Work Package 7

Comparative Analyses and Reporting

Deliverable D7.1

Comparative Analysis Report

University of Münster

Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Johannes Ludwig Löffler, Jozef Zelinka

Executive summary

The European funded research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) (October 2022 – September 2025) is focusing the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes (LOs) across eight European Union Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain) and in selected regions within them. The project is inquiring into the construction of LOs and perceives the latter as resulting from manifold intersecting institutional arrangements, spatial and socio-economic determinants, discursive and socio-cultural influences, individual experiences, dispositions, as well as cognitive and psycho-emotional abilities. It is the combination and interplay of these multiple factors that the project seeks to examine and understand. The Work Package *Comparative Analyses and Reporting* (WP7) focuses on the synthetisation of project data and gathered knowledge. The *Comparative Analyses Report* (Report) of WP7 aims to provide comparative, cross-case and cross-national analyses that consider multiple levels of analysis.

The Report draws from the results of empirical studies that included quantitative analyses of secondary aggregated data from primary data sources (N=51 indicators subdivided into 403 variables), review and assessment of literature defining LOs (N=502 documents), semi-structured interviews with local professionals in education and training (N=105 interviews), narrative biographical interviews with young people, particularly those in vulnerable positions, from 16 EU regions (N=169), and expert survey with national and regional policymakers in various fields related to education and employment of young people (N=494). With our Transversal Participatory Approach, we have further engaged local and regional practitioners, young people, career counsellors, teachers, and trainers in a series of participatory actions, most notably in the local Innovation Forums (N=210). Based on the preliminary findings and the large amount of data, the comparative analyses seek to address the project's overall objectives and main research questions.

The Report is structured in 14 chapters. The introductory chapter presents the project's overall design and heuristic criteria for the comparisons. The following 12 chapters are clustered in three Parts, each Part addressing one central research question from a specific thematic focus. The concluding chapter synthetises the results of the analyses and embeds them in wider research and policy debates on LOs. In following, we briefly present the main conclusions of the comparative analyses and key project messages.

The results of the comparative analyses from the perspective of *Life Course Research* have yielded several conclusions, showing that

- young people's agency correlates with external limitations and subjective sense of power, which is why it is necessary to acknowledge the wide array of external constraints (spatial, structural, intersectional) that limit their actions and instead provide them with sufficient institutional support to spark their agency;

- young people's educational achievements, as much as their vulnerable positions, are increasingly being individualised, which ignores the role of other factors and actors involved in the construction of LOs and instead calls for a new culture of responsiveness and recognition;
- the attempts to provide institutional support must be accompanied by empowerment and inclusion of young people in the decision-making processes, as most of them are framed as passive recipients and spectators of their life courses.

The perspective of *Intersectionality* has enabled us to examine the interdependence and accumulation of disadvantages from multiple angles. Our findings indicate that

- a systemic mismatch between young people's educational outcomes and their living and learning spaces persists to intensify intersectional disadvantages, as the institutional rigidity, persistence of stratifying cultural and social norms, and the labour market inaccessibility/instability impinge on young people's social and spatial mobility. In other words, since most policy are category-based, and affected by silo effect, they are often inaccurate – if not blatantly wrong glasses – to look at the complexity of youth conditions. It is not a theoretical stance (world is complex!), but a very empirical one: wrong categories, wrong solutions;
- a lack of institutionalised spaces to articulate the contradictions and misunderstandings between various educational stakeholders and governance levels leads to fragmentation of educational landscapes, further deepening the divide between local and regional/national decision-making;
- various institutional logics aiming at the inclusion of groups in vulnerable positions create a nexus of conflicting interests operating past each other, which underscores the need for more collaborative actions.

The novel approach of *Spatial Justice* has shifted our attention to the role of spaces in enabling or disabling educational opportunities. Our conclusions imply

- a contradiction between more technocratic/technological and socio-politically motivated approaches to the issue of spatial justice, pointing at the need to develop a shared understanding of educational processes that includes lived local experiences;
- local and regional stakeholders lack the necessary institutional power and authority to manoeuvre between institutional demands and the needs of young people. This, however, does not mean that downscaling everything would be the solution; sometimes there is a limited awareness of the relevance of the spatial dimension; sometimes there is awareness, but inadequate tools. The problem is having a working balance between coordination (granting the same rights irrespective of the place one lives) and autonomy (having an own room for

manoeuvre to account for specific, place-based issues within a common frame of rights);

- there is a conceptual ambiguity related to the meaning and use of LOs, often applied at administrative and territorial levels, but focusing individual learners, which de-contextualises the whole process of assessing educational quality.

We have further examined the process of constructing LOs as a multiplicity of actors, factors, and spaces involved in variable temporary combinations. While the single chapters provide unique insights into specific topics, several conclusions could be drawn from zooming in on each category.

Factors

The interplay of institutional, socio-cultural, discursive, individual, spatial, structural, relational but also increasingly technological and data-driven factors establishes a unique, permanently changing environment, which cannot be homogenized by international assessments that seek to leverage outcomes of young people. Instead, the multiplicity of factors must be examined to better understand its (negative or positive) effects on specific groups of learners and carefully re-arranged, if it fails to provide for those in most vulnerable positions.

Actors

Our findings suggest that, at the level of local practitioners, the promotion of spatial, educational, and professional ownership is necessary in facilitating young people's agency and community responsibility. At the level of policymakers, thinking beyond the mere institutional and spatial boundaries is important in order to connect with the educational issues at stake. Finally, at the level of young people, the capacity of subjective agency is often underestimated, which requires carefully listening to their needs and devising feasible solutions.

Spaces

The analysed spatial-educational dichotomies emphasize that education is a highly contested spatial good that decides not only about residential and citizenship rights, but about the quality of life courses as well. The findings urge to go beyond the static and naïve conception of spaces and embrace the full breadth of spatial impacts on learners' disposition and educational achievements.

The project has yielded new evidence on the assessment of LOs. By embracing a holistic approach and incorporating a large number of aspects other than statistical indicators only, it has assessed the process of constructing LOs from multiple angles. Given the current scholarly and policy debates on LOs, we conclude with the following statements:

- **Our analyses have identified and problematised several shortcomings of the mainstream conceptualisation of educational (under-)achievement and LOs.** Against this background, we call for a systematic re-assessment of both concepts, arguing that their indifferent, decontextualised application threatens a just educational provision. Our conclusions contradict the instrumental use of LOs as an anticipatory tool and call for a holistic, context-sensitive approach to education.
- **We have provided evidence for structural and spatial factors affecting the quality of LOs and posit the need to de-essentialise vulnerability and spatiality in relation to young people.** The findings suggest that essentialising ascriptions and spatial representations persist to affect educational processes, which is why we argue to examine more precisely how the spatiality of educational pathways, decisions, and programmes can be re-imagined and re-adjusted to better fit the situations resulting from the interplay of space and education.
- **We have engaged multiple actors in our participatory actions and illustrated the role of innovative policy arrangements in tackling poor LOs. In that respect, we advocate for a stronger recognition and participation of local/regional voices in educational policymaking.** Besides re-framing the role of factors and spaces in constructing LOs, we promote the empowerment of actors directly involved in educational processes at the local and regional levels.

Acknowledgements

The Consortium members of the CLEAR research project and selected external partners have contributed to the Deliverable D7.1 by drafting the single chapters. We thank all the authors in alphabetical order for their contributions that helped to streamline the complexity of the research outcomes in a series of comparative analyses:

Natália Alves

José Pedro Amorim

Eduardo Barberis

Sebastiano Benasso

Ruggero Cefalo

Hannah Edler

Hélder Ferraz

Davide Filippi

Sara Gil

Darena Hristozova

Alexandra Ioannidou

Nikoletta Jablonczay

Tero Järvinen

Yuri Kazepov

Siyka Kovacheva

Johannes Ludwig Löffler

Andreas Martin

Martí Manzano Moliner

Plamen Nanov

Päivi Naumanen

Tiago Neves

Konstantinos Pagkratis

Achilleas Papadimitriou

Marcelo Parreira do Amaral

Francisco Pérez Basso

Niklas Pernhaupt

Luís Filipe de Araujo Pessoa

Luca Raffini

Xavier Rambla

Federico Rossi

Berenice Scandone

Rosario Scandurra

Tanja Sturm

Jenni Tikkanen

Liliana Zeferino

Jozef Zelinka

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction: Addressing Educational (Under-)Achievement in Comparative Analyses

Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Jozef Zelinka & Johannes Ludwig Löffler

1.1 The CLEAR project

The European-funded research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: a multi-level analysis of (under-)achievement in the life course* (CLEAR) is committed to better understanding the combination of multiple factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes (LOs) in Europe. In contrast to the more common conceptualisations of educational achievements based on standardized, large-scale assessments, CLEAR conceives of LOs as resulting from the interplay of manifold intersecting factors and actors. Understanding it as a dynamic process of 'constructing' LOs reveals the underlying complexity and uniqueness of educational achievements, which cannot be reduced to quantifiable outcomes only. Instead, the irreproducible combination of diverse institutional arrangements, spatial, structural and socio-economic determinants, discursive and socio-cultural influences, as well as individual experiences, dispositions, cognitive and psycho-emotional abilities, produces different quality of LOs. To enquire into the process of constructing LOs, CLEAR has been designed as a multi-level, mixed-method study, encompassing eight EU member states—Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain—with varying educational systems and experiences. Over the course of three years (October 2022 – September 2025), CLEAR has progressed from the (Phase I) launching and (Phase II) empirical stage into the final (Phase III) analytical and reporting periods. Within the final phase, the main goal is to conduct comparative analyses of all previous results and preliminary findings, which is done within Work Package 7 *Comparative Analyses and Reporting* (WP7).

In the *Comparative Analysis Report* (Report) of WP7, we provide cross-case and cross-national comparisons taking empirical data and participatory results into consideration and addressing the overall research questions. We have conducted the empirical fieldwork and analysed the diverse findings in separate Work Packages (WPs), which has enabled us to approach what lies at the root of educational (under-)achievement at different levels and through the lenses of various actor groups—local educational and training professionals, regional and national policymakers, teachers, counsellors, employers, and young people, particularly those in multi-disadvantaged positions. All of these stakeholders seek on their own to improve the quality of LOs, often missing or misinterpreting the perspective of others. Against this background, the comparative strategy seeks to carefully calibrate the messages of the previous WPs. This applies to the analysis of secondary aggregated data in WP3, policy reviews and interviews with local professionals in WP4, narrative biographical interviews with young people in vulnerable positions in WP5, expert survey with regional and national actors involved in designing and implementing educational policies in WP6, and local knowledge gathered from

participatory actions in WP8. While the different types of data represent different sources of information and give voice to different actor groups, they enter into a dialogue during the comparative analyses, which combine the partial results and give shape to robust body of evidence.

The project's solid methodological design is built around three overarching theoretical frameworks—*Life Course Research, Intersectionality, Spatial Justice*—and five analytical levels—*individual, institutional, spatial, structural, relational*—that were continuously applied throughout the project and which, to a various degree, are integrated in the comparative analyses. The comparisons offer unique insights into selected research sites and present a balanced sample of diverse intersections of factors and actors involved in the construction of LOs. The Report has been compiled as a collaborative work of the whole Consortium in order to account for the various professional expertise, field experience, and research interests, and to enable early career researchers to gain experience and take leading roles in drafting the Report's chapters. The role of WP7 Lead consisted in balancing the spatial (local research sites, regions, countries), empirical (WP3, WP4, WP5, WP6, WP8), actor-related (young people in vulnerable positions, policymakers, local professionals), and thematic (e.g., migration, agency, vulnerability, spatiality) representation of the comparisons. Further, the WP7 leader has initiated, guided, and monitored the process of selecting the relevant composition of topics, data, actor groups, and spatial sites, and provided heuristic criteria and template for drafting the chapters. After the drafting of the chapters, the WP7 leader has edited the single chapters, synthetised the results and produced a comprehensive conclusion and discussion of the findings (Chapter 14).

In the following sub-sections, we walk the readers through the Report, presenting the starting point for our analyses, describing the research design and rationale of the Report, and briefly introducing the Report's structure.

1.2 Starting Point: The quality of learning outcomes in Europe

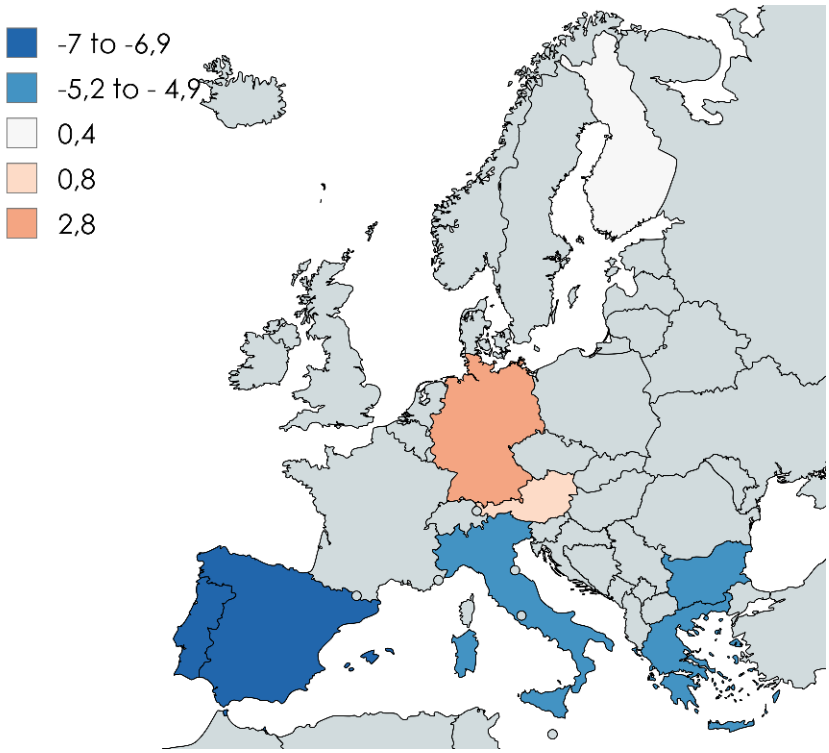
Poor learning outcomes

Europe's youth feature highly uneven levels of LOs across the continent, the quality of which translates into the ability to build meaningful life courses and successfully transit to the labour market. The following figures below illustrate the development of indicators related to LOs at national level, comparing data for the years 2015 and 2024 in order to highlight general trends for Europe.

Figure 1.1 shows the rates of Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET) for young adults aged 18 to 24 years. The data evidences that Southern and Eastern European countries managed to almost halve their ELET rates between 2015 and 2024, with an average EU decline from 11,0 % to 9,4 %. The data also shows a trend of stagnation and decline in Central and Northern Europe. As a result, except for Greece, EU ELET rates have

converged over the past years, as EU members with previously high ELET rates are in the process of rapidly catching up, while countries with previously lower rates either stagnate or slowly increase.

Figure 1.1 Difference in ELET Rates, 18-24 years (2015; 2024)



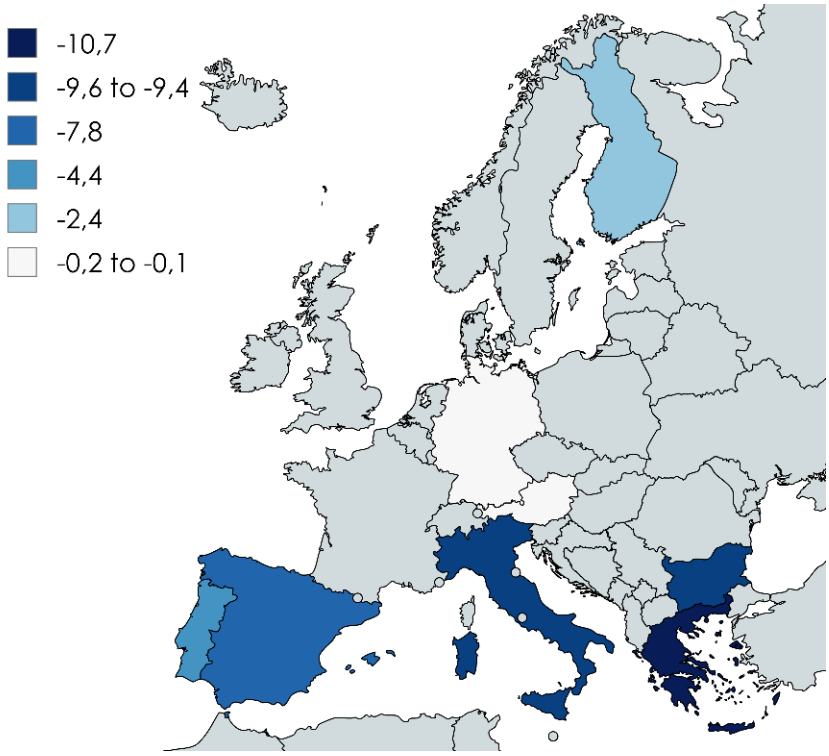
Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat, 2025d

Figure 1.2, in turn, compares the rates of young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) for young people aged 15 to 34 years. The data shows an average decline from 16,6 % to 12,2 % at the EU level. Over the past nine years, Southern and Eastern European countries are currently in the process of catching up with the rest of Europe.

Finally, Figure 1.3 depicts the rates of the Educational Attainment for young people aged 20 to 24 years with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0 to 2). At the EU level, the share of young people with lower education was dropping from 17,8 % to 14,9 %. However, at the country level, the rates vary substantially. In CLEAR countries, the data shows a general decline in Southern Europe, with substantial reduction in Spain (from 31,5 % to 20,1 %), Portugal (from 22,8 % to 10,7 %) or Italy (from 19,9 % to 13,5 %).

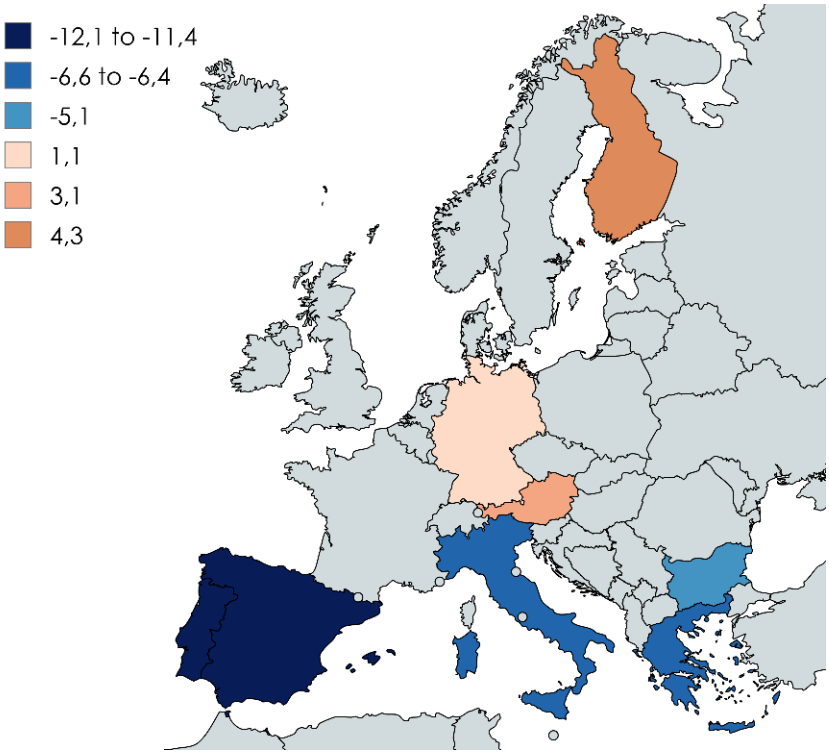
The national data, thus, reveal a positive trend among Southern European countries, with mixed results for Central and Norther Europe, evidencing declining NEET rates in all eight CLEAR countries, a decline of ELET rates in five countries, and a decline of young people with less than primary, primary and secondary education in five countries, as well. At the regional level, there are several common traits, but also significant differences within and across the eight CLEAR countries and their respective regions.

Figure 1.2 Difference in NEET Rates, 15-34 years (2015; 2024)



Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat, 2025f

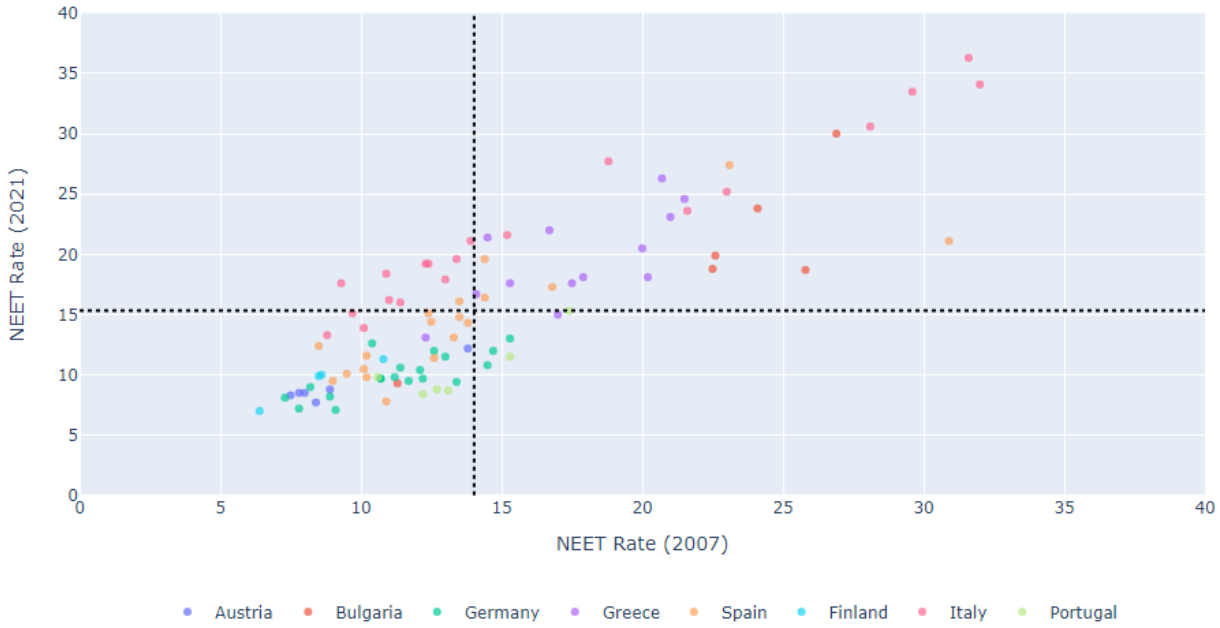
Figure 1.3 Difference in Educational Attainment Rates, 20-24 years (2015; 2024)



Source: Own calculation based on Eurostat, 2025c

Figure 1.4 compares available NUTS 2[1] NEET rates from the years 2007 and 2021 (aged 15 to 29 years), using a two-by-two matrix to assess changes over time. The results show a linear relationship between the two years, indicating a strong path dependency across most CLEAR regions, with consistently high (bottom left corner) or low (upper right corner) NEET rates between the years 2007 and 2021. The data not only points at the overall high cross-country variations between Southern and Central European countries that align with data available on the national level, but also at the strong cross-regional variations within Southern and Eastern European countries, indicating significant disparities of spatial living and learning conditions on the regional level. High intranational variations were especially detected in the regions of Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Spain; low variations in Austrian and Finnish regions.

Figure 1.4 NEET Rate, 15-29 years, NUTS 2 Regions (2007; 2021)



Source: Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report, Eurostat, 2025f.

Although the situation of poor LOs has slightly improved over the last years (European Commission & EACEA, 2025), the issue remains nonetheless a high priority at the EU and national levels. In this regard, the European Commission has issued a Call directed at improving the persistent low levels of LOs in Europe.

CLEAR has responded to the European Commission's Call *HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-04: Addressing poor learning outcomes in basic skills and early school leaving at national, regional and local level in Europe* (Call) by deliberately shifting from the main discourse on LOs that seeks to enhance their quality through better and more

1 NUTS – Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (from the French **N**omenclature des **u**nités **t**erritoriales **s**tatistiques).

scalable measurements, and by problematising instead existing methodologies and discourses that categorise young people as low achievers or underperformers.

The project addressed all Call's *objectives* that aimed at examining the quality of LOs, addressing underachievement, and evaluating educational practices and policies, particularly in the case of young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations. It also covered the Call's full *scope* directed at adopting a general life-long learning (LLL) approach, in which the development of the key competence of 'learning to learn' is crucial, as well as developing a specific diagnosis and targeted methodologies for combatting persistent low levels and negative trends in LOs in Europe.

The Call further referred to the issue of social justice. CLEAR has extended the latter by focusing on how *spaces* affect social inequalities. In CLEAR, we departed from the observation that education cannot be considered as free of social injustices, nor that it can be viewed as detached from spaces. Education is not 'spaceless', meaning that it unfolds within a specific set of institutional, geographical, symbolic, and physical spaces. In this regard, we address the issue of social and spatial justice by re-contextualising LOs within their spatial frameworks across the participating countries in CLEAR.

Assessing educational (under-)achievement

The quality of educational achievements has been widely researched (see for an overview: Zelinka et al., 2025a). Following the advent of large-scale international assessments surveying students' academic performances (e.g., *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA)), the paradigm of quantification has dominated the public, political and academic discourse on education (Takayama, 2008). Participating countries that scored 'high' in the assessed subjects became the new global role models, in particular Finland (for Europe and North America) and Singapore (for East and South-East Asia), while nations with comparatively 'low' performances such as Germany reacted to the "PISA shock" by realigning educational policies (Rowley et al., 2019).

While the impact of PISA resulted in a growing educational monitoring alongside a better cooperation between education research and education policy (Klieme et al., 2010), it also facilitated the transformation of academic (under-)achievement into a label, marking educational systems as either the 'forerunners' of 'good educational policies' or as unable to satisfy requirements of a globalised labour market. Consequently, nations started to perceive educational (under-)achievement as a threat to their welfare systems. Following this perception, (under-)achievement is not only an educational issue but a socio-political issue as well, where the rankings of international studies like PISA represent an effort to facilitate 'policy lessons' for countries that underperform, creating a competitive market that conceptualises education in terms of profit rather than merit.

Recent studies evidence that the intended effects of large-scale assessments have failed to materialise. PISA and similar assessments have not yielded a significant long-term

positive impact on the quality of students' performances (Rowley et al., 2019), nor did they significantly improve the equity within the participating countries (Enchikova et al., 2024). Instead, they continue facilitating their own understanding of academic achievement (Gorur, 2016), promoting a limited concept of LOs based on selected quantifiable indicators.

From assessment to construction

Previous efforts to assess LOs have proven to be insufficient to tackle issues related to (under-)achievement that were addressed by the Call. This has several reasons. On the one hand, regular assessments do not automatically translate into better LOs, meaning that more data do not lead to more clarity about the root causes of the issue at stake. On the other hand, large-scale international studies focus on a small range of knowledge and skill formation (reading, math, science), excluding abilities, characteristics and/or skills that are not related to them, such as arts and humanities. They further make visible only those efforts achieved in formal education, thus ignoring vital sets of skills acquired in informal or non-formal educational settings. The latter are hardly traceable by statistical methods, although limited attempts to include non-formal skills in the measurements have already taken place. Finally, measuring LOs takes place at an individual level and puts enormous pressure and responsibility for the success (and failure) on learners alone. This not only decontextualises their unique intersectional, structural, and spatial (dis)positions, but risks turning systemic problems into individual deficiencies (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019).

Against this background, current attempts to enhance the quality of LOs prove to be at least ambiguous, if not insufficient: "20 years after the beginning of PISA, the participating countries, with rare exceptions, have been unable to improve their equity significantly." (Enchikova et al., 2024, p. 12). Thus, instead of doing more of the same and delivering more evidence on the quality of measurable LOs, the CLEAR project has operationalised its research strategy based on the premise that LOs evolve in a complex environment shaped by a spatial and temporal irreproducible set of intersecting factors and actors. By enquiring into this interplay, we aim to study the process of constructing LOs and derive key messages for educational stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers, which we believe can advance the discussions on the underlying causes of poor LOs in Europe further than the prevailing policy discourse.

1.3 Research design

Comparative approach

In CLEAR, we have developed a shared understanding of comparison and comparative analysis. The method of comparison is a widely accepted scientific approach to knowledge generation the underlying assumption of which is that differences in phenomena exist in relation to systems, structures, policies, perceptions, experiences, and outcomes, as well

as across space (Manzon, 2014) and time (Sweeting, 2014). The method of comparison offers us several entry points for the comparative analyses.

Comparison enables us to combine different empirical findings not as a "mere placing of data side by side" but in an attempt to "understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is" (Charters & Hilton, 1989, p. 3). This helps us to adapt to the various research contexts and (educational) paradigms and integrate our theoretical frameworks and different types/sources of (disciplinary) knowledge. The method of comparison also broadens our understanding of various data sources. Instead of reducing them to exclusive sources of knowledge, such as results of large-scale assessments that produce socio-political discourse about LOs and provoke "a permanent need for self-justification" (Nóvoa & Yariv-Masha, 2003, p. 427), we seek to understand what the different sources of knowledge tell us about the phenomenon of LOs. Another benefit of the comparative analysis is that it urges us to move beyond static categories and adopt a multi-sited and multi-scalar research approach that focuses on "linkages across place, space, and time" and pays attention to their "vertical, horizontal, and especially the transversal elements" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7).

The comparative work is organised along four steps: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, comparison (Bereday, 1964). Going through all the steps allows us to understand how the compared phenomena work in different contexts and raises the awareness about *how* and *why* the same things work in different settings (Parreira do Amaral, 2022). This is particularly important in order to prevent ethnocentric and universalistic conclusions and avoid misconceptions related to different stakeholder positions. Since the method of comparison has been applied to serve different purposes, most of which revolve around either interpretation *or* causal analysis of the observed phenomena, we emphasize the complementarity of both the *qualitative-oriented approach*, which focuses primarily on cases and considers the holistic complexity of relations, contexts, and cultural specificities of a chosen case, and the *quantitative-oriented approach*, which primarily focuses on the data variables and their comparability, usability, and interpretation (Ragin, 1987, p. xi). Although both approaches vary "on the basis of different concepts of 'understanding': related either to generalizable knowledge of relations among variables (aiming at generalization), or to dense knowledge of cases" (Della Porta, 2012, p. 207), we make use of both approaches in our mixed-methods design.

Mixed-Method-Design

The mixed-method design of the CLEAR project provides the opportunity to approach our research questions from multiple angles, offering "a greater diversity of divergent views", whilst providing "better (stronger) inferences" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003, pp. 15f.). It utilizes different methodological approaches to contextual particularities related to the selected analytical levels and units of analysis. Mixed-method designs intentionally combine qualitative and quantitative research approaches, merging their strengths to

create robust analyses (Parreira do Amaral, 2020) for the purpose of "breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 123). They provide the necessary background for contextualized interpretations and explanations of the results (DeJaeghere, 2024), allowing for a more pronounced assessment of the limitations of the separate methodological approaches and empirical data. As such, the mixed-method design does not shy away from the complexity of the CLEAR project's web of thematically and theoretically interconnected research questions, but has the capacity to utilize the explanatory power of the empirical WPs to their fullest.

The mixed-method design enables us to establish *comparability* between the chosen units of analysis right at the start, i.e., identifying "the extent and the reasons for commonalities and differences between the units of comparison, examining the causes at work and the relationships between those causes" (Manzon, 2014, p. 100). In terms of *equivalence* among education phenomena, the design shifts our attention to the precise definition of terms, since concepts are often context-dependent and for similar terms there are different semantics transported by the respective national and cultural context. We particularly avoid essentialisation of certain ascriptions, such as underachievement, vulnerability, multiple disadvantages etc., using them instead in their discursively constructed and relational connotations. To ensure a valid *contextualization* of the compared phenomena, we first approach them in their own embeddedness and only then in relation to other phenomena. In doing so, we can isolate differences and select variables for meaningful comparison. Each chapter of the Report implements the mixed-method design to its best extent in order to account for its thematic foci and research questions, which are informed by our three overarching theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical frameworks and analytical levels

The CLEAR project has three overarching theoretical frameworks. Every chapter of the Report provides a unique approach to the construction of LOs from the perspectives of *Life Course Research*, *Intersectionality*, and *Spatial Justice*. The comparative analyses apply all three frameworks, which enables us to enter into a fruitful dialogue between them and transcend their epistemological boundaries instead of mechanically adding one theoretical layer after another.

The theoretical framework of *Life Course Research* helps us to shift our focus on the construction of life events (trajectories, transitions) and, thus, also on the construction of LOs as institutionalised and often still standard expectations on individual actors (young people, migrants, refugees). Through its lenses, we perceive LOs as processual, relational as well as socio-cultural and socio-historical phenomena and envision different actors involved in their construction as capable of actions and change of events.

The theoretical framework of *Intersectionality* places the relational and multidimensional nature of inequalities centre stage, conceptualising different sources of discrimination as intrinsically and mutually interrelated, not as dissociated and detached from one another.

It further questions the socio-cultural, contextual and historical origins of inequalities and analyses their interplay at the level of individual subjects, social and material structures, as well as discursive and symbolic representations. Further on, its rich theoretical and disciplinary categories help us to connect the macro-dimension of social inequalities with the micro-dimension of their embodied realizations, showing how historical narratives continue to persist as materialised forms of power and oppression.

Finally, the theoretical perspective of *Spatial Justice* enables us to perceive spaces both as products and producers of social and power relations, which actively shape the possibilities and limits of reaching and following certain life courses. Through the lenses of Spatial Justice approach, we view schools, educational institutions and learning sites through their spatiality (i.e., their ability to affect educational performances, achievements, and decision-making in relation to their spatial distribution) and perceive LOs as co-produced by spatial distribution of opportunities, rights, and resources, as much as by spatialised forms of exclusion, oppression, and marginalisation.

The three theoretical frameworks cross with our five analytical levels that build an analytical grid (see Deliverable D2.2 State-of-the-Art Report). The *individual* level deals with different types of actors and stakeholders, their perceptions and dispositions, skills and competencies, disadvantages, life histories, spatial positioning, temporal experiences, as well as social and/or economic backgrounds. The *institutional* level primarily focuses on existing policies, institutional arrangements, policy coordination, communication, skills ecosystems as well as policy levels. The *structural* level emphasizes socio-economic conditions, levels of educational, economic or social inclusion, as well as the impact of systemic crises and transformations. The *spatial* level looks at remote regions or cities, thriving or declining spaces, spatial awareness of policymakers, accessibility of educational sites, impact and perception of spaces, as well as spatial dispositions and limitations. The *relational* level emphasizes local logics of action, the interplay between objective (contextual, discursive and institutional) and subjective (individual resources, attitudes and competences) elements, as well as the opening up or closing of opportunities. By considering the five analytical levels and three theoretical frameworks, the Report opens new horizons on how to address the complex realities surrounding the construction of LOs. To operationalize the analyses, various sources of data have been applied.

Data sources

The chapters in this Report exploit and expand on the results of the analyses from empirical and participatory WPs. Their synthesisation of different project sources further provides results that account for the multidimensionality of the research topic as well as for the socio-cultural and institutional specificity of the respective research sites. Instead of focusing only on the results of one WP, the authors make use of all available data. In particular, the Report draws on data sources as specified in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Data sources

WP	Type of data	Sample	Description	Reference
WP3	quantitative	N=51	We have compiled and analysed over 50 indicators subdivided into 403 variables from primary quantitative data sources from Eurostat focusing on young people aged between 15 and 34 at NUTS 0 and NUTS 2 levels.	Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report
WP4	quantitative & qualitative	N=502	We have reviewed and assessed over 500 documents from all CLEAR countries defining LOs at ISCED 2−6 levels, such as curriculum plans, statistical assessments, white books, laws, policy reports etc.	Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report
WP4	qualitative	N=105	We have conducted over 100 semi-structured interviews with local educational and training professionals in the fields of health, hospitality and IT at vocational and higher education.	Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report
WP5	qualitative	N=169	We have conducted further almost 170 narrative biographical interviews with young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions aged between 18 and 30 years.	Deliverable D5.2 National Qualitative Report
WP6	quantitative & qualitative	N=494	We have engaged nearly 500 national and regional experts from the fields of education and training, adult learning, labour market and youth work representing the public sector, academia, labour market, civil society to take part in an online expert survey.	Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report
WP8	qualitative	N=210	We have engaged over 200 educational stakeholders (policymakers, professionals, young people, teachers) in various participatory actions.	Deliverable D8.2 Innovation Forums

Source: WP7 Lead

1.4 Heuristics for the analysis

We have approached the comparative analyses by developing shared heuristics for the analysis and selection of the research themes. To achieve a balanced representation of the findings and author teams, the heuristics included a combination of various criteria, the application of which enabled us to articulate the project's findings in the best possible way. The heuristic criteria served as a guidance for the authors to develop a comprehensive approach to the project's findings. The heuristics consisted of five criteria to be productively combined in order to address the construction of LOs from various angles: *theoretical frameworks, analytical levels, units of comparison, thematic foci, and data sources*.

We have shared and discussed the heuristics with Consortium members, inviting them to form chapter teams that would represent diverse expertise, experiences, and countries. Our heuristics served as a guidance to develop a research agenda within the chapter

teams. To account for the variety of findings, all chapter teams were asked to select a minimum of three (out of eight) countries (regions, research sites) to be included in the analyses, a minimum of three (out of six) data sources from the empirical and participatory WPs to be utilized, and a minimum of three (out of five) differently combined analytical levels. The chapter teams had to account for all three theoretical perspectives, taking one of them as the entry point, and respond to at least three research questions derived from the project's overarching objectives (see Deliverable D2.2 State-of-the-Art Report, Tables 2 to 6). The teams could decide on their own thematic foci, which would address one or several of the issues targeted in the project. As a result of the selection process, we have organised the chapters alongside the project's three theoretical frameworks.

The Life Course Research

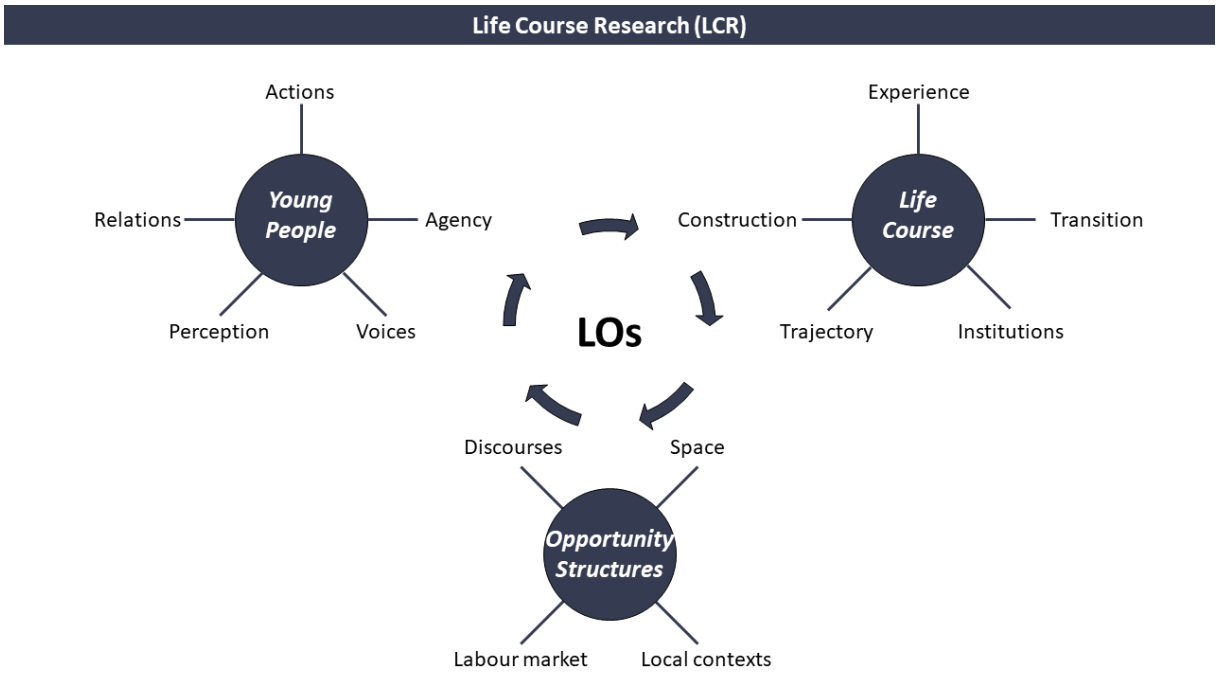
The perspective of Life Course Research (LCR) offers a multidisciplinary focus and an ecological model placing families and individuals in the context of historical, demographic, and social change. It enables us to study the experiences, expectations, visions, and perceptions of young Europeans, and their ability to create subjective meanings and continuity along the different phases of their life courses, as well as to consider their diverse socio-economic and spatial contexts (Tikkanen, 2020). The theoretical instruments of LCR help us to understand how various policies interact with individual life courses of young people and to localise the points of possible change. The role of individual agency is placed centre stage, recognising that young people do not accept their social and historical circumstances passively, but actively construct their own life courses through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance (Elder et al., 2003). In the context of CLEAR project, we especially consider the principle of *'linked lives'* that focuses the interactions between young people and their families, schools, policy professionals, and other stakeholders in shaping the individual trajectories, in particular the processes of falling into or coming out of vulnerable situations.

In our analyses, we address various relations between the LCR perspective and the construction of LOs. These include the tension between young people's life courses and their local/regional opportunity structures, especially trying to understand how young people's life courses evolve in different local/regional contexts and opportunity structures—and how these affect their LOs—, especially given the variance of CLEAR's regions and research sites. We also focus on the impact of vulnerant settings (i.e., those settings potentially causing vulnerable situations, such as social and cultural contexts, institutional settings, family and neighbourhood etc.) on young people's life courses, analysing their impact on the quality of their LOs. Finally, we concentrate on the relation between young people's agency (their capability to act, imagine, accomplish) and the (geographical, institutional, cultural, symbolic) spaces they encounter during education.

The following figure (see Figure 1.5) illustrates the interconnections and relationality between young people, their opportunity structures, and life courses, and how these elements interact in the process of constructing LOs.

The elements in Figure 1.5 below are supplemented by related concepts that help to situate the analysis. In the case of *young people*, their actions, agentic power, or perception of the surrounding institutional, structural and socio-cultural environments enter into dialogue with their existing *opportunity structures* (local labour markets, political, educational, or social discourses) and unfold during various stages of their *life courses* (at the moments of decisive life transitions, in the interaction with pivotal institutions—family, school, employer—, or as aspects involved in the construction of their life projects). Against this background, our analyses take up the multiplicity of interactions that the LCR perspective offers and problematise the construction of LOs as a lifelong process.

Figure 1.5 Relationships learning outcomes and Life Course Research



Source: WP7 leader

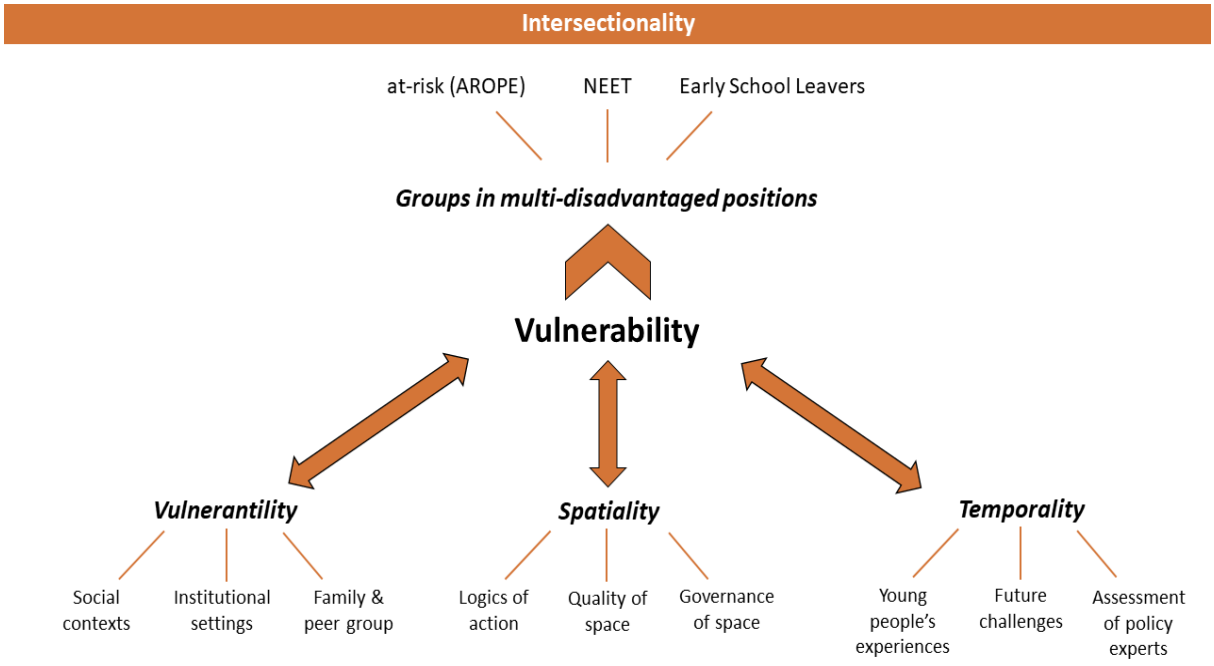
Intersectionality

The concept of Intersectionality is critical for addressing the multiple disadvantages as root causes of educational (under-)achievement. This approach understands inequalities as intrinsically relational, meaning that the interactions between different sources of discrimination intensify the social position of various groups. Furthermore, it analyses how the unequal intersections operate in specific organizational/structural and representational/discursive contexts that are historically, culturally, and spatially constituted. The intersectional approach also considers the macro-micro dimensions of inequalities, perceiving inequality as resulting from a combined structural-subjective

perspective that includes the macro-structural expressions of exclusion and its embodied realizations (Wilson, 2013). In CLEAR, we apply a context-sensitive approach to educational inequalities, focusing on the discursive and policy construction of groups in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions. Since the different sources of inequality have different ontological histories and internal logics to be carefully disentangled, we address educational inequalities as relational and contextual phenomena.

We address diverse relations between Intersectionality and LOs. In particular, we focus on the interplay of local contexts and youth in multi-disadvantaged positions across Europe seeking to analyse how the various compositions of local/regional contexts (economic performance, social structure, labour market, educational opportunities) interact with and affect young people in vulnerable positions. We further examine the governance of learners from multi-disadvantaged backgrounds by looking at how policies on different levels and in different countries/regions address and attempt to govern learners from multi-disadvantaged backgrounds and how this affects young people's capacity to reach the institutionally desired quality of LOs. Finally, we ask ourselves how education evolves at the intersection of space and justice, in particular, how educational systems interact with different spatial characteristics and dynamics (e.g., spaces as thriving sites or lagging regions), as well as with different notions of and possibilities for justice. Figure 1.6 below illustrates the diverse relations we aim to address.

Figure 1.6 Relationships learning outcomes and Intersectionality



Source: WP7 leader

Vulnerability is a central concept that helps us to organize the various elements that traverse the relations between Intersectionality and LOs. It points at the relational nature of situations or positions, which may temporarily worsen individual or group conditions,

e.g., access to educational services, symbolic exclusion, labelling and stigmatisation due to cultural or socio-economic characteristics etc. We strongly emphasise that vulnerability is not an individual trait or an in-born characteristic, but rather a socially constructed concept defining certain dispositions as disadvantageous compared to other individuals or groups (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2021). Therefore, we prefer to use the term *groups in multi-disadvantaged positions*, underscoring their spatial, temporal and relational situation. Statistically, this correlation appears in form of various groups *at-risk*, young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), Early School Leavers (ESL) etc. We further extend the concept by addressing the vulnerant, spatial, and temporal aspects involved in creating unequal relations. *Vulnerantility* applies to the different socio-institutional contexts and settings that have the potential to temporarily worsen social positions (Burghardt et al., 2017). *Spatiality*, in turn, problematises how the different composition of spaces impacts vulnerable experiences, such as the quality and proximity of educational provision, the local and regional governance patterns, and the sedimented logics of action that characterise various spaces—urban, rural, industrial, touristic etc. *Temporality* encompasses those aspects of vulnerability that are subjects to a temporal change, be it the open-ended experiences of young people, the anticipated future challenges, or the various future scenarios involved in the design and implementation of policy programmes. The elements of the relations between intersectionality and LOs are present in our analyses and guide our comparative approach.

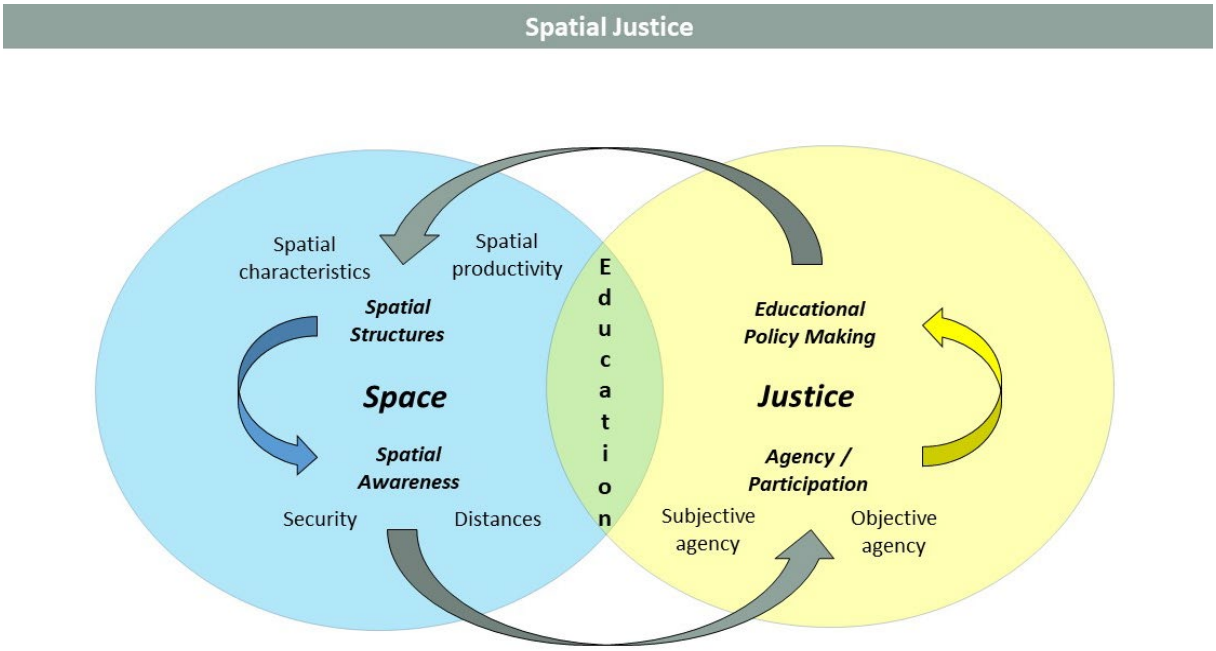
Spatial Justice

The concept of Spatial Justice (SJ) aims to properly consider the spatial dimension of social inequalities in contemporary societies. It underlines the socio-spatial differentiation in the fair distribution of opportunities, access to rights and public goods, and—in general—of positive and negative outcomes of social and institutional processes. The concept entails a representation of space that goes beyond being a mere container of social relations, as it instead depicts complex socio-spatial relations, in which the space both influences and is influenced by social agents. Spatialized relations can have both negative and positive effects on individuals and groups, producing unfair distributions of opportunities (Soja, 2010). In CLEAR, the concept of SJ turns our attention to the fact that LOs may be affected by spatial dimensions before, during, and after schooling. Spaces may cumulate economic, social, environmental and cultural disadvantages, with negative consequences on a range of individual life chances—usually reinforced (if not caused) by institutional dimensions: different locales receive unequal educational resources due to wealth, power, and connectedness factors that impact on the quality of teachers, school programs, out-of-school opportunities students might experience (Beach et al., 2018; Kettunen & Prokkola, 2022).

The analyses conducted aim at exploring the different relations between LOs and Spatial Justice, placing the emphasis on how research, policymaking, and practice intersect in

establishing just educational settings. From the research perspective, we ask ourselves what is the variety of understandings and meanings of LOs and (under-)achievement and what are their conceptual framings? From the perspective of policymaking, we seek to understand how policymakers are constructing and actively engaging young people in vulnerable positions in their future policy scenarios, and what temporal and/or spatial framings are used in addressing policy issues and target groups. In addition, from the perspective of local practitioners, we analyse how justice is interwoven in and results from the complex regional/local relations and factors that impact the quality of LOs, also seeking to provide evidence on the local awareness of the existing challenges and groups in multi-disadvantaged positions. The Figure 1.7 below illustrates the multiplicity of relations between Spatial Justice and LOs.

Figure 1.7 Relationships learning outcomes and Spatial Justice



Source: WP7 leader

Figure 1.7 positions education at the intersection of space and justice. Spaces display various characteristics that can hinder or enable educational processes; they can convey a sense of security and safety, but can also function as zones of uncertainty and danger. This applies not only to their physical or architectural compositions, but also to the quality of school and training facilities, local transportation and infrastructure, as well as the functional relations of the larger residential areas. Spatial awareness is key in assessing the quality and the potential of educational sites. Young people, parents, educational professionals, employers, policymakers—all of them perceive the spaces through different lenses. Therefore, the goal of SJ approach is to enhance the spatial awareness among the different stakeholder groups and strengthen the educational policymaking by

sharing their various visions and expectations in participatory events, which are part of the CLEAR research project and which yielded great insights into the local interactions.

The developed and applied heuristics is not all-encompassing or exhaustive in terms of possible interactions and relations that affect the construction of LOs. Nonetheless, it presents a powerful tool for the analysis of the large body of data and information collected and processed during the various project stages.

1.5 Structure of the Comparative Analysis Report

The Report is structured in three Parts. Each of the Parts places emphasis on one of the three theoretical frameworks, while at the same time utilising the synergies produced within other frameworks. All three Parts yield critical knowledge to answer the project's overall research questions (see Deliverable D2.2 State-of-the-Art Report). We briefly describe each of the parts, offering a first insight into the separate chapters and their results.

Overview of the Report

PART I *Learning Outcomes, (Under-)Achievement, and Young People* focuses on the interplay of LOs and young people's life courses. Chapter 2 by *Jenni Tikkanen et al.* seeks to examine the development of young people's reflexive skills, which are considered key tools for making and effecting biographically meaningful, flexible, and realistic educational and occupational plans. Chapter 3 by *Davide Filippi et al.* explores the impact of LOs and local opportunity structures on the life perspectives and plans of young people in vulnerable positions. Chapter 4 by *Berenice Scandone et al.* aims to identify, analyse, and compare the challenges that migrant-background youth face in their learning journeys especially in Southern Europe. Finally, chapter 5 led by *Johannes Ludwig Löffler et al.* examines the agency, perception of the region and capability of young people in remote regions to construct their own life courses.

The results from chapters in PART I show that the interplay of individual, institutional, spatial, and structural factors yields different outcomes in different settings. For young people from migrant background, context- and culturally sensitive education enhances their chances to overcome the intergenerational reproduction of socio-economic disadvantages. For young people in remote regions, their agency is closely tied to the perception of the places they live in, resulting in variegated forms of groundedness, which can accelerate, entrench, or prolong their disadvantaged positions, depending on their sources of support. For young people experiencing mental health issues, the self-blaming and self-responsibilisation restrict their agentic potential and educational aspirations, which calls for an acknowledgement of the structural factors impacting their vulnerable positions. Finally, the recognition, promotion, and institutional integration of reflexivity can support young people's informed educational choices and enhance their agency, so that they can actively and deliberately shape the construction of their LOs.

PART II *Policymaking, Vulnerability, and Inclusion* shifts the attention to the relation between LOs and young people in vulnerable positions. In Chapter 6 by *Hannah Edler et al.*, the focus is placed on examining the impact of spatial contexts on individual labour market outcomes by utilizing available microdata. Chapter 7 by *Xavier Rambla et al.* explores the framing of LOs at various levels of governance, as well as the impact of these frameworks on young people's learning paths in the Southern European regions. Chapter 8 by *Ruggero Cefalo et al.* centres on the role of multilevel governance structures and spatial disparities in shaping LOs and highlights the differences of welfare and transition regimes in the four selected countries. Finally, chapter 9 by *Jozef Zelinka et al.* compares the life contexts of groups in multi-disadvantaged, vulnerable positions and elaborates on the impact of urban spaces on the quality of LOs.

The results from chapters in PART II indicate that local/regional opportunity structures and spatial divisions impinge on the capacity to unite the needs and visions of different stakeholders. At the regional level, economically thriving regions often amplify disadvantages for groups in vulnerable positions due to competitive housing and job markets. Particularly in urban spaces, the overproduction of opportunities fails to meet the needs of young people. With regard to the multilevel governance structures, this situation can worsen or improve depending on the flexibility of the coordination frame and the levels of autonomy at the regional and/or local level. Economically declining regions, on the other hand, suffer from scarcity of job and infrastructure opportunities, which can aggravate in centralised coordination frameworks. Furthermore, the different logics applied by educational and training professionals and young learners lead to contradictions and frustrations at both sides, since they follow diverging interests not aligned in mutual dialogue.

PART III *Bridging Research, Policy, and Practice* problematises the approach to LOs from the perspective of various stakeholders. In chapter 10 by *Tiago Neves et al.*, the aim is to identify recurring patterns of articulation regarding the conceptual meaning as well as the actual use of LOs in research. Chapter 11 by *Eduardo Barberis et al.* explores stakeholders perceived room for action and agency in the complex interplay between structural boundaries and a proactive professional orientation stemming from a commitment to crucial societal goals. Chapter 12 by *Hélder Ferraz et al.* sheds light onto the question of how different educational stakeholders form diverging temporal and spatial perspectives, and how these visions interact with one another, open up or close cleavages and contestations. Finally, chapter 13 by *Sebastiano Benasso et al.* focuses on the results of participatory actions integrated in and traversing the project and offers reflections on the Innovation Forums carried out at local levels.

The results from chapters in PART III evidence that LOs are constructed in various spatial and institutional settings in which their main actors are inserted. Policymakers face the challenge of overviewing the complex institutional spaces encompassing education,

labour market, career guidance, and policymaking. To bridge the gap between these different arenas it appears necessary to foster spaces that nurture personal and collective growth and give voice from the grassroots to the people that cannot be seen only as recipients of top-down demands (and learning objectives). Especially young people are deeply impacted by mismatches between the temporal and spatial fragmentation of their personal experiences and the institutionalised life courses. This calls for the creation of environments characterized by trust and inclusivity that encourage the expression of diverse perspectives, particularly in contexts where there are intergenerational or power asymmetries (e.g., between youths and policymakers).

In the Conclusion (Chapter 14), we synthetise the results to answer the project's overall research questions and account for the broader discussions focusing the quality of educational achievements and the phenomenon of constructing LOs.

Some notes for readers

The reference list entails the compiled and harmonized references for all chapters to avoid redundancies among the chapters.

At the end of every chapter, we provide a section with key messages that result from the analyses and offer a concise summary for the readers.

The Report uses codes for citing the empirical findings from WPs 4, 5, and 6. The codes have been produced at the end of the project's launching phase (see Table 1 in Deliverable D2.3 Report with Sites Selection). The codes for WP4 quotes entail information about the country, region and research site, as well as on the professional background of the interviewees ("E" stands for educational professional; "LM" stand for Labour Market professional). The for WP5 quotes inform about the country, region and research site. The codes for WP6 quotes entail information on country, number of open question (see Annex 1 in Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report), gender ("F" female, "M" male respondent) and ID number of the interviewee.

PART I

LEARNING OUTCOMES, (UNDER-)ACHIEVEMENT, AND YOUNG PEOPLE

2. Navigating the Maze: Reflexivity as a Critical Skill in Youth Transitions

Jenni Tikkanen, Liliana Zeferino, Niklas Pernhaupt & Ruggero Cefalo

2.1 Introduction

We understand learning outcomes (LOs) and educational achievement to be broader phenomena than simply sets of knowledge, skills, and competences measured by school grades and test scores. Instead, LOs include various unquantifiable inter- and intrapersonal skills needed for reaching positive life course outcomes, such as participation in education and employment as a means of participation in society and finding one's place in the world (Tikkanen et al., 2025). This chapter examines young peoples' reflexivity—the means through which individuals try to understand, negotiate, and cope with society's structural inequalities and uncertainties in their life course and, thereby, a prerequisite for agency in educational and other life course transitions—in different transition regimes and differing spatial contexts in Austria, Finland, and Portugal. As reflexivity is a central transversal skill in navigating one's learning and life pathways, it is also a key learning outcome for young people.

Today's young Europeans are faced with challenging, prolonged, and non-linear transitions from youth to adulthood especially in achieving self-actualisation in one's professional career and, consequently, a stable financial situation (e.g., Sironi, 2018; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022). A key factor behind this is the increasing difficulty of recognising, mobilising, and consolidating productive and successful educational choices as the complexity of these choices and their respective labour market consequences is growing (Cuconato et al., 2016). Finding employment poses also significant challenges as the entrance criteria for the labour market have become more demanding than ever before due to altering occupational structures, increasing skills requirements, rising expectations for higher and more formal education, and collapsing demand for unskilled workers (Harkko, 2018). Nevertheless, young people are expected to take charge of their own future and individualise their lives by constructing educational and occupational trajectories based on their personal preferences and choices—and held personally responsible if they fail in managing labour market risks by not becoming 'active', 'flexible', and 'employable' enough (Aapola-Kari & Wrede-Jäntti, 2017). Especially for those youths, who have limited resources due to their vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged life situations, making and executing biographically meaningful and flexible educational and occupational plans that account for personal, structural, and spatial strengths and limitations, charting the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to reach one's goals, dealing with ruptured pathways, finding alternative routes, and adjusting aspirations when necessary are demanding tasks.

Youth reflexivity does not emerge spontaneously but requires social and pedagogical contexts that foster it intentionally and in a structured manner (Maclure, 2017). Furthermore, individuals' reflexivity is embedded in contextual opportunities within a

certain space, which offer or impede access to opportunities in education and the labour market. Education and various other policy measures can hinder or promote young people's reflexivity, for instance, by emphasising specific goals (i.e., labour market placement or individual exploration). In this study, we apply the theoretical lenses of *Life Course Research* (Mayer, 2009; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003) and *Spatial Justice* (Soja, 2010) on individual and institutional analytical dimensions/levels and aim to answer two research questions:

- How do young people in vulnerable and multi-disadvantaged situations display reflexivity in educational transitions and disruptions in Austria, Finland, and Portugal?
- How are young people's reflexive skills supported, ignored, or hindered by their lived experiences of educational and labour market policies and practices in differing spatial contexts in these countries?

By highlighting the interplay between reflexivity, structural barriers, and policy frameworks, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how reflexivity shapes young people's ability to navigate their life course transitions. It emphasises how young people's critical reflections on their life paths interact with the structural and policy contexts they face, helping us to better understand their consequent potential for agency and decision-making in complex and unequal spaces.

The chapter contributes to answering CLEAR project's key research questions: how do young people construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance (life course/individual level); how do various policies interact with individual life courses of young people and what are their points of possible change (life course/institutional level); and how do spatial settings affect the choices and decisions of young people (spatial justice/individual level). The chapter unfolds in four steps: We first conceptualize the term reflexivity; second, we present the national contexts of the sample countries; third, we introduce the data used and methods applied in our chapter; fourth, we present the main research findings. The chapter is rounded out with a brief conclusion.

2.2 Reflexivity

Individuals' capacity to reflect on their own abilities, possibilities, and life courses as well as their abilities for critical thinking and strategic goal setting are key components of reflexivity (Kim, 2023; O'Connor, 2012). While it requires reflective abilities, reflexivity should not be equated with some kind of internalised meta-reflection (Adams, 2006). As Farrugia (2013, p. 875) states: "Reflexivity is not just an attribute of subjects, but aims to capture something about societies. The role of reflexive subjectivities in these accounts of social change is as the personal dimension of social processes which escape the subject."

Reflexive practices, with which individuals try to respond to the unstable and contradictory structural environments, are socially embedded and oriented towards the realisation of meaningful biographical trajectories (Farrugia, 2015a). Thus, reflexivity does not equate with emancipation from structural constraints (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), and reflexive practices are not, but can include or lead to, agency. Thus, reflexivity and agency are distinct: reflexivity may exist even when structural barriers prevent agency from being exercised (Threadgold, 2010). For example, even though an individual might be reflexively very aware of many different possibilities potentially available, they can still find it difficult or impossible to access them due to a lack of relevant resources. Therefore, reflexivity does not necessarily bring choice but can lead to a "painful awareness of the lack of it" (Adams, 2006, p. 525). Whether or not it is possible to put one's reflexive choices into practice can produce a range of emotions, from confidence and satisfaction to frustration and alienation (Threadgold, 2010).

Individuals' abilities and opportunities to be reflexive in avoiding or dealing with the increased structural risks and uncertainties are affected by their position in social structures (Dawson, 2012). For instance, Threadgold & Nilan (2009) argue that the intensified risks and uncertainties of late modernity construct reflexivity as a form of cultural capital. However, reflexivity is also amenable to being taught and learned as well as consciously incorporated into different levels of social action (Kim, 2023; Maclure, 2017). The development of young people's reflexivity requires relational and institutional contexts and spaces that legitimise critical thinking, recognise the uniqueness of life trajectories, and offer consistent, dialogical support. As Maclure (2017) emphasises, when the conditions for collective and mediated reflection are absent, reflexivity tends to become silent, internalised, and often associated with personal guilt, rather than becoming critical and transformative.

2.3 The national contexts: Austria, Finland, Portugal

The three countries under examination represent different youth transition (and welfare) regimes, i.e., configurations of the regulation of transitions in the life course (Walther, 2022). Austria belongs to the employment-centred regime, which has educational and training frameworks that are selective and standardised. Besides academic education, the focus is mostly on various levels of vocational training. In this regime, young people are expected to qualify for and then be allocated to occupational careers and social positions in different segments, and labour markets are divided into a highly standardised and protected core and precarious peripheries. Finland represents the universalistic regime of the Nordic countries characterised by an extended welfare provision providing individual and universal access to social security, and an inclusive schooling system with a focus on education and activation. Together with various forms of institutional support schemes, these express the recognition and securing of growing up as a process of personal development. The familistic/sub-protective regime of Portugal is characterised

by a non-selective and relatively inclusive educational system, which is, however, combined with under-resourced and often low-standard training schemes and, particularly for young people, highly challenging access to the labour market. Family plays a central role as a safety net, compensating for institutional shortcomings and absorbing much of the social risk associated with transitions, which contributes to high levels of intergenerational dependency and reflects an institutional 'status vacuum' of youth (Walther, 2006; 2022).

In Austria, the education system is stratified, with a strong vocational orientation (Lassnigg, 2020). At the age of 10, based on their academic achievement, pupils are sorted into parallel channels: academic lower secondary school and basic lower secondary school. The second critical transition point in the Austrian system is from lower to upper secondary education where the choice is between different vocational school types, apprenticeship, and academic upper secondary school. The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system is constituted by work-based (dual apprenticeship) and school-based tracks. Dual vocational training accommodates a relevant share of secondary school graduates by means of apprenticeship contracts combining part-time vocational schooling and on-the-job learning. The strong vocational orientation of the education system is associated with comparatively fast transitions to employment. Dual apprenticeships seem to facilitate timely employment, but the dual system has been recently declining, due to rising participation in school-based and academic higher education in universities, and the shrinking number of firms offering training. In response, bridges between dual training and higher education have been introduced to increase the attractivity of apprenticeships contracts. Further, most youth-oriented activation measures aim at supporting young people below 18 years who are not able to find an apprenticeship position.

As shown by the work carried out in the CLEAR project, Austria displays above-average LOs, with the economic climate significantly contributing to youth integration. Young Austrian adults with vocational upper secondary qualifications and tertiary education have good labour market prospects. Conversely, in the selective Austrian system, groups in vulnerable situations, like low-income families and marginalised communities, face challenges accessing quality education and, therefore, face higher risks of unemployment. Risks of career delays and early school leaving are stronger among students who do not use German as their daily language. Austria has implemented multiple measures to reduce early school leaving and youth unemployment by promoting VET to improve educational conditions for low-qualified young people in disadvantaged situations. However, insufficient guidance and counselling at school is a significant issue.

In Finland, compulsory education applies to all 6–18-year-olds (since 2021), and the first major transition is from comprehensive to upper secondary education. There are two main tracks: general upper secondary education (GUS) and VET and the completion of

both gives eligibility to continue to higher education. While there are no dead-end tracks and no non-reversable choices in the system, the choice of the upper secondary track is still an important one often with long-term consequences. Regarding institutional support for learning and transitions, Finnish basic and upper secondary schools provide special needs education, guidance, school psychologists, and social workers' services based on students' needs. There are also various other institutional actors providing support for youth in vulnerable situations (e.g., preparatory training for degree studies, guidance and counselling, coaching, mental health and social services, rehabilitative work). The support is often holistic and individualised, and the collaboration within the network is relatively well organised (Tikkanen et al., 2017). However, the availability and accessibility of support is impacted by significantly decreasing financial resources (e.g., Ministry of Finance, 2025).

Educational attainment among Finnish youth has shown limited growth over the last 16 years, with the share of tertiary graduates stagnating compared to the rest of Europe. The Finnish labour market presents challenges for young people without at least an upper secondary vocational qualification, with declining job opportunities in the last decades. In contrast, employment rates for upper secondary and tertiary graduates have remained above the EU average, and labour market opportunities for young people with tertiary education have further expanded in the late 2010s. Economic prosperity and social well-being concentrate especially in the metropolitan areas, while the northern and eastern regions face lower living standards and increased risks of poverty and social exclusion.

Portugal has a universal education system until the end of basic education, and compulsory education lasts 12 years. In upper secondary education, students can choose an academic (for access to higher education) or vocational path (focused on access to the labour market, but still enabling higher education access). Disparities in regional development and the inability of compensatory education programmes to enhance the school performance of those that are most disadvantaged are among the key educational issues in Portugal (see Deliverable D3.1, p. 186). Access to quality guidance and training opportunities is unevenly distributed across territories, and while public employment services and vocational training centres offer important transition support, they do not fully address structural mismatches or territorial disparities.

Ongoing reforms aim to increase the quality, flexibility, and relevance of VET, but their impact remains uneven (Silva & Pinto, 2023). Portugal has significantly reduced Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) and Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) rates that are now below the EU-27 average, and young adults generally exhibit higher employment rates than the EU average. This aggregate improvement is connected to the labour market changes that have taken place in Portugal over the last few decades together with educational policies that since the beginning of the 20th century have been geared towards skills and a more integrated relationship with the labour market. Further, the extension of compulsory education to 18 years and the

diversification of VET supply have contributed to the decreased ELET rates (Simões et al., 2020). However, these advances coexist with persistent spatial and social inequalities. Rates of early school leaving, underachievement, and low qualification levels remain higher in peripheral and rural regions. Moreover, labour market integration for young people remains precarious and segmented.

2.4 Data and methods

The data consist of biographical narrative interviews with young people in vulnerable life situations (N=67) (see Deliverable D5.2 National Qualitative Report). Data collection was carried out in two socio-demographically contrasting regions per country in 2024 (see Table 2.1 for the sample's key features).

We have conducted qualitative thematic analysis, and while our approach was not theory-driven, we started the analysis process by constructing an analysis grid by drawing on our insights from the previous analyses of the interview data carried out in the CLEAR project. The analysis grid included: 1) family background; 2) vulnerabilities and disadvantages; 3) life course and current situation; 4) future plans; 5) displayed reflexivity; and 6) institutional factors and regional conditions promoting/hindering reflexivity. Then, the grid was filled in based on several rounds of thorough reading of the interview transcripts. Throughout the analysis process, the authors convened regularly to discuss the functionality of the analysis grid and the themes emerging from the analysis.

Table 2.1 Sample characteristics

Country	Region	N	Gender	Age range	Mig. backg.	Key vulnerabilities[2]
Austria	Upper Austria	12	7 men, 3 women, 2 unknowns	18–23	5	Disadvantaged family background (mostly related to migrant background); mental and physical health problems; learning difficulties and disorders; neuropsychiatric disorders; bullying at school; disrupted educational pathways; difficulties finding employment
	Vienna	13	7 men, 4 women, 2 unknowns	18–30	8	
Finland	Southwest Finland	11	6 men, 5 women	18–26	2	Disadvantaged family background; mental and physical health problems; learning difficulties and disorders; neuropsychiatric disorders; bullying at school; disrupted educational pathways: difficulties finding employment
	Kainuu	11	6 men, 5 women	18–28	0	
Portugal	Tâmega e Sousa	10	4 men, 6 women	19–29	0	Living in neighbourhoods/areas with limited access to opportunities, services, and healthcare; disadvantaged family background; mental health problems; disabilities; disrupted educational pathways; bullying at school
	Amadora (AML)	10	5 men, 5 women	23–29	6	
Total		*67*	*35 men, 28 women, 4 unknown*	*18–30*	*21*	*Various intersecting individually ascribed, socially produced, and territorial based vulnerabilities (Filippi et al. in this report)*

Source: Deliverable D5.2 National Qualitative Report

[2] For most of the interviewees, vulnerabilities were multiple and intersecting.

2.5 Results

The interviewed young people displayed varying degrees of reflexivity in their narratives of educational transitions and pathways. It was quite rare that the (initial) choice of upper secondary track and/or vocational field of study was based on a highly reflexive consideration of well-defined personal interests and aptitudes, skills needs, and future employability—and led to a linear, uninterrupted educational path. Only few interviewees, who were facing only moderate vulnerabilities and were, thus, in a relatively good position, displayed this kind of high reflexivity in their narratives about having clear occupational aspirations at the end of basic education and mapping out available pathways to reach these goals. One of these was Elias:

> *[The reason for choosing the VET field] the certainty of getting a job, employability. As long as there is electricity, electricians will be needed. [---] I love cars. I could spend every day with them, customising them and driving around. But I wasn't interested in being a mechanic for the rest of my life, I'd rather be an electrician or like. [---] [Electric cars] is one of the things that I plan to study too. That would be like a pretty good business plan, studying electric cars. (WP5_FI_E_S_3)*

More commonly, the degree of reflexivity displayed by the interviewees in this regard was much lower and associated with ruptures on their educational trajectories. The vulnerabilities faced by the young people typically drained their mental and material resources and, thus, played a significant part affecting the degree of reflexivity and/or the extent to which making reflexive choices was possible, for example, due to problems with mental or physical health limiting the scope of opportunities, as was the case for Paul:

> *[T]he end of lower secondary school, my kneecap fell out all the time [---] and that made it very difficult for me to find an apprenticeship and then Corona [COVID-19] came along, so I didn't really get to try out much and then I just took the next-best apprenticeship as long as I had something and that was at a large supermarket. (WP5_AT_U_L_3)*

The upper secondary choices were often based on limited knowledge of the chosen field and its job opportunities or even made without clear personal reasoning: "I don't even know [why chose the VET field]. [---] The substitute counsellor mentioned something about [the VET field] and somehow it stuck to my head. So, I applied there pretty much just on a whim." (WP5_FI_E_S_7). A Portuguese interviewee explained: "I went with my father to enrol, and they told us there were no places left. So, I just took what was available. I didn't choose it." (WP5_PT_L_A_14). Several other Portuguese participants also described making decisions based on availability rather than genuine interest or informed judgement. Particularly in vulnerable contexts, young people tended to choose vocational tracks with minimal information or based on what was locally available or suggested by others.

> *It was something the teachers suggested. The course—I think it was the only one available at the school. I actually wanted the sports one, but it was already full. So,*

> *I went for another one, which I didn't mind, but it wasn't really what I wanted. (WP5_PT_L_A_18)*

Particularly in Finland, many youths struggled with making decisions on the field of study expressing that there were simply too many options (and too little real information about them) or that they simply were not able to figure out what they would like to do, which intensified their plight further: "I feel really anxious and uncomfortable. Because I have no idea of what I'd like to do. Where to apply to study or anything. Like what job I will have. The feeling of not knowing anything causes anxiety." (WP5_FI_E_S_10). Some of the Austrian and Finnish interviewees reflected on the capabilities of 15-year-olds and explicitly expressed that they had been too young to be forced to make these decisions with long-lasting effects on their trajectories:

> *I think it's a systemic problem that you have to choose a subject at 15 or 16 that you want to do later [---] at that age you have no life experience, you have the influence of your parents from home and that you really have to choose a path for your whole life at 15. (WP5_AT_V_F_2)*

Families influenced young people's degree of reflexivity in a myriad of ways—in addition to a disadvantaged and/or dysfunctional family background being a key vulnerability factor in the sample. For some, the vocational field of a family member was virtually the only field that was at least somewhat familiar to them, thus, strongly guiding their educational choices: "I learned metal technology, partly because I couldn't think of anything else. My father did that and my brother did it for a year. I actually finished it, I have no idea how." (WP5_AT_V_F_11). For others, family provided encouragement to a certain direction or even clear pressure to choose 'the family trade' despite a lack of own interest in the field. In Portugal, some mentioned disruptive family events as catalysts for school disengagement: "Ever since my parents' divorces, when I was 18, I completely gave up on school. [...] I lost all motivation to do something I could be proud of and show them." (WP5_PT_N_T_9).

Making educational choices with low reflexivity was very often followed by dropping out of education and enrolling into another educational programme or apprenticeship or seeking employment—for many, this cycle was repeated more than once. However, dropping out of education can also be a choice that gives space to (re)gain resources for reflexivity, as was the case for Luca (WP5_AT_U_L_12) who dropped out from school due to mental strain caused by a rising internalised pressure to perform at school. This allowed them with time to reflect and recover from mental health issues, thus, improving their wellbeing. However, this kind of reflexivity was not always institutionally supported:

> *I talked with a guidance counsellor that I would've wanted to take a gap year [after basic education]. They said to me that they don't really condone applicants' gap years in VET. So, I didn't take a gap year, because I thought it wouldn't be worth it. Now I feel that it would've helped me a lot to cope and recover. (WP5_FI_E_S_9)*

For some of the interviewees in Austria and Portugal, early school leaving did not result from low levels of reflexivity and a freely made choice, but from a need or wish to achieve economic autonomy. Joana explained: "I have two children. I couldn't manage everything. Work became the priority." (WP5_PT_L_A_1), and Rutendo stated: "I have bills to pay. Losing one, two, three years studying would be difficult." (WP5_PT_L_A_9). These narratives describe transitions shaped by overlapping material responsibilities and the absence of institutional support, where reflection on the future is constantly subordinated to the urgency of the present. In Austria, early school leaving emerged more as a personal preference: "I'm not the kind of person who likes education, I'm more of a working person, I like to work more and that's why I didn't go to secondary school." (WP5_AT_U_L_7).

Dropping out of school and early school leaving did not typically appear as a sudden rupture but as the culmination of a process of systemic disconnection and lack of differentiated support, especially during critical moments such as the transition from lower to upper secondary education. Mariana illustrated this experience: "I knew that course wasn't for me, but no one gave me another option." (WP5_PT_N_T_7). Ilona was very motivated to study, but a lack of timely support led to dropping out: "Because I wasn't diagnosed with [neuropsychiatric disorder] as a child, I hadn't learned how to balance life and studies. [---] [Studying] didn't work out, my already unstable mental health took more hits, because I couldn't cope with stress." (WP5_FI_E_S_5).

Thus, low levels of reflexivity displayed in the narratives of educational transitions were not due to young people's inherently lacking abilities of reflection and critical and strategic thinking—nor were school drop-out and early school leaving always results of limited reflexivity. In the following sections, we further highlight this by discussing young people's reflexivity on their own vulnerabilities and the degree and quality of available institutional support for developing reflexivity and turning it to transformative agency.

Reflexivity on vulnerabilities

Many of the interviewees displayed reflexivity on the vulnerabilities of their own situations and awareness of the consequent life course effects. Their narratives illustrated how vulnerability is not merely the context in which they live, it is also a subjective experience that can, at times, become an object of critical awareness. Several interviews highlighted how reflexivity in life course transitions is in itself a demanding task for young people struggling with intersecting vulnerabilities, but that the vulnerabilities also create a further layer of need for reflexivity in making educational and occupational plans.

Reflecting on one's own fragility, exclusion or stigma demanded emotional strength, particularly when the surrounding institutions had failed to acknowledge the suffering endured or to offer legitimate spaces for its articulation. For some, emotional vulnerability was a barrier to reflexivity, and emotional silence was not the absence of thought, but a deliberate survival strategy, a way of protecting oneself from the paralysing impact of pain, as was the case for Mariana: "There was too much in my head. Thinking only made

it worse. So, I pushed everything down." (WP5_PT_N_T_7). For Johanna, it had been easier to think about passing away at a young age than about future pathways: "Like, in a way, there never was a future for me. [---] Yeah, I don't really know, I probably thought that I wouldn't be here anymore." (WP5_FI_P_K_11).

In Finland, while there were few interviewees who were facing very difficult intersecting vulnerabilities but (or due to which) did not display reflexivity about the potential challenges or limitations that those could pose on their occupational aspirations, many young people were reflexive about how the vulnerabilities affected their functional and coping abilities and limited the feasibility of different vocational options. For instance, Ilona and Kerttu illustrated this: "I have this really ambitious goal that I'd be able to enter the working life and achieve some kind of balance so that I could work without it draining my energy excessively." (WP5_FI_E_S_5) and "I've been thinking a lot about what job would have as few taxing features as possible. [---] That I could feel like I could cope with it well. So that it would give more than it takes." (WP5_FI_E_S_7). However, this reflexivity did not typically lead to agentic transformation of one's situation due to the surrounding opportunity structures lacking suitable employment opportunities that would have provided these young people with sufficient support and part-time or otherwise 'lightened' work opportunities.

Whereas young Finns were reflexive about their vulnerabilities mainly in relation to educational and occupational pathways, for the Portuguese youth—often facing more intense structural inequalities—vulnerability-related reflexivity was more 'holistic', further highlighting aspects of processes of disengagement. Several young people describe feelings of institutional invisibility experienced as symbolic exclusion. Joana stated: "I felt like no one cared about me. Even when I went to class, it didn't seem to matter whether I was there or not." (WP5_PT_L_A_1). In some cases, young people articulated the intersecting layers of their social condition. Ellen identified the convergence of gender, class, and racialisation as a cumulative burden: "I feel like I must prove myself twice as much. For being a woman, for being black, for coming from here. I don't even try in some things anymore, because I know it's not worth it." (WP5_PT_L_A_3). Some were able to identify more subtle dynamics of discrimination, such as racialisation within their own communities. For example, Thabisa, an African immigrant, recounted: "They were African, but born here. They spoke better. And they laughed in my face. [...] Many dropped out." (WP5_PT_L_A_14). These narratives reflect a critical awareness of language and belonging, where young people begin to understand the mechanisms that exclude them from full participation placing them in subordinate positions even within theoretically homogeneous groups. However, there were also Portuguese interviewees in whose narratives vulnerability became a driver of resistance and identity reinvention. Rui, after a long process of mental health medicalisation, reoriented his path through critical reflection: "I was on medication for ten years. But I realised I needed another way of taking care of myself. I started reading, talking to other people. I changed my focus."

(WP5_PT_L_A_11). Reflexivity, in such cases, emerged as an act of epistemic autonomy, a refusal to accept external definitions of oneself, and a deliberate effort to rebuild meaning from within one's own vulnerability.

Particularly in Austria and Portugal, a recurring element in the narratives was a retrospective awareness of the negative consequences of certain decisions they had made, such as early school leaving. However, this rarely led to a critical analysis of the underlying structural causes. Instead, the strength of internalised and naturalised meritocratic narratives was evident, for example, in the accounts of Mariana and Joana from Portugal: "If I could go back, I wouldn't have messed up so much. I would have made the most of it." (WP5_PT_N_T_7) and "Now that I'm a mother, I see that I should have done everything differently." (WP5_PT_L_A_1). In these cases, school 'failure' was appropriated in an individualised manner, with no consideration given to institutional constraints or the effects of accumulated vulnerabilities. In Austria, many youths—mostly men—expressed regret over laziness: "In my current situation, if I'd gotten better grades back then, I might still be in school now, so if I'd gotten used to sitting down and learning, then I'd be able to do that." (WP5_AT_U_L_1). The Finnish interviewees did not display much awareness of the structural factors contributing to their vulnerabilities either, but they typically recognised—at least in retrospect after receiving institutional support—the impact of mental health problems, neuropsychiatric disorders, and/or learning difficulties on their LOs and educational choices, including dropping out. Thus, they did not display quite as much 'meritocratic self-blame' in their narratives in general, but still for some, like Pekka, these feelings of being a failure were strong: "When I dropped out of GUS and applied to a new place, immediately I had this fear of like I don't think I'm going to able to finish this... I was afraid I'd fail, disappoint my parents and myself too." (WP5_FI_E_S_6).

In the interviews from Vienna (Austria), meritocratic thinking intertwined with the lived reality of the available opportunity structures reflecting a lacking number of available apprenticeship positions. Thus, many of the young people were part of an alternative supra-company apprenticeship programme (see Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report) where they were being trained through courses and many short internships across multiple companies. Some reflected on supra-company apprenticeships being a more precarious form of apprenticeship—especially monetarily. Many of them, however, had internalised a sense of deservingness to justify earning less money in supra-company apprenticeships vis-à-vis regular ones, like Karim: "So, I think that's fair, because the people who are working outside now don't sit here like we do and so on. Of course, they get more than we do. I think that's fair." (WP5_AT_V_F_6).

(Lack of) institutional support for reflexivity

In Austria, insufficient guidance and counselling at school left many young people like Max to navigate their educational paths on their own devices: "Um, I just studied, I just looked around to see if there was anything that interested me, I just did a bit of research."

(WP5_AT_U_L_11). One salient pattern was that the Austrian young adults who had attended special needs and performance-based programmes reflected on the ambivalence and impact of these supposedly integrative measures, thus, illustrating how they can create stigma and hamper turning reflexivity into agency by limiting opportunities in the labour market.

> *[L]et's say, the problem nowadays with apprenticeships is that if you look at the school report card now, not all companies of course, but some, if you look at the report card, for example, in a certain subject like math [special needs status], it's not so good. (WP5_AT_V_F_9)*

Austrian narratives illustrated how educational and labour market conditions can limit the space for young people's reflexivity. For instance, there are more young people looking for apprenticeship positions in Vienna than there are available ones, which can hinder putting reflexivity into practise: "I wanted to be a car mechanic, but in the end, I became a tiler, it's something else." (WP5_AT_V_F_1). Regarding transitioning into the labour market after completing school, Austria's labour market integration scheme is primarily based on placement. For many youths in the unemployment system this means facing the heteronomy of being placed in sectors of need and, thus, a lack of choice.

> *You sit down there [AMS], tell them you're interested in an office job and they put you in a youth workshop where you do bricklaying, and then you're desperate again and don't know what to do with yourself and you stand there again and think you have to combine that with the other and it's always this cycle that leads nowhere. (WP5_AT_V_F_7)*

In Finland, many of the young people who had dropped out of education (eventually) sought for or were guided to support measures aimed at youth in vulnerable situations. Some were able to strengthen their reflexivity by gaining more critical insights on the available opportunities, alternative educational routes, and their own strengths with the provided support. Thus, they were able to come up with more suitable and/or personally meaningful educational and occupational plans and start to pursue their goals: "I attended preparatory training for VET [---] and [a coaching programme]. Then I thought what to do after, and my coach and I started to think about that. [---] [W]e visited vocational institutions. And I chose this one." (WP5_FI_E_S_1). However, despite the relatively wide range of different forms of support with potential to contribute positively to young people's reflexivity, many interviewees did not receive sufficient support for the vulnerabilities they were facing, which impacted their reflexive abilities negatively. Regarding mental health problems, learning difficulties, and neuropsychiatric disorders, which were very dominant in the sample, it was typically a question of not getting a timely diagnosis and the consequent lack of individualised support, having to queue long times to gain access to services, or the complexity and fragmentation of the service network—the latter of which was an issue especially in Southwest Finland. In Kainuu, the much smaller population and limited resources have forced the different actors of the service

network to a close collaboration, which benefitted those seeking support. Regarding guidance at school, while many Finnish interviewees discussed how it had benefitted them at least to a degree, there were also those who had received insufficient or even counterproductive guidance rejecting their own reflexivity and leading to disruptions on educational pathways. For example, Niina received questionable advice from a guidance counsellor impacting her reflexivity and educational pathway negatively.

> *I was thinking about studying animal care in VET. And then I thought about studying to become a restaurant cook. But at that point our guidance counsellor was like your grades aren't good enough. That there's no point in even trying to apply. That it's much easier just to apply to our local GUS, because the required grades are so low there. [---] So, then I was like help! Like is there any place that I can apply to. It was really close that I didn't apply anywhere. (WP5_FI_P_K_3)*

In Portugal, the narratives point to a school system that is largely unresponsive, characterised by normative pedagogical practices, a lack of meaningful listening, and technical support disconnected from the lived realities of students. In the young people's narratives, schools failed to create hybrid spaces of listening, mediation, and recognition—fundamental conditions for reflexivity on life course pathways. This institutional failure cuts across both urban and rural settings. In AML, territorial fragmentation and the stigmatisation of certain neighbourhoods hinder integrated responses. In Tâmega e Sousa, the scarcity of resources and pedagogical rigidity obstruct inclusion. Despite their differences, both regions reproduce inequality through schools that rarely listen, offer poor guidance, and fail to challenge young people to think critically about themselves and the surrounding societal structures. It is within this relational void that one of the key opportunities for developing reflexivity is lost: educational guidance. Most testimonies refer to technical, context-free guidance mechanisms detached from relational dimensions and incapable of fostering deep, situated reflexivity. Thabisa highlighted the clear absence of support beyond the classroom: "If I'd had support outside classes... it might have worked. I think I could have even started to enjoy it." (WP5_PT_L_A_14), showing that the availability of educational support is neither guaranteed nor sustained, and that the absence of stable, mediating pedagogical relationships weakens students' engagement with learning and self-reflection. Amahale recounted the humiliation she experienced at the hands of a teacher: "She basically meant I wasn't going to learn, that I wasn't worth the effort." (WP5_PT_L_A_13) exemplifying systemic forms of epistemic violence (Dotson, 2011), whereby young people's cognitive potential is dismissed outright, denying them the possibility of being recognised as legitimate thinking subjects.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to answer two research questions by utilising the theoretical perspectives of life course and spatial justice: how do young people in vulnerable situations display reflexivity in educational transitions and disruptions; and how are their

reflexivity supported, ignored, or hindered by their lived experiences of educational and labour market policies and practices in Austria, Finland, and Portugal. Thus, the aim was also to contribute to answering CLEAR's key research questions related to the construction of young people's life courses through their choices and actions in differing social and spatial contexts. In their narratives, the young interviewees in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations navigating their lives in the differing transition and welfare regimes of Austria, Finland, and Portugal displayed varying degrees of reflexivity and ability to turn reflexive awareness into agency. These variations were associated with the severity of their vulnerabilities and the surrounding institutional and opportunity structures. Intersecting vulnerabilities created additional challenges to and needs for individual reflexivity, which is a demanding skill for any young people to develop (Kim, 2023; Maclure, 2017). Limited regional/local opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009) meant that for many, reflexivity in planning one's educational and occupational pathways turned into a painful awareness of the lack of biographically meaningful options (Adams, 2006).

Instead of well-informed or strategically reflexive decisions, educational (and occupational) choices were often shaped by lack of guidance, lacking support for individually ascribed vulnerabilities (see Chapter 3), socio-economic pressures, gendered (family) expectations, and urgency to secure income. Thus, the typically low levels of reflexivity displayed in the youths' narratives was not an individual shortcoming or inherent lack of abilities of the individuals. Instead, as illustrated time and time again through their lived experiences of policies and practices, it was the institutions that often fell short by failing to provide young people in vulnerable and multi-disadvantaged situations with individualised, context-sensitive, and timely support for navigating their pathways in biographically meaningful ways. What followed was that early school leaving and school drop-out, which often followed circumstantial educational decisions made with low levels of reflexivity, emerged as an end result of a process of systemic disconnection and lack of differentiated support (see also Dupéré et al., 2015; Hilal et al., 2024), not as an individual lack of aspirations and motivation to engage in education and invest in LOs. Nevertheless, internalised meritocracy beliefs (Ho, 2024), which dominated many young people's narratives, led to feelings of guilt and self-blame, which affected their self-images and added to the burden of the vulnerabilities of their situations. To conclude, we emphasise that for youth-targeted educational and labour market policies to achieve their goals, institutions cannot keep overlooking the importance of reflexivity as a transversal skill and, thus, a key learning outcome for young people.

KEY MESSAGES

Based on our analyses, we have produced three key messages:

Reflexivity is not a 'fixed' inherent trait, but a context-dependent, relational process. Young people's ability to reflect critically on their educational paths and make biographically meaningful decisions is strongly shaped by their socio-material conditions. Intersecting vulnerabilities, such as social and socioeconomic disadvantage, migration, and mental health issues, tend to constrain reflexivity, not because young people lack critical thinking skills, but because they are overwhelmed by structural pressures. Educational choices often appear accidental or externally imposed, particularly when guidance is limited or misaligned with lived realities, which increases the risk of educational disengagement and school drop-out.

Institutional support for reflexivity (and, thereby, agency) is uneven, fragmented, or misdirected—and often fails to reach those in most vulnerable positions. Although support structures exist in all three countries, they vary widely in accessibility, quality, and responsiveness at national and regional levels. This relates to factors ranging from the organisation of and collaboration between institutional sources of support, to the professionalism and institutional attitudes—that is the habitual ways institutions and their professionals perceive, relate to, and prioritise the needs of young people—of the experts working with young people. Across contexts, there is a general failure to provide young people in vulnerable situations with spaces where reflexivity can be developed dialogically and supported in both life course transition points and over time.

Spatial (in)justice compounds social inequality and limits turning reflexivity into agency. Geographical locations with their opportunity structures shape access to education, training, and employment. Young people in disadvantaged urban areas or rural regions face compounded obstacles. Even when young people develop reflexive awareness of their situation, spatial and structural constraints and institutional shortcomings often prevent them from acting on it. This highlights the need for context-sensitive, relational approaches to guidance and other forms of support for youth that account for both material conditions and subjective needs and aspirations.

3. The Influence of Learning Outcomes' Conceptualization on the Life Plans of Young People in Italy, Spain, and Finland

Davide Filippi, Jenni Tikkanen, Martí Manzano Moliner & Sebastiano Benasso

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we examine the relationship between vulnerability, resulting from the intersection of various disadvantage factors, and the institutional responses across different local contexts, starting from the perspectives of young people interviewed in Finland, Italy, and Spain. We also consider the relevance of spatial dimensions and the injustices they produce (Soja, 2010). Educational environments are culturally and socially constructed, and opportunities for education can vary greatly based on geographic context—such as regions, cities, and rural areas—as well as the quality of teaching and available infrastructures. In discussing the issue of vulnerability, we take a contextual and process-oriented approach (Oksala, 2015). We depart from the prevailing neoliberal perspective, which in the three countries we analysed tends to attribute the causes of vulnerability to individuals. This view overlooks the impact of inequalities and affects the institutional responses to them. Consistently, our approach allows us to move away from an individualized conception of educational success and instead situate it within the context of spatial location and the unequal distribution of resources, a notion further supported by the macro analysis of statistical data conducted in the project.

The chapter focuses in particular on three questions:

- How do young people experience, interpret, and frame their learning outcomes (LOs) as part of their own trajectories and social positionality?
- How do young people construct their own life courses within their opportunity structures, life histories, educational spaces, and social circumstances?
- How do spatial settings affect the choices, opportunity structures, and logics of action of young people?

Beck's concept of risk biographies (1992) illustrates that late modernity is characterized by increasing individualization and exposure to global and uncertain risks. This reality compels individuals to seek personal solutions to systemic contradictions. In this context, the ability to plan for the future becomes more valuable yet harder to achieve for those lacking solid social and economic security. The uncertainties associated with the risk society exacerbate inequalities: some young people benefit from individual support networks and resources that help them manage and mitigate risks, while others are left to navigate precarious situations that severely limit their prospects for the future. The capacity to envision potential futures then becomes a proxy of privilege. This situation emerges from the diminishing institutional control over individual life courses brought about by the neoliberal turn, making the subjective management of life course de-standardization (Brückner & Mayer, 2005) a central challenge for the contemporary performative citizen (Zelinka et al., 2023). In coping with the uncertainty produced within

the framework of risk society, the life courses of youths in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged conditions are concerned by processes of individualization of accountability, and they are made responsible for their educational outcomes. In addition, the so-called "performative society" (Chicchi & Simone, 2017) ranks individuals according to the level of human capital they are able to express. Dardot and Laval (2013) argue that the "factory of the subject" today frames the individual as a self-entrepreneur, who tends to focus on enhancing their own human capital in a context where the market, with its paradigms of competition and productivity, becomes the main structuring factor of society. Human capital theories define every individual as someone who, over time, acquires a personal set of educational, relational, and experiential skills, which constitute their added value to be deployed within the competitive arena of the global market (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2014).

Within this neoliberal framework, competition becomes the main lens through which social relationships are interpreted. This resonates with the quantifying aims of the measurement of LOs, which result in forms of ranking of the learners' profiles. Though, educational opportunities are differentiated based on geographic location and on the social, cultural, and economic resources available to each individual, making the 'competition' to high LOs an unfair race.

The meaning and shape of personal biographies increasingly depend on individuals' varying capacities and opportunities for exercising biographicity (Alheit, 2018), the ability to construct life trajectories through narratives, projects, and future projections built at a subjective level. As Appadurai (2004) highlights in his work on the "capacity to aspire", the ability to identify plausible futures and to desire social change does not stem from innate skills, but rather from culturally and socially mediated processes. Crafting a coherent narrative of one's existence, which links past, present, and projection toward the future, requires resources—both economic and cultural—that are not uniformly available in society. Access to these resources is influenced by opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009) that affect the pursuit of biographical goals within the dominant discourse (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). These structures dictate the means that institutions provide for achieving these goals (ibid.), as well as the opportunities offered through meaningful relationships (Benasso et al., 2022), particularly in social and educational contexts.

Consistent with the findings of the research carried out with educational professionals, LOs should not be solely focused on academic achievement; instead, they should aim for a broader definition that considers the impacts of education also in terms of empowering reflective skills and self-narrative abilities as crucial skills for individuals to manage their life trajectories. However, prevalent approaches to quantifying academic performance across Europe are overly simplistic. This narrow focus affects not only the experiences of young people within educational systems but also their perceptions of life and opportunities beyond school. This situation is particularly critical for young people living

in disadvantaged contexts. For many, school represents one of the few structured environments for interaction with institutions, often in collaboration with social services. Schools can provide opportunities for building relationships with adult figures such as teachers, tutors, and educators. These adults embody the state and public policies and offer access to symbolic and material resources essential for developing a sense of belonging and planning for the future. As a result, the educational context and its evaluative mechanisms, such as LOs, are central to policy and institutional efforts aimed at addressing inequality. As Archer & Francis (2006) argue, the experiences young people have in school influence their ability to envision possible futures and translate those visions into concrete plans. For young people burdened by various forms of disadvantage, the risk of disaffiliation is significant. This refers to the progressive estrangement of people in vulnerable situations from institutions, often triggered by complex relationships within educational settings.

Analysing the narratives of young people in vulnerable situations provides valuable insights into how their educational experiences shape their life trajectories. It reveals how structural inequalities affect not only academic performance but also the ability to create self-narratives and derive meaning from their experiences. This highlights a gap between the potential for a comprehensive understanding of LOs and the reductionist approach that focuses solely on measurable metrics.

The chapter's structure follows an exhaustive descriptive analysis, which is concluded with a discussion of the findings and concluding remarks.

3.2 Descriptive analysis

A cross-cutting topic emerges from the interviews with young people, as many of them discussed how they deal with multiple forms of vulnerability that often intersect with each other. To structure the comparative analysis of the relationship between life courses and the different approaches adopted by educational institutions in Italy, Spain, and Finland to mitigate the inequalities experienced by young people, we have identified three macro-categories of vulnerability. These categories arise from the interaction between specific socio-structural and individual characteristics of young people and the educational environments they engage with. Our analysis focuses on these specific forms of vulnerability.

The first category of *individually ascribed vulnerabilities* refers to vulnerabilities resulting from the mismatch between students' individual characteristics and the cognitive, performative behavioural, and emotional regulation standards expected and promoted by educational institutions. This category includes all forms of vulnerability that, in some way, relate to subjective conditions, such as mental health issues and learning disorders.

The second category of *socially produced vulnerabilities* includes those vulnerabilities generated by the mismatch between the basic skills expected by the educational system

and the individual capabilities of young people. In this sense, we consider the vulnerabilities produced by young people's social backgrounds. For instance, this includes language-related difficulties for foreign students or low socio-economic family conditions. More broadly, we also refer to disadvantages resulting from the mismatch between the kind of cultural capital that is promoted in educational environments and that owned by learners, as highlighted by some interviewees, consistent with the perspective of the "hidden curriculum" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and its profound impact on young people's educational outcomes.

The third category of *territorially based vulnerabilities*, focuses on vulnerabilities linked to opportunity structures available in different territories, both in economic and infrastructural terms. This includes disparities between metropolitan and peripheral areas, differences between neighbourhoods within cities, variations in labour market size and opportunities, and limitations in public transportation systems. In this framework, this category is directly connected to theories associated with the spatial justice paradigm.

In applying this categorization, it is important to emphasize that each individual may experience multiple conditions of vulnerability—both within the same category and across different categories. In this sense, the categorization serves as a pragmatic tool for conducting the comparative analysis of the examined countries and is not meant to overlook the intersectional relation among different factors producing vulnerabilities.

Individually ascribed vulnerabilities

In the Italian context, two main forms of vulnerability emerged from the interviews, which are generally ascribed to the individual conditions of the subjects experiencing them. On the one hand, we refer to issues related to mental health and the ways in which educational institutions attempt to address them. On the other hand, we refer to learning disabilities, which, as previously emphasized, have seen a significant increase in diagnoses[3]. The first noteworthy aspect is that in the Italian process of recruiting the interviewees, we did not focus on these specific forms of vulnerability. Only during the interviews did they emerge as transversal conditions, affecting the majority of the subjects involved in the research. Looking to the interviews, mental health issues appear to be structurally present in the life courses of many youths in Italy, Finland and Spain, opening up new research questions that should be further investigated.

The issues related to mental health are addressed by the interviewed young people either in relation to their own biography or in reflexive terms regarding a sort of generational characteristic. Although almost all the interviewees share the idea that these forms of vulnerability are due to subjective predispositions, they also emphasize how the

[3] For instance, in the period between school years 2010/2011 and 2020/2021, the number of primary and secondary school students who have been diagnosed with a DSA in Italy increased five-fold from 0.90 % to 5.41 % (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2022).

organizational structures of educational institutions and rhetoric such as merit or excellence contribute to this condition in many young Italians. In this sense, the typical neoliberal dynamic of individual accountability for inadequate performance ends up reproducing a reflexive judgment that interprets unsatisfactory results (such as, for instance, underachievement in school) as a consequence of personal deficit. The educational institutions seem to firstly 'produce', and then attempt to compensate, the vulnerabilities that are often interiorized by the 'underachieving learners' as subjective lacks.

> *My school has a reputation of being difficult, very serious, also because there is selection to get in. So, these entries and expectations, they determine the mental health statistics of the students. A lot of things I understood later, however, there was a very high rate of eating disorders and self-harm in our school. In a high-performing environment like my school, which is considered an excellence, you notice it more, and I remember I had classmates with very high levels of stress and performativity. (WP5_IT_L_G_7)*

Another element that emerges in many interviews is the absence of school psychologists in most schools. In Italy, in fact, the presence of this figure is contingent upon the choices of school principal, who must evaluate its necessity and, if needed, find the resources to implement it in their school (Cacciamani & Confalonieri, 2022).

Concerning the learning disabilities, a relevant topic that emerges is that the compensatory tools that some of the interviewees were allowed to use after being diagnosed with Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) did not make them feel at ease, producing a labelling that would accompany them throughout their entire school experience. To some extent, the stigma that these compensatory tools attached to their public image and in their peer relationships led some young people to reject their use. School is thus the institution that is forefront in intercepting and recognizing the SLDs, but at the same time, it focuses exclusively on the tools that allow the individual to achieve a predetermined level of competence. Conversely, the narratives of young people emphasize that the same tools should also be questioned in terms of symbolic impact, giving more attention to the socio-relational dynamics within the school environment. Therefore, in the interviewees' opinion, educational institutions should not only aim to achieve good levels of LOs but also prioritize building horizontal and supportive social relationships. In this sense, compensatory tools for students with SLDs do not take into account this important aspect, which is a relevant issue for young people.

> *In lower secondary school I was given aids, but I did not want them. I was very ashamed of using a calculator and computer. Today I use the computer instead and I don't mind. I had a computer and a pen with a flash drive on the top, you would write on the paper and the pen would record your movements, you would put the flash drive in and it would decipher the letters, so you could write by hand and just commit to the content. But I never used it because I was ashamed even*

though I had the right to because the other children made fun of me because I was a burden since I had selective learning disorders. (WP5_IT_L_G_2)

From the Finnish interviews, three key types of individual vulnerabilities emerged: 1.) mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression), 2.) neurodiversity[4] (ADHD, autism spectrum disorders), and 3.) learning difficulties and disabilities.[5] Often these three types intertwined in the narratives, for example, by difficulties in learning and functioning in a school environment leading to mental health struggles. One key factor behind the prevalence of mental health problems was bullying. Over half of the interviewees talked about being bullied at school and a majority of them suffered from depression and/or anxiety. The professional skills and abilities and even willingness of teachers and schools to address and intervene with bullying varied but were often seriously lacking.

Also, the importance of and differences in access to a proper and timely diagnosis was illustrated in the interviews. Those youths with timely diagnoses talked about receiving different forms of support at school (e.g., remedial teaching, small-group teaching), while those with delayed diagnoses did not get the support they would have needed, which impacted their LOs and educational trajectories as the vulnerabilities accumulated. When talking about their school experiences, some of these young people talked initially about "losing motivation" or "not being interested in school anymore", but revealed later in the interview that they had been suffering from mental health issues at the time. For example, Venla described her attitude towards school as negative and that she had no interest in learning. Initially in the interview, she blamed herself for having a wrong attitude, but later stated that her attitude and learning difficulties were probably due to her mental health problems and neurodiversity which went unrecognised in compulsory school, as did rampant bullying at school, loneliness, and a difficult home situation.

I had a really bad attitude, I didn't really care. I did wish the whole time that I'd be really good at school and that I'd be motivated, but it never happened. And then there were many things going on in my life that affected my schooling. (WP5_FI_E_S_10)

While the demands of achieving certain level of LOs were not dominant themes in the Finnish interviews *per se*, many young people with individually ascribed vulnerabilities struggled with schooling and education. For instance, learning difficulties and neurodiversity meant that they had to invest great amounts of effort in learning and studying in order to pass courses, and mental health problems burdened them so much

4 We use the term neurodiversity as a depathologizing concept that emphasizes the diversity in how human brains function, avoids reinforcing deficit-based theories about individuals, and highlights the interaction between individual conditions and social contexts of interaction.

5 Both neurodiversity issues and learning and other disabilities were explicitly discussed by the interviewees; i.e., they are self-attached and not attributed to the young people by the researchers.

that they had little resources to invest in learning—thus, leading often to school drop-out or long periods of absence from education.

The narratives from Spain highlight two key topics: mental health and neurodiversity. In the Spanish interviews, mental health is a recurring issue among young people, with themes such as anxiety, and burnout appearing in the interviews. In some cases, participants mention being diagnosed with depression or experiencing suicidal ideation.

The fieldwork suggests that mental health issues are deeply connected to social and structural vulnerabilities. In Ken's case, for instance, loneliness emerges as a significant trigger for mental health and well-being issues. This loneliness stems primarily from his parents' socioeconomic circumstances, which force them to work long hours, rendering family-work balance unattainable. Conversely, seemingly random traumatic events—such as the death of a parent—are also deeply intertwined with inequality. In Lara's case, the death of a close family member became the primary obstacle to both her emotional well-being and her educational trajectory. However, her family's ability to mobilize resources for therapy, coupled with her father's substantial capacity to support her through grief, proved pivotal in sustaining her emotionally. Finally, multiple forms of violence emerge as key explanatory factors for the socially rooted traumatic events that shape young people's life trajectories. This is evident in cases such as reported instances of sexual violence or particularly traumatic migration experiences. Regarding neurodiversity, there is an exemplar case in the story of Meritxell, a computer science student on the autism spectrum.

> *You can never make a system that works for everyone. So, it's about trying to make a system that works for the majority, I suppose. But without leaving those of us who don't fit out. (WP5_ES_C_B_4)*

Meritxell has a very clear discourse regarding the relationship between her trajectory and her neurodiversity: when the institutional educational context has failed to adapt to her reality, the barriers have been overwhelming and the school experience particularly traumatic. In contrast, when the school has provided proper support and she has engaged in studies that interest her, her neurodivergence has even proven to be beneficial. Her trajectory illustrates how schools lack the necessary resources to improve a more inclusive environment. She notes that in some schools, teachers understood her autism and developed pedagogical approaches suited to her needs, while in others, she felt neglected and marginalised. In any case, the sensitivity shown by her teachers stemmed from their personal goodwill towards her, rather than from effective institutional mechanisms designed to address her educational needs. Interestingly, under the right institutional conditions, Meritxell is an excellent student. She herself explains that her ability to stay focused on a challenge and her ease with logical thinking make her a very good computer programmer. Of course, none of the identified forms of vulnerability exist independently from the social contexts that shape and define them, especially in the

educational field. However, young people's narratives reveal a clear tendency to conceptualise socially rooted problems in an individualised way, influenced by the ideology of giftedness and meritocratic rhetoric. On one hand, when students define ability as a fixed characteristic or a gift, they reproduce a discourse that naturalises social differences and inequalities as inherent talents (Tarabini et al., 2020). On the other hand, when young people attribute learning solely to effort and behaviour, they reinforce an explanation based purely on individual predisposition (Sánchez Rojo & Prieto Egido, 2020). In doing so, they frame educational trajectories as individual experiences, overlooking their collective and socially situated dimensions.

Socially produced vulnerabilities

Socially produced vulnerabilities are prominently reflected in the experiences of the young people interviewed in Italy, manifesting primarily in two dimensions: the socio-economic background of their families and their personal or familial migratory experiences. For those from low socio-economic backgrounds, the most striking challenges include difficulties in affording educational expenses, such as materials and fees. These financial barriers often lead to comparisons with peers, creating a hierarchy among students based on their economic potential. However, the next quote highlights the importance of considering not just the economic aspects but also the time required for studying. Since the age of sixteen, the interviewee has worked every weekend, and this commitment has significantly impacted her school performance and, more broadly, her educational pathway.

> *I have always managed to achieve the required number of credits; I have always managed to get the apartment thanks to the regional scholarship, which provided the apartment, canteen, and an annual allowance. [...] I have always worked since I was 16, and then around 18 I started working more or less every weekend, because in any case there are three children in the family, so it's a bit difficult for everyone. (WP5_IT_M_P_10)*

In this context, there are other dynamics that affect the lives of young people from disadvantaged family backgrounds. Firstly, some report experiencing discrimination related to their socio-economic status. These instances of discrimination are often perpetrated by teaching staff and reflect the classist framework within which educational paths in Italy are structured (Romito, 2016).

> *First and second grade I attended in this neighbourhood, where we lived before with my mother. That was a terrifying school and I felt terrible because there was a certain standard. In that school there was only a certain class so everyone who was not part of that class was excluded. And not because the children were like that, but because their parents were such people. I will tell you an episode to make you understand the absurdity of this school. We had aprons and my mother had washed it and laid it out on the top floor on the terrace. A gust of wind swept it away. The next morning it was hard to find an apron at eight o'clock, my mother*

explained the situation, and the teachers kept me in detention all day because I had no apron. This episode marked me already when I was six years old, but when I think about it now it is really absurd. (WP5_IT_L_G_3)

Secondly, the issue of labelling also affects young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some interviewees point out that the stigma attached to these individuals is gradually interiorized, causing them to identify with the self-image projected by teachers, which in turn influences their educational outcomes.

Furthermore, the family background influences the expectations and encouragement young people receive from their families. In the stories shared by the interviewed Italian youths, these factors significantly impact their educational outcomes. Here, the concept of cultural capital becomes relevant, as many young individuals lack the level required by Italian educational institutions. According to Bourdieu & Passeron (1990), cultural capital refers to an individual's familiarity with the codes, practices, and values of the dominant classes. From this viewpoint, a sort of hidden curriculum emerges, enabling individuals to adopt behaviours and attitudes suitable for the educational context they navigate. Many young people feel inadequate at school, a sentiment reinforced by the attitudes of teaching staff and their own academic results. It is intriguing to examine the interplay between the approaches of educators and institutional representatives, the personal efforts of young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations, and the assessment of their performance through LOs. This analysis reveals how the Italian educational system often struggles to recognize and accommodate the vulnerabilities that, from an intersectional perspective, affect life trajectories and limit opportunities for achieving meaningful educational success. In this context, the hidden curriculum and cultural capital are crucial to young people's educational paths.

Thinking about it, all the contradictions and difficulties of an educational system that does not work emerge, especially for all those people who do not meet certain standards. It's a system that tends to reward certain characteristics, which mainly relate to the status of families of origin. So it's as if a student profile is identified and all those who fit succeed, while all those who go outside the standards struggle and become problematic. And the school tends to do a skimming operation, a selection operation. After the age of sixteen certainly, but it happens as early as middle school where it says, "You are from technician, you are from high school," so at thirteen. School is a structure that is just functional to reproduce certain dynamics. (WP5_IT_L_G_4)

For students from migrant background, the primary concern is their proficiency in the Italian language. Language proficiency is seen as a fundamental prerequisite for constructing successful educational paths. Many criticize the Italian school system for lacking programs that effectively support students from other countries or those raised in non-Italian-speaking households. Additionally, there is criticism that, compared to their native peers, non-native students face disproportionately greater challenges in achieving the same LOs.

The Finnish sample included only few young people from migrant background. They talked about struggling with the Finnish language for some years after arriving to Finland but also about the institutional support they received for learning the language. One of them mentioned facing discrimination at school:

> *[I]n the fifth and sixth grade I had a teacher, who is dead now. I should say now "rest in peace". But the teacher treated boys and girls differently, and because we were also foreigners, the teacher treated us even worse. (WP5_FI_E_S_3)*

Disadvantaged family backgrounds (e.g., financial problems, lack of cultural capital, foster care, substance abuse) were the key factor behind socially produced vulnerabilities for many of the Finnish interviewees. While low economic resources did not directly close educational opportunities, the stress caused by their or their family's poor financial situation affected their wellbeing. For some of the young people, their parents' low educational level and difficult life situation indicated a lack of parental interest in and support with schooling, which had detrimental effects. Financial issues were not as prominent in Finnish young people's narratives as in many other countries. However, disadvantaged and/or dysfunctional family backgrounds and low levels of resources were an impactful factor in socially produced vulnerabilities that were not even close to being mitigated by institutional support. The social vulnerabilities that shape the experiences of the interviewed young people in Spain can be grouped into two broad and related categories: vulnerabilities related to low *socio-economic position*, either personal or familial, and vulnerabilities associated with the *migrant background* of the persons.

Regarding vulnerabilities linked to socio-economic position, the first key issue is the economic barriers within the structure of opportunities. In contexts like Barcelona, where private schools are prevalent at the post-compulsory level, the inability to access this type of education narrows available options and limits students' opportunities. Furthermore, we see how the families' class positions push this young people to enter the labour market relatively quickly. They emphasize that they "do not want to depend economically on their families" (WP5_ES_C_B_1) and, as a result, choose educational paths that facilitate early entry into the workforce. The second key issue is that the social and cultural capital of their families does not align with the forms of capital that schools recognise and reward. This affects both young people's ability to sustain successful educational trajectories and their capacity to develop and pursue strategic educational and professional aspirations. Although aspirations are often perceived or analysed as fixed and well-defined, the degree of clarity in one's aspirations is a variable that must be considered. How clearly or vaguely young people define their aspirations, and their understanding of how to achieve them, depends on their social position.

> *But in general, I'm not very clear either, I'm not... I'm not very clear, to be honest, about anything. I don't know if I'm going to leave here and start studying something else or... or if I want to work in this, I don't know. I don't know, I don't know, I'm not sure, I'm not sure yet. (WP5_ES_C_B_2)*

Regarding migrant background, the first major challenge identified is language difficulties among some young people. Proficiency in the primary language(s) of instruction is a fundamental condition for maintaining successful educational trajectories. Otherwise, the interviews reveal a pattern in which young people with low language proficiency are directed towards the most vulnerable educational courses and job positions. Additionally, the lack of recognition and the complex process of accrediting foreign educational credentials pose significant barriers for young migrants in Spain. Newly arrived students who have completed part of their education in their country of origin often struggle to validate their qualifications, limiting their educational and professional prospects.

> *I learned about [the program] because, you see, I had studied in Colombia, but I couldn't get my qualifications recognized because I didn't know how to go about it when I arrived here. I wasn't aware. It took some time. And then, they told me to go back to studying. I won't go back to studying because I feel it's a waste of my time, you know? To start over, to study again, to go back to school. No, because I already did it. I already have my degree. (WP5_ES_C_B_10)*

Territorially based vulnerabilities

When examining the vulnerabilities linked to the distribution of opportunity structures among different territories, the Italian case studies from Marche and Liguria regions reveal some contrasts. These differences highlight, on the one hand, specific social dynamics unique to each region, and on the other, dimensions that can be generalized across the entire country. The first prominent feature of Liguria region (declining region) is its demographic profile. Genoa is indeed the city with the highest rate of elderly population in Italy, while the Liguria region is the oldest in Europe. Many interviewees emphasize this point, noting how it results in a lack of attention from local institutions, which fail to acknowledge the educational, employment, and more general life needs of the youths. Notwithstanding this, the interviewees tend to adhere to the neoliberal rhetoric that places a strong emphasis on self-entrepreneurship as one of the few, often the only, strategies to emerge and survive in competitive living and working environments, thus overlooking the impact of the peculiar demographic profile of the area they live in. From the same perspective, even though the demographic data differs, interviewees in the Marche region point out the same scarcity of life and work opportunities faced by young people in Liguria.

> *Fortunately, it's an exercise I'm quite trained in, because talking about Genoa is something I get a lot of. Genoa is a very unkind place, in its form and in its life. Genoa does not make you feel comfortable. It is a city that challenges you, that engages you. There is no focus on young people because it is a city of old people, so you have to create your own opportunities. Economically and politically, there are a lot of things moving in Genoa that go in a disturbing direction. If you have your eyes open you can realize how the world, or at least Italy, is going and what the designs of politics are. (WP5_IT_L_G_1)*

The interviewees from both regions accounted for similar challenges when engaging with the opportunity structures available in their areas. The situation for young people in Italy is marked by significant issues, such as the fragmented and precarious nature of the labour market (Pitti, 2020), and a cultural trend that tends to delegitimize and ignore their desires and ambitions (Benasso, 2013). Consequently, the interviewees tend to focus on the opportunities within their own local context rather than making comparisons with other parts of the country. For instance, in Genoa, many interviewees consider the disparities and varied opportunity structures across different city neighbourhoods. In this sense, the educational facilities are unequal, offering diverse prospects for those who navigate them, influenced by the socioeconomic and cultural traits of the neighbourhoods' populations.

> *If you are born in a rich neighbourhood they propose high school, if you are born somewhere else technical college, if you are from the good and rich ones you can go for the elite high school. Someone may have said to me, 'but you haven't thought about art or classical,' and no one has ever said to me, 'you haven't thought about an agricultural or dental institute.' Evidently because you are surrounded by people who all went to high school and expect their children to do that. (WP5_IT_L_G_7)*

In Finland, there is a clear difference between Southwest Finland and Kainuu in the available educational and labour market opportunities. However, regarding the former, there were not drastic differences in the perspectives of the interviewees who, in both regions, had a rather positive view. In the more declining Kainuu region, this can relate to the study's target group: young people in vulnerable situations are not as likely to consider/aspire higher education than more affluent youths. Also, those young people, whose future plans and aspirations match with the regional opportunities, are the ones that stay there. However, in Kainuu, many interviewees found the job opportunities for young people to be scarcer and felt that they lacked the 'right' connections needed to gain access to the labour market. An often-repeated request was for more support with connecting potential employers and for the employers to give young applicants a chance:

> *Also, there should be more of these like recruiting events, more of those like, in those events young people could sell themselves, or at least touch on the surface. [---] Well, it would be great if, like even if they don't want to hire you for the job, but if you've got a good attitude and willingness to work, and if there's any chance to offer them a work try-out period or something. (WP5_FI_P_K_2)*

In Southwest Finland, the interviewees were quite positive about the available opportunities in general, but their narratives revealed gaps in learning opportunities for different groups. Young people with mental health problems, lower work capacity, and/or learning or neurodiversity struggled to find the right learning and skills pathways (e.g., with sufficient support, part-time or otherwise 'lightened').

Regarding vulnerabilities related to territoriality in Spain, the interviews conducted in Castelló highlight specific challenges faced by its young population. In territories where

educational and professional opportunities are more geographically dispersed, such as Castelló, transitions in education or employment often require a change of residence. When this occurs, the 'price' of this choice is significantly higher, both economically and symbolically. Beyond the cost of rent, daily expenses, and other financial burdens, young people also face the emotional challenge of living away from their families at a much younger age than the national average. At 18, Luís considered moving to the capital of the province to continue his studies, but his family could not support him financially, and he also felt that leaving home at such a young age was not a viable option.

> *A teacher told me, 'Well, if you want to keep studying for a higher-level qualification, come to Castellón—it's one of the oldest and best public schools, with great status across the Valencian Community.' And I said, 'Alright then. That's what I want, so let's do it.' I looked for flats, made a budget, and said, 'No, I can't afford it, I don't have enough money.' (WP5_ES_V_C_3)*

Closely related to this, the interviews highlight the importance of an accessible and reliable public transportation network in territories with greater geographic dispersion. When regions are poorly connected, young people become highly dependent on private transportation. This is the case for Noelia, who drives 60 km every day to attend school. Secondly, we have identified that schools located in territorial peripheries face specific challenges in ensuring equal educational opportunities compared to urban contexts:

> *A school in a provincial capital has teachers who scored the highest in all the competitive exams—the ones with the most qualifications are the ones who get those positions. The teachers they have are the best in the whole province. And on top of that, their teaching staff is very stable, while ours isn't. We don't have a stable team, nor do we have the best teachers. I mean, there are 5 or 6 of us who live in the area and have been here for many years, but the rest of the staff come and go—every year, 10 new teachers join. Ten, twelve, or even more. (WP5_ES_V_C_6)*

Teachers often lack incentives to work in rural areas like Castelló, leading to high turnover, a predominance of inexperienced staff, or unmotivated teachers. As teachers are key to student success, this concentration of less effective educators in disadvantaged areas reinforces existing vulnerabilities. Young people's perceptions of their territory go beyond educational and job opportunities—it is also where they live. Regions with more opportunities are often seen as having poorer living conditions. Barcelona is a clear example: many describe it as hostile, noisy, and stressful, and rising housing prices make it hard to imagine a future there. While tourism and economic growth have brought prosperity, they have also fuelled gentrification and displaced working-class residents.

> *Barcelona kills you, it's a city that traps you. When you leave, it feels like life starts to slow down. In Barcelona, everything moves so fast, it's completely consumed by tourism, by rich people, right? Now if a basic rent here costs €1,200—at least €1,000 or €1,200—and the minimum wage is also €1,200, it's just stupid. It's a horrible place to live, in my opinion. I don't understand why people live here. (WP5_ES_C_B_6)*

Conversely, in Castelló, young people do not perceive it as a region with a particularly high concentration of opportunities. Instead, they emphasise the high quality of life, affordable housing, and the beauty of the surrounding environment. While many young people understand that progressing in their educational careers may require moving to larger cities like Barcelona or Valencia, many also express regrets that this means leaving behind their families and familiar surroundings.

3.3 Discussion and conclusion

The CLEAR approach to vulnerability emphasizes the processes through which vulnerable conditions emerge in young people's lives, highlighting their time- and context-specific nature (Oksala, 2015). This analysis explores how educational environments in Finland, Italy, and Spain contribute to constructing vulnerability by shaping students' self-perceptions, aspirations, and educational trajectories. Three major categories of vulnerability were identified from interview data: individually ascribed, socially produced, and territorially based.

In response to the question "how do young people experience, interpret, and frame their LOs as part of their own trajectories and social positionality?", individually ascribed vulnerabilities stem from the mismatch between students' characteristics and institutional performance expectations, often leading learners to internalize difficulties as personal failings. Across all countries, participants reported that institutional pressure contributed to psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. In Italy, self-blame was particularly evident, as youths interpreted academic failure as a lack of motivation or ability rather than a reaction to systemic performance demands. The substantial absence of school psychologists further intensified these issues. In Finland, although the welfare system provides more structured support for neurodivergent students, challenges persist, especially regarding early diagnosis. Delayed recognition often led students to perceive their difficulties as individual shortcomings. Spanish students highlighted how mental health issues intersected with broader socio-economic and migratory factors, reinforcing the perception that success is difficult to attain for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Stigma related to learning disabilities and compensatory tools was especially acute in Italy, where technological aids, though intended to support learning, often resulted in social exclusion and peer marginalization. In contrast, Finland offered more systematic diagnoses and support structures, though late interventions continued to impact students' progress. In Spain, responses to neurodivergence varied across schools, reflecting a lack of consistent national policy. Despite these national differences, the answer to the initial question is that all three cases reflect a neoliberal framework that individualizes educational failure and obscures the systemic dimensions of vulnerability.

Conversely, the second category is more useful to answer the question "How do young people construct their own life courses within their opportunity structures, life histories,

educational spaces, and social circumstances?" Socially produced vulnerabilities originate from disparities between students' social resources and those implicitly required by educational systems. Youths from low socio-economic or migrant backgrounds face material obstacles and institutional biases that hinder their educational development. In Italy, financial constraints forced many students to balance work and study, reducing time available for academic success. Interviewees described a classist school culture where expectations were shaped more by background than LOs results, particularly during critical transitions such as from lower to upper secondary school. Students from migrant background reported inadequate language support and persistent discrimination. Finland's welfare state helped mitigate some economic inequality, but cultural capital remained decisive; students from less educated families reported limited academic encouragement. They also struggled with language barriers and social exclusion. In Spain, privatized education markets in cities like Barcelona restricted access for low-income youths, pushing many toward non-desired tracks. Discriminatory practices and challenges in recognizing qualifications from students' countries of origin further limited their opportunities. While these vulnerabilities are rooted in structural inequalities, educational institutions across all three countries often shift responsibility to the individual, perpetuating the same individualizing logic found in the first category. In this sense, it becomes clear that young people's life courses are strongly connected to their backgrounds and to the opportunity structures they encounter throughout their biographies.

Finally, the third category enables us to answer the question "How do spatial settings affect the choices, opportunity structures, and logics of action of young people?". Territorially based vulnerabilities concern the spatial distribution of opportunity structures, including infrastructure, labour markets, and educational services. In Italy, regional disparities shaped youths' access to education and work. In Genoa (Liguria), the lack of youth-oriented policy and uneven neighbourhood resources were seen as major barriers, often interpreted as immutable conditions that reinforced neoliberal ideals of self-entrepreneurship. In the more dispersed Marche region, inefficient public transport limited mobility and access to opportunities. In both areas, territory influenced aspirations as well as access, contributing to a broader sense of exclusion and disillusionment. In Finland, while territorial inequalities were less pronounced, students noted weak links between education and the labour market, including a lack of job fairs and employer engagement. In Kainuu, an economically declining region, students reported satisfaction with educational opportunities, suggesting that expectations themselves are shaped by local structures. Spanish interviews revealed marked differences between rural urban areas. In rural areas, poor job prospects and high teacher turnover pushed students to migrate toward cities, where they encountered new barriers such as gentrification and high living costs, which limited their actual access to perceived

opportunities. Answering to the last question, this indicates that geographical space functions not only as a location but also as an active agent shaping educational outcomes.

In conclusion, although the forms of vulnerability differ across categories and national contexts, a common theme emerges: the educational systems in Finland, Italy, and Spain tend to interpret vulnerability through an individualizing lens consistent with neoliberal ideology. Whether related to mental health, socio-economic background, or geography, the burden of navigating structural barriers falls on students. This reinforces a vision of educational failure as a personal shortcoming, rather than a product of systemic conditions. Our analysis suggests the need for a reconceptualization of vulnerability that accounts for its structural roots and intersectional dimensions within European educational contexts. With this, we are able to connect the proposed analyses with the theoretical frameworks that support the CLEAR project:

From the *Life Course Research* perspective, difficulties related to late diagnoses of neurodiversity (in Finland) and mental health problems (in Italy, Finland and Spain) can result in different biographical 'turning points'. When these dynamics are characterized by de-synchronization with respect to needs and different individual "biographical timing," they can therefore contribute to cumulative disadvantage (Elder, 1994). In this sense, the 'timing' of interventions and the ability of institutions to provide support become crucial elements in preventing initial vulnerabilities from turning into long-term negative outcomes. In a more general sense, the introjection of self-blaming for educational performance and LOs considered unsatisfactory may result in narrowing down the ability to construct projections toward a desired future, and foster renunciatory attitudes based on self-evaluations influenced by the negative feedback received from the relationship with educational settings.

From the perspective of *Intersectionality*, the different vulnerabilities that are produced in the relationship with educational environments, that are 'materialized' in the biographies of learners, determine expectations and strategies that are not individual direct expressions of subjective attitudes but are shaped by the differentiated opportunities to which different social profiles have access. The possibility to catch those opportunities strongly relies on their positive 'match' with individuals' intersectional features. In other words, looking at the intersectional characteristics of the subject ('race', class, gender), inequalities in symbolic material cultural resources and opportunities to succeed in educational paths remain.

Regarding the *Spatial Justice* approach, our analyses confirm how differences between urban and rural areas, as well as between different regions (e.g., the disparities between Liguria and Marche in Italy or the urban dynamics of Barcelona compared to rural areas in Spain), substantially influence the conditions of access to resources, transportation, and support services. The interviewed young people were aware of the relevance of these factors in making different types of opportunities more or less accessible, and thus

incorporate mobility as a potential strategy, or almost a "moral imperative" (Raffini, 2017), to overcome the 'localisation' of disadvantages.

In conclusion, we emphasize how the analysis of the three categories shows the individualizing lens, through which educational institutions attempt to address and mitigate the vulnerabilities experienced by youths in Italy, Finland, and Spain. Using a metaphor drawn from the different approaches adopted by medical science in treating illnesses, the educational institutions in the three selected countries apply a symptom-focused treatment model, overlooking the causes that produce 'illness', namely the structural features that 'produce' vulnerability and underachievement of LOs. To effectively address these situations a radical shift of perspective would be required. It would be necessary to transition from a model based on individual responsibility and to a more holistic, inclusive educational approach that acknowledges the social determinants of vulnerability. Within this framework, educational institutions should envision organizational practices, discourses, and trajectories that focus more on the needs, aspirations, and desires of the youths, rather than on the neoliberal imperatives that promote a society where competition and success are the dominant paradigms.

KEY MESSAGES

Our analyses have yielded the following key messages:

The institutional approach on vulnerabilities plays a crucial role in shaping the subjective internalization processes through which individuals come to attribute educational deficits to personal shortcomings. To effectively address these situations a radical shift of perspective would be required. It would be necessary to transition from a model based on individual responsibility to a more holistic, inclusive educational approach that acknowledges the social determinants of vulnerability (socially produced vulnerabilities).

Territorial conditions—such as the availability of infrastructure, labour markets, and educational services—significantly shape young people's life chances. Differences between urban and rural areas, or between declining and metropolitan regions, create specific forms of vulnerability. Young people perceive space not merely as a geographic setting but as an active agent influencing educational and professional opportunities, often forcing them into mobility to overcome local disadvantages (territorially based vulnerabilities).

Educational institutions should envision organizational practices, discourses, and trajectories that focus more on the needs, aspirations, and desires of the youths, rather than on the neoliberal imperatives that promote a society where competition and success are the dominant paradigms (individually ascribed vulnerabilities).

4. Challenges of Learners from Migrant Backgrounds in Southern Europe

Berenice Scandone, Martí Manzano Moliner, Achilleas Papadimitriou & Liliana Zeferino

4.1 Introduction

Across Southern European countries, immigration has increased rapidly since the 1990s, leading to a growing presence of young people from migrant backgrounds[6] (Schnell & Azzolini, 2015). Compared to their peers of non-immigrant origins, these young people tend to have lower educational outcomes, even when they come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. They are more likely to achieve lower grades and attain lower levels of formal education, and are overrepresented in less prestigious educational and vocational tracks at all levels (Diakogeorgiou, 2024; Pordata, 2023a; Triventi et al., 2022; Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2020). These disparities have long-term consequences, impacting employment prospects and contributing to the intergenerational reproduction of educational and socioeconomic inequalities along ethnic lines.

This chapter aims to identify, analyse, and compare the challenges that migrant-background youth face in their learning journeys in four Southern European countries—Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain—considering the opportunity structures available in each national context. By doing so, the chapter unearths the multiple and intersecting factors that shape these young people's learning outcomes (LOs), highlighting both common patterns of disadvantage and variations across individuals, groups, and contexts. Thus, it addresses the following overall research questions of the CLEAR project:

- How do young learners experience, interpret and manage the obstacles they face?
- How do various policies interact with individual life courses of young people and what are their points of possible change?
- How does the process of skills formation reflect the diverse possibilities and abilities of young people in vulnerable positions?

The analysis is based on rich mixed-methods data from the four countries, collected as part of the CLEAR project. This dataset includes in-depth interviews with young adults of immigrant origins (three in Greece, nine in Italy, six in Portugal, and nine in Spain) on their education and training experiences from a life-course perspective, and interviews with education and employment professionals on perceived education and training challenges and opportunities. To contextualize these narratives and interpret them against each national context's opportunity structure, the analysis also includes quantitative education and labour market data.

The findings reveal a complex set of challenges that migrant-background youth face in education and training across Southern European contexts. These challenges are shaped

[6] In this chapter, the term 'young people from migrant backgrounds' is used to include both migrants and children of migrants.

by varying opportunity structures and influence young people's ability to navigate their educational trajectories, thus impacting their LOs. Across countries, immigrant-origin youth encounter language barriers, difficulties in strategically navigating the education system and limited institutional support. Bureaucratic challenges related to residency status and to the recognition of prior learning and qualifications present additional obstacles. Structural and interpersonal discrimination also affect these young people's educational experiences, contributing to social exclusion and undermining engagement. Moreover, economic precarity restricts their access to learning resources and education opportunities. For young migrants, these issues are sometimes compounded by the emotional and psychological impact of migration. By adopting a cross-national perspective, this chapter examines how these barriers unfold in different contexts, shaping the learning trajectories and opportunities available to migrant-background youth in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

The chapter has three main parts. First, we provide an insight into the educational situation of young people from migrant background in the selected sites. Second, we briefly introduce our research methods. Third, we present the main findings of the analysis. The chapter ends with a summary of main findings.

4.2 Young people from migrant background in education and training

Across Southern European countries, the 1990s marked a transition from a migration regime based on emigration to Northern European countries to the arrival of migration flows from Eastern European, African, Asian and Latin American countries (Schnell & Azzolini, 2015), a trend that amplified in the 2000s. Since then, the share of residents with a foreign nationality has rapidly increased to 7.15 % of the total population in Greece (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2024), 7.4 % in Portugal (Pordata, 2023b), 8.9 % in Italy (Instituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2025), and 13.37 % in Spain (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2025). Along with the stabilisation of this population and continuing immigration trends, the presence of children and young people from migrant backgrounds has grown rapidly and is now a consolidated feature of the education system. In Italy, students without Italian citizenship were around 11.2 % of the student population in 2022/23, with 65.4 % being children of migrants, predominantly of Romanian, Albanian, and Moroccan origins (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2024). In Spain, foreign citizens represent 11.27 % of the population aged 0-18, with estimates suggesting that migrants' children account for 15 %-30 % of younger cohorts (Bayona-i-Carrasco & Domingo, 2024). Morocco, Romania, and Colombia are among the main backgrounds. In Greece, around 10.8 % of students are of immigrant origins, mostly Albanian and from former Soviet Union countries (Sofianopoulou, 2018). In Portugal, foreign students comprised 6.9 % of the school population in 2022/23, coming mainly from Brazil, Cape Verde and Angola, however migrants' children are not included in these figures (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2023b; Pordata, 2023b). In

some schools in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, it is estimated that overall, over 50 % of students have a migrant background (Almeida et al., 2023).

In all these contexts, migrant-background youth tend to have worse LOs compared to native peers with non-immigrant parents (see Table 4.1). This includes lower school grades and national and international standardised tests scores, higher grade retention and drop-out rates, and lower levels of progression to tertiary education. In upper secondary education, migrant-background students are overrepresented in vocational tracks with generally lower further education and employment prospects. There is however considerable variation in LOs both between and within ethnic groups, based for example on migrant status and socioeconomic background (Azzolini & Barone, 2013). In all the considered countries, young people who are themselves immigrants have on average lower educational outcomes than those who are born in the country and even lower than those with one native parent, who have similar outcomes to their native peers (Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità, 2022; Almeida et al., 2023; Bayona-i-Carrasco & Domingo, 2024; Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione, 2024; Tramountanis, 2024). Similarly, differences in LOs reduce considerably when controlling for students' socioeconomic backgrounds.

Worse LOs partly contribute to persistent labour market disadvantages and vice-versa. In all four countries, foreign citizens face considerably higher unemployment levels than national citizens and tend to be concentrated in low-wage jobs in sectors such as hospitality, care and domestic work, agriculture and construction (Escobar, 2022; Foro Para la Integración Social de los Inmigrantes, 2023; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024b). The unemployment rates of people from migrant background are around 1.5 percentage points higher than non-migrants in Portugal, 3 in Italy and 6 in Spain and Greece (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & European Commission, 2023) Highly educated people from migrant background are also less employed than their native peers with similar qualification levels and often work in jobs that require lower qualifications, reflecting structural barriers to labour mobility (Kouvelis & Markou, 2021; Foro Para la Integración Social de los Inmigrantes, 2023; Oliveira, 2023; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024). Research on the educational experiences of migrant-background youth in these countries has mainly started developing since the late 1990s and evolved over time, focusing on distinct aspects while also sharing common themes. In Italy, it has moved from initial concerns with school inclusion and intercultural practices to an interest in educational outcomes and more recently in interethnic relationships (Azzolini et al., 2019). In Spain, research initially concentrated on migrant populations but has recently expanded to include migrants' children (Aparicio & Portes, 2014), though the lack of disaggregated data has hindered quantitative research (Serra & Palaudàrias, 2010).

Table 4.1 Indicators for learning outcomes of migrant-background youth

Country	Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	Grade retention	Early leaving from education and training (ELET)
Greece	Mathematics: significant difference of -40 score points compared to non-immigrants (-13 controlling for socioeconomic profile) Reading: significant difference of -46 score points compared to non-immigrants (-17 controlling for socioeconomic profile)	In 2012, foreign-born students were almost 7 times as likely as native-born students to have repeated a grade, and 3 times as likely after controlling for socioeconomic status and performance.	In 2016, the ELET rate among 15–24-year-olds was 15.2 % for foreign students compared to 5.3 % for native students with native parents.
Italy	Mathematics: significant difference of -30 score points compared non-immigrants (not significant after controlling for socioeconomic profile) Reading: significant difference of -31 score points compared non-immigrants (not significant after controlling for socioeconomic profile).	In 2022/23, the grade retention rate was 26.4 % for students without Italian citizenship compared to 7.9 % for Italian students. The gap is widest in upper secondary education (48 % compared to 16 %).	In 2022/23, the ELET rate was 29.5 % for non-EU nationals, 18.9 % for non-Italian EU nationals and 9 % for Italians.
Portugal	Mathematics: significant difference of -32 score points compared to non-immigrants (-25 after controlling for socioeconomic profile) Reading: significant difference of -22 score points compared to non-immigrants (-15 after controlling for socioeconomic profile).	In 2021/22, the overall grade retention rate was 6.8 % in basic education and 12.3 % in secondary education. We could not find national-level data disaggregated by migrant background. In the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, in several schools, over 20 % of migrant-background students had repeated a grade.	In 2022, the ELET rate was 19.4 % for foreign students compared to 7.5 % for native students.
Spain	Mathematics: significant difference of -33 score points compared to non-immigrants (-7 after controlling for socioeconomic profile) Reading: significant difference of -32 score points compared to non-immigrants (-7 after controlling for socioeconomic profile).	In 2022, the average grade retention rate was 21.7 %, with migrant-background students almost twice as likely as their peers with native parents to have repeated a grade.	In 2018, the ELET rate for was 37.6 % for foreign students compared to 16.4 % for native students.

Sources: Almeida et al., 2023; Carrasco et al., 2018; Cobreros & Gortázar, 2023; Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2023a-b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015, 2023a-d, 2024a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2024.

Note: Immigrant students are defined as students whose parents were born in a country other than that where the student took the PISA test. The ELET rate is defined as the incidence of young people between 18 and 24 years old with a qualification lower than upper secondary.

In Portugal, early studies addressed integration and spatial distribution in urban areas, later focusing on inequalities such as underachievement, segregation, and institutional discrimination (Almeida et al., 2023; Mendes & Candeias, 2013). In Greece, research has long highlighted persistent inequalities and institutional challenges, although more recent studies also evidence examples of resilience, especially among migrants' children pursuing social mobility (Fragkoudaki & Dragona, 1997).

Overall, these studies highlight significant barriers for immigrant-origin youth, with socioeconomic factors playing a prominent role (Tsiganou & Hatzi, 2009; Aparicio & Portes, 2014; Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità, 2022; Almeida et al., 2023). For example, among students who took part in the 2022 PISA tests in Greece, Italy and Spain, 25 % are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged compared to 50-60 % of those from migrant background (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023a; 2023b; 2023d). Other major challenges consistently identified in the literature include limited knowledge of the country's language and education system among young migrants and immigrant parents, which affects the academic support that they can provide to their children (Araújo, 2015; Papadatos, 2016; Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità, 2022; Almeida et al., 2023). Regarding the school context and practices, studies point to the importance of teachers' ability to manage classroom diversity in shaping students' outcomes, and evidence discrimination in grading and educational advice and the concentration of migrant-background students in certain schools, which can exacerbate inequalities in LOs (Mendes & Candeias, 2013; Kapsalis, 2015; Public Policy and Management Institute, 2017; Boterman et al., 2019; Aktaş et al., 2022).

4.3 Research methods

This chapter draws on in-depth, biographical interviews with young adults of immigrant-origins and on interviews with education and employment professionals conducted in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain as part of the CLEAR project. In each country, a relatively thriving region (Region A) and a relatively declining one (Region B) were selected for the fieldwork, based on a range of indicators of young people's education and labour market performance. In each region, the fieldwork involved at least 10 interviews with young adults aged 18-29, who were dealing with various conditions of disadvantage, ensuring a balanced gender profile (Deliverable D5.2 National Qualitative Report). Those focused on participants' education experiences and trajectories, their current situations and future projects and their perceptions of the local area and available opportunities. Interviews also took place with at least six education and employment professionals in the hospitality, healthcare, and ICT sectors in each region, to better understand their perceptions of the main challenges of the sector, existing education and training programmes and their capacity to meet employment needs (see Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report).

4.4 Challenges affecting migrant-background youth's learning outcomes

Academic and institutional issues

Language barriers

From the interviews with young people and education professionals, proficiency in the vehicular language(s) of each educational system emerged as a fundamental condition for full participation, successful attainment and effective integration in all the contexts analysed, in line with existing literature (Azzolini et al., 2012; Eva Lam et al., 2012).

> *When I arrived here, I went to the shelter, and after I found a job. I took an Italian language course. [...] Here in Italy, if you want to go to school, I have to take a language course first. (WP5_IT_M_P_4)*

> *Language obstacles mostly and sometimes fear that I am not good enough or I will not make it. (WP5_EL_K_T_10)*

Interviewed education professionals perceived the language barrier as mainly pertaining to newly arrived migrant students. However, our findings indicate that proficiency in the vehicular language of the system can become a barrier in at least three additional situations. Firstly, migrants' children, despite being born and socialised in the destination country, may still face language difficulties that impact their education trajectories. This is particularly the case in cities like Barcelona and Lisbon, where young people's personal and education biographies unfold in contexts of high urban and school segregation (Hortas, 2013; Bonal & Zancajo, 2020). Secondly, significant linguistic barriers were observed among migrants from countries that share the official language of the destination country, such as Spanish-speaking migrants in Spain or PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries) migrants in Portugal. Despite sharing the official language, linguistic proficiency is not guaranteed, and barriers persist.

> *Outside of school, we practically spoke only our [Cape Verdean] language because most of the people I knew were Cape Verdeans. My classmates were Cape Verdeans, and it was easier for us to speak our language. But in school, it was Portuguese, which I had learned but struggled with. I had to separate and speak only Portuguese, but I couldn't. (WP5_PT_L_A_9)*

Finally, linguistic proficiency alone is not sufficient. Education institutions do not merely value a basic level of linguistic competence but instead reward the internalisation of specific socio-linguistic codes that are often unfamiliar to migrant-background students (Codó & Patiño-Santos, 2014).

The institutional responses to the language gap present substantial challenges in all the countries considered. In Italy, Bertozzi et al. (2020) evidence high levels of school autonomy and teachers' discretion in the practices adopted to manage or address language difficulties in upper secondary schools, resulting in considerable variation in the type and quality of support provided. In Lisbon, PALOP-origin youths are effectively excluded from Portuguese courses, despite many of them needing such support. In

Barcelona, migrant reception classrooms in schools struggle to ensure a sufficient level of Catalan proficiency, and the segregation of migrant-background students into specific courses can be counterproductive to inclusion objectives (Zhang-Yu et al., 2025).

In all the cases analysed, a lack of teacher training in effectively addressing literacy in the vehicular languages of the destination countries and supporting immigrant-origin students is noted. As a result, the language support system in the studied contexts is poorly structured and largely discretionary, relying on the goodwill or specific training of certain professionals.

> *We tell them, 'We don't have the tools to offer you [translation], but if someone comes with you...' and sometimes someone from an association comes along and translates, which really helps. Especially for these young people who don't speak the language well. [...] Because otherwise they would get really frustrated because they would not understand anything and would end up dropping out. (WP4_ES_V_C_1)*

Recognition of prior learning and qualifications

In Spain and Italy, a significant issue was the lack of recognition of education credentials issued by the countries of origin:

> *I had studied in Colombia, but I couldn't get my qualifications recognised because I didn't know how to go about it when I arrived here. I wasn't aware, it took some time. And then, they told me to go back to studying. I won't go back to studying because I feel it's a waste of my time, you know? To start over, to study again, to go back to school. I already did it. I already have my degree. (WP5_ES_C_B_10)*

Lack of clear, easily accessible information and lengthy bureaucratic processes for credential recognition potentially exacerbate vulnerable positions of young migrants. Upon arrival, urgent economic pressures often force them into immediate employment. Due to the difficulties and long timeframes involved in getting their qualifications recognised, many highly educated young migrants are compelled to enrol in basic employability courses—designed for individuals with low professional skills—to access low-paying jobs. This structural issue contributes to the concentration of young migrants in precarious labour sectors.

In Italy, the strong discretionary power of individual schools and universities in recognising migrants' prior learning and qualifications brings additional challenges and uncertainty (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione, 2014; European Commission et al., 2020). This discretion can result in the need to repeat one or more school years to obtain an upper secondary education degree, thus leading to higher rates of grade repetition among young migrants. This also includes those who have already completed upper secondary education but wish to enrol in university and do not have their credentials recognised.

> *When the war started, I was in my final year of [upper secondary] school. I graduated and left for Italy. [...] I wanted to go to university, but they said I didn't have enough classes because in Ukraine we only have 11 years of school. [...] I have two options. One is to go back to Ukraine and complete another year, or I have to finish the Italian school here. A: Okay, just one or two years? B: No, the whole thing, taking all the exams, five years. (WP5_IT_L_G_9)*

Navigating the education system

In all the cases studied, migrant-background students experienced challenges navigating the education system of the destination country due to limited familiarity with the system and the local offer and limited social and informational capital. This results in a reduced ability to identify available and strategic options for achieving specific educational or professional goals (Appadurai, 2004).

> *My dad found [this school] because I told him my passion A: So, you didn't know what other options were available? B: No, because I didn't know how the system worked in Italy, so it was up to him to find it for me. (WP5_IT_M_P_8)*

> *I wanted to take a cooking or photography course, but I couldn't find one. I had to choose what was available. Not that I dislike it, but it's not something I see myself doing. (WP5_PT_L_A_14)*

These barriers were particularly strong for newly arrived migrants. However, migrants' children also faced difficulties navigating the system. Immigrant-origin families often involve parents with low educational credentials, usually from their home country, and even those with moderate to high education levels may struggle to translate their experiences into familiarity with the host education system (Joy et al., 2018).

In this context, and especially in the cases of refugee and unaccompanied minors, the role of education or career counsellors emerges as one of the few sources of information available to understand the education system of the host country. However, interviews with young people highlighted that the provision of education, training and career guidance is often perceived as insufficient, not easily accessible, or not applicable.

Furthermore, interviews with education and employment professionals showed that vocational education and training programmes are generally perceived as being for students who are "less academically inclined" and who have a range of "problems," such as language difficulties and behavioural issues stemming from personal and family circumstances. This perception contributes to the segregation of young people from migrant and/or lower socio-economic background, as students with higher academic achievement and/or from wealthier backgrounds tend to avoid them (Appadurai, 2004). In our sample countries, legal barriers related to the (ir-)regularity of migrants' status, lengthy bureaucratic processes and the precarious and temporary character of support and protection measures hindered transitions into stable education and/or employment. One example is a young asylum seeker in Spain who worked in the grey economy, experienced homelessness and was given training only after obtaining asylum rights.

Social and emotional challenges

Discrimination and bullying

Experiences of discrimination and bullying importantly affect immigrant-origin youth's LOs. Discrimination includes interpersonal overt and covert discrimination as well as systemic discrimination embedded within institutional and broader societal structures. While students might struggle to connect their personal experiences with structural inequalities due to a prevailing individualistic mindset (Franceschelli, 2016), institutional discrimination remains widespread, often operating beneath the surface yet systematically disadvantaging these learners (Gillborn, 2008).

Segregation profoundly influences these young people's social and educational pathways. In urban centres such as Barcelona, it is common for migrant-background students to attend schools and reside in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of migrants. In all the four countries, segregation extends to education itself, as these students are disproportionately enrolled in basic vocational education and training, rather than mainstream pathways. This confines them, limiting their educational and professional opportunities while perpetuating social and economic marginalisation.

In Italy and Portugal, young people reported instances of prejudice and bullying inside educational environments, frequently associated with their immigrant or racialised backgrounds. Discrimination was manifest both overtly, via insults, derision and social ostracism, and covertly, through differing expectations from educators and peers. Some pupils experienced segregation, resulting in minimal interaction between native and migrant students. These experiences generated feelings of devaluation and unfairness and undermined young people's motivation and engagement in school.

> *In lower secondary school, there were many subjects where I was falling behind. [...] It was mainly because of bullying. It had already started in primary school. [...] Sometimes the teachers noticed something was wrong, like [my classmates] made jokes about my skin colour. They made these jokes, but then the teachers told them off, and that was it. (WP5_IT_M_P_2)*

In Italy, discussions with education and training professionals also indicated the existence of ethnic stereotyping, with different academic aptitudes being ascribed to students based on their ethnic backgrounds.

> *Asian migrants often have a particular aptitude for math. Since IT and math are closely linked, they find it easier to grasp. [...] Those few we've had, particularly Chinese or Indian students, showed a strong aptitude for math, and IT came quite easily to them. On the other hand, migrants from Africa, I would say, find IT very distant from their way of life, and they don't have a natural inclination toward it. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_3)*

Young people's accounts highlight the importance of the school context and of their positioning relative to others within this context in shaping their experiences. In this

respect, some participants who attended what they described as "multicultural" schools recounted positive experiences of mutual respect and inclusivity.

Social isolation and the need for safe spaces

In all the countries studied, social isolation was a significant issue among young migrants. A major challenge was the difficulty of forming friendships with local peers, particularly for newly arrived migrants who often struggled with language barriers but also due to discrimination. These difficulties limited young people's ability to connect with their classmates and access emotional and academic support and resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness. In some instances, cultural and linguistic differences within migrant groups exacerbated young migrants' sense of alienation among peers. "I felt isolated. My classmates wouldn't talk to me, the teachers had no patience, and I just cried." (WP5_PT_L_A_3)

Interviews with young people in Spain showed that loneliness can be especially acute for those who arrive alone as young adults, with weak support networks limited to distant relatives. In extreme cases, additional hardships such as homelessness intensify these young people's isolation and emotional distress. In this context, employability courses can become key spaces for socialisation, offering a rare opportunity for social interaction and enabling connections with peers facing similar challenges.

> *I ended up homeless. So, while searching around, a support group explained how the system worked. They asked me, 'Hey, are you an applicant for protection?' I said, 'Yes'. Then they told me, 'Look, the reception programme works like this'. (WP5_ES_C_B_9)*

For young refugees, the traumatic nature of their migration often compounds these challenges. Refugee youth in Greece and Italy described dangerous migration journeys and the emotional toll of fleeing war and leaving their lives, family and friends behind without warning.

> *When we first arrived in Kos Island, it was very bad. Some didn't make it. My father almost died. But in Kos it was the first time I also felt safe. Before that I thought that I was going to die. (WP5_EL_K_T_10)*

Economic and structural constraints

Economic precarity

Economic precarity cuts across migrant-background youth's testimonies in all four countries, considerably affecting their educational experiences and trajectories. This is related to the higher incidence of disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds among immigrant-origin youth and more limited support networks, especially among young migrants.

A recurring theme is the need to work from an early age. Needing to work while studying limited the time and energy young people could dedicate to education thus impacting on

achievement, as also indicated by education and training professionals. For those in more precarious situations, economic necessity led to interrupting education. The urgency to contribute to the family income was particularly strong in cases of parent loss or premature caring responsibilities. As widely evidenced in research on social reproduction and education, a lack of redistributive public policies exacerbates structural disadvantage, reinforcing inherited inequalities (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; Reay, 2006).

> *I wanted to study more, but since I already had my baby, I had to work. At first, I tried to balance both, but then I realized it was not possible. (WP5_PT_L_A_3)*

> *I didn't finish Gymnasio. [...] After my father's death when I was 13, I was the only child, and my mother collapsed, and she is with long depression ever since. [...] I started looking after her, just getting by really with my dad's small pension and some help from the church and my dad's colleagues. Until I managed to be of age to get a driving license and use my dad's taxi permit. (WP5_EL_D_A_8)*

In all the countries studied, the impact of economic hardship is reflected in the widespread preference for vocational tracks, contributing to the overrepresentation of migrant-background students in vocational pathways (Manzano & Tarabini, 2022). These trajectories, shaped by class-based constraints and institutional orientation, result in educational segregation, where cultural and economic capital determine from an early age who is likely—or not—to pursue longer and more prestigious academic routes (Bonizzoni et al., 2014).

> *These are young people whose families, in most cases, advise or encourage them to pursue a path that quickly provides professional skills and leads to employment. [...] When I speak to a student, they often say: 'I'm doing hospitality school so I can get a diploma and start working'. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_1)*

A further challenge is the lack of material and digital resources, including basic school supplies, computers, and reliable internet access, which poses daily obstacles. In Portugal, for example, data from Instituto Nacional de Estatística (2022) indicate that approximately 20 % of immigrant-origin students do not have a personal computer. Financial constraints extended to the costs associated with professional training, such as compulsory medical tests for internships. In this context, the lack of targeted support mechanisms excludes students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds from full participation in their courses.

Economic hardship also echoed in family dynamics. Working in low-paid jobs with long hours left little time and energy for migrant parents to support their children's educational endeavours, a sacrifice too often mistaken for a lack of interest. Academic support provided by community centres could be especially important for these young people. "My parents always worked a lot, so I studied on my own or went to the community centre [which offered homework support and activities outside school hours]." (WP5_PT_L_A_9)

Despite these challenges, interviews in Spain and Italy highlighted several examples of high parental expectations for their children's educational attainment. This involved parents strongly investing in their children's education and encouraging them to do well to secure better job prospects and achieve upward mobility, reflecting the complex interplay between economic necessity and educational ambition.

> *My parents were extremely dedicated. First school, then everything else, always. That's why all my sisters and I have a university degree, and the youngest is currently earning hers, because they believe that education comes first. (WP5_ES_V_C_10)*

Barriers in the transition to the labour market

In all the countries analysed, interviews with young people and education and employment professionals showed that migrants encountered structural barriers that hindered their transition into stable and skilled employment, triggering intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. This evidences segmented assimilation processes (Portes & Zhou, 1993), with migrants disproportionately concentrated in unstable, low-skilled jobs. Young migrants faced limited job opportunities, often confined to sectors characterized by temporary contracts, low pay, and precarious conditions. The lack of legal documentation was a significant obstacle. Interviews conducted in Spain revealed that lengthy bureaucratic delays could force these young people into the informal labour market, where they faced severe exploitation and lacked social protections. This is in line with broader research indicating that prolonged regularization processes push migrants into informality, reinforcing their economic vulnerability (González-Ferrer & Cortina, 2021).

> *Since I arrived, I have done nothing but work as a warehouse operator. Moving pallets here, moving pallets there. Yes, I took a forklift course. […] To enter the labour market, I need to be regularized, I need a NIE [Foreigner Identity Number], and that is an immigration issue that makes everything more difficult. (WP5_ES_C_B_9)*

Even regular migrants who completed vocational training struggled to secure stable employment. In all four countries, migrants tend to be concentrated in low-paid jobs in sectors such as hospitality, construction and care and domestic work, which are in high demand but provide limited prospects for career progression. In Italy and Spain, structural deskilling due to the non-recognition of foreign qualifications was another major issue. Unable to use their credentials, many highly qualified migrants are forced into lower-skilled employment, which severely hampers their long-term upward mobility prospects (Bonizzoni et al., 2014; Ambrosini, 2018).

> *Many [foreigners in the healthcare assistance course] have diplomas or degrees from their home countries that are not recognised here. […] Even recently, there was a Ukrainian doctor whose degree isn't recognised here, so she's considering taking the course to become a healthcare assistant. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_4)*

Spatial discrimination, where residential origins become a barrier to employment, can further compound these challenges. Interviews with young people in Portugal unveiled the territorial stigmatisation of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, leading to the exclusion of immigrant-origin candidates in the hiring process (Wacquant, 2008).

> *I didn't know what people would think, so I avoided saying where I lived. Only after getting to know some people better would, I tell them. Companies judge us by the neighbourhood we live in. (WP5_PT_L_A_9)*
>
> *I used a different address. If they knew I was from [this neighbourhood], they wouldn't give me the job. (WP5_PT_L_A_4)*

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter engaged with migrant-background youth's experiences in Southern Europe to understand the obstacles they face in their learning journeys and how they manage them, how various policies interact with their life courses and points of possible change, and how the process of skills formation reflects their diverse possibilities and abilities. The findings show that these young people's challenges are shaped by a combination of structural barriers, institutional constraints, and socioeconomic factors. The interplay between migration and education policies, economic hardship, and institutional practices, all affect their learning experiences and outcomes creating difficulties in accessing and progressing through education. As a result, skills formation reflects both constraint and adaptability. While due to the obstacles faced they are more likely to attend vocational tracks perceived as less prestigious, these same pathways can also offer spaces for socialisation, skill acquisition, and future opportunity.

One of the most pressing challenges is the role of language barriers, which continue to hinder the academic success of immigrant-origin youth. Language difficulties, sometimes compounded by a lack of adequate language support services in schools, exacerbate educational inequalities, preventing young people from fully engaging with the curriculum and limiting their ability to build meaningful peer relationships. Migrant-background youth also experience challenges navigating the education system due to limited social and informational capital and insufficient institutional support. For those who are immigrants themselves, limited proficiency in the language of the country of destination further aggravates these issues. Bureaucratic and legal constraints for those with irregular or precarious legal status as well as administrative challenges in recognizing prior learning and qualifications obtained in the country of origin, additionally undermine these young people's LOs.

Social and cultural barriers also play a significant role in shaping the educational experiences of migrant-background youth. Experiences of discrimination, both within and outside of school settings, contribute to a sense of exclusion and marginalization among young people. In some cases, negative stereotypes about migrant communities lead to lower teacher expectations. These experiences can undermine students' engagement at

school and, in the long term, limit their career prospects. Social isolation, exacerbated by legal, economic, and housing precarity, and the emotional and psychological impact of migration create additional challenges affecting migrant youth's education experiences and pathways.

The economic precarity that many immigrant-origin families and young people face further deepens educational inequalities. Limited financial resources restrict access to learning tools and opportunities that can enhance educational outcomes. Economic necessity can negatively impact students' ability to focus on their studies and lead to interrupting one's studies to prioritise economic stability. It can also affect educational trajectories through orienting decision-making towards vocational tracks and courses that are geared to securing immediate employment. Finally, the findings point to structural issues in the transition to the labour market, which contribute to the overrepresentation of migrants in precarious and poorly paid jobs and to the intergenerational reproduction of educational and socioeconomic disadvantage among migrant-background youth.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Education policies must move beyond assimilationist frameworks and instead embrace culturally responsive pedagogies that acknowledge and value the diverse backgrounds of migrant students. Expanding language support programmes, streamlining the recognition of foreign qualifications, and increasing financial assistance for low-income migrant families are key steps in fostering greater educational inclusion. Additionally, teacher training programmes should incorporate anti-discrimination and intercultural competence components to ensure that educators are equipped to support diverse student populations effectively.

Strengthening collaboration between schools, local communities, and policymakers is essential in creating more equitable educational environments. Policies should be informed by the lived experiences of migrant youth and should involve them as active stakeholders in shaping educational reforms. The promotion of inclusive and representative curricula that reflect the multicultural realities of contemporary Southern Europe can also contribute to fostering a greater sense of belonging among migrant-background students.

KEY MESSAGES

From the analyses conducted, we can conclude with the following key messages:

Structural and systemic barriers shape immigrant-origin youth's educational experiences: Educational inequalities among migrant-background youth in Southern Europe are driven by intersecting structural, institutional, and socioeconomic factors, rather than individual shortcomings.

Language, legal status, and discrimination are critical obstacles: Language barriers, limited institutional support, legal and bureaucratic obstacles, and experiences of discrimination significantly hinder the academic success of migrant-background youth.

Inclusive, responsive policies and practices are essential: Addressing these challenges requires culturally responsive education policies, improved language and financial support, anti-discrimination training for educators, and inclusive curricula that reflect the diversity of student populations.

5. Grounded Youth: Building Futures in Declining Regions

Johannes Ludwig Löffler, Jenni Tikkanen, Siyka Kovacheva & Hélder Ferraz

5.1 Introduction

The word 'grounded' has a double meaning: For children and youth, the phrase 'getting grounded' has a negative connotation, as you are not permitted to leave the house as a form of punishment, which greatly limits your ability to act freely, as you are stuck within the confided space of your home or room. At the same time, 'to be grounded' can also be perceived to have a positive meaning, as having your roots firmly planted in familiar soil. For young adults living in economically and demographically declining regions that offer comparatively fewer and/or more limited educational and employment opportunities, being 'grounded' has more long-term ramifications for being an agent of one's own life course. Particularly young people in multi-disadvantaged positions experience limited opportunities, as vulnerabilities are often connected to and impacted by scarcer resources and functional capacities. Yet, while many young people actively move or emigrate from declining to more thriving regions and cities in search for better and more versatile life opportunities, others either choose or are forced to remain stationary. In this chapter, we focus on the group of 'grounded youth' and their agency, perceptions of opportunities and capabilities to build their own futures, using the cases of four declining NUTS 3 regions from four different European countries: Gabrovo in Bulgaria, Kainuu in Finland, Halle (Saale) in Germany, and Tâmega e Sousa in Portugal.

Following the introduction, part two outlines our theoretical and methodological approach. The chapter uses a multi-lensed framing that unites Life Course Research, Opportunity Structures and Spatial Justice, aiming to explore the complex relationship between young people's agency, educational, vocational or occupational opportunities, and local space(s). To provide insight on 'grounded youth' in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged positions (based on, e.g., gender, disability, ethnicity, migrant background), we also included the theoretical framework of Intersectionality. Thus, the chapter seeks to address the effects of limited opportunity structures on young people's perceptions of agency and space within the context of declining European regions. The second part concludes with a brief description of this chapter's distinct comparative mixed-methods approach that combines regional and local data from the CLEAR research project's empirical Working Packages and a categorization of 'groundedness'.

Part three presents the results of our research. Drawing from quantitative socio-economic and educational data (WP3), and qualitative interviews with local educational stakeholders (WP4), this part compares and scrutinizes CLEAR's biographical narrative interviews with young people from the selected declining regions (WP5). We analyse how young adults make biographical sense of their local surroundings and how they (seek to) build their life courses. While some remain firmly grounded, utilizing learning, training and employment opportunities locally available to them, others adapt more passively, lowering their

aspirations or creating narratives of spatial (under)achievement. Thus, we focus on young people's reasons for wanting or having to stay in the region, their degree and/or display of agency in adapting to regional conditions and perceived relevance of the region for their individual life course construction.

Part four discusses the overall commonalities and differences between the four selected cases with regard to young people's agency, opportunity structures, and the impact of local space(s). The chapter aims to answer the following CLEAR research questions, primarily on the individual (young people) and spatial (region/city) level of analysis:

- How do young people construct their own life courses within their (locally available) opportunity structures, life histories, educational spaces, and social circumstances?
- How do young people experience, interpret, and frame their learning outcomes as part of their own life trajectories in a spatial context?

Part five summarizes the main findings with regard to the featured categories of groundedness, agency, and life course construction, presenting communalities as well as differences between declining regions in Europe. It highlights the potency of comparative mixed-method research, the value of data gathered at the regional as well as local level, and the overall integrability of the project's main theoretical frameworks. The chapter focuses on the aspects of agency and learning outcomes (LOs) from the comparative perspective of four declining European regions.

5.2 Theoretical framing and methodology

As this chapter deals with the issue of young adults who remain stationary in declining regions, two analytical levels stand at the forefront of our approach: the *individual* and the *spatial* level. Both research questions revolve around the perspectives of young adults, i.e., the construction of life courses within the distinct spatial context of declining European regions. As we look at the decision-making process of young adults and their narratives of staying within their respective region—be it forced or voluntarily—, we selected the theoretical lenses of *Life Course Research* (LCR) (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003; Mayer, 2009) and *Spatial Justice* (SJ) (Soja, 2010; Williams, 2013).

To understand how young adults construct their life courses and experience LOs within the spatial context of declining European regions, we utilize CLEAR's biographical interviews with young people, which shed light on past experiences, vulnerabilities, narratives and decisions for the present/future (see Heinz et al., 2009; Mayer, 2009; Elder et al., 2015). To this purpose, we perceive 'space' not as a background for social relations to play out in the presence of people, but as an actor in its own, that projects, mediates and exerts power (Augé, 2011, p. 110), through its physical existence, geographical location, socio-political function, cultural-historical narratives, and/or interpersonal relations.

Bringing LCR and SJ together requires more than a mere merging of theories. With regard to the research topic, we utilize the concept of opportunity structures as glue for our framework. In doing so, we are able to scrutinize the relationship between agency and spatiality. While opportunity structures (Merton, 1968; Roberts, 2009) come in many forms (see Rinne & Parreira do Amaral, 2015; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022; Benasso et al., 2022), they are primarily perceived by (young) people as *spatial conditions* that impact their lives. For young adults in declining regions, the ability to move between spaces entails the possibility to move to/away from different opportunity structures. Additionally, place attachment and social networks influence people's perception of locally available opportunities and, thus, their plans and decisions (White & Green, 2015).

Narratives of life courses in declining regions drawn from biographical interviews with young adults are not simply passive reflections of their geographical surroundings, but a part of the life course itself. It is the local region, its *spaces* and *places*, through which young people experience the world, a starting point from which they (physically and mentally) venture forth throughout their life, e.g., their homes, the surrounding blocks and streets, their schools, nearby parks and malls. 'Space' is the realm in which LOs are perceived, constructed and evaluated.

The following categorization of 'groundedness' is the result of a thematic analysis of the CLEAR WP5 biographical interviews. The categories are a result of four individual analyses on grounded youth brought together within an inter-regional comparative design. In order to take structural differences of the selected NUTS 3 regions into account, we drew from socio-economic as well as educational data available for the respective NUTS 2 level, collected as part of WP3. To provide a fine-grained perspective on the locally available opportunity structures, we drew from interviews with local educational stakeholders, collected in the course of WP4. The following categorization of groundedness emerged from the first round of our analysis—and was used as a tool in the subsequent stages of the analysis process:

A) *firmly grounded:* stayers who demonstrate strong intention and/or determination to stay in the declining region, to actively seek out/utilize local opportunity structures; they appreciate the (limited) regional/local opportunities and quality of life available to them, expressing forms of personal attachment to the region/city;
B) *passively grounded:* stayers who demonstrate vague intention and/or determination to leave or stay in the declining region; they either have low agency or are not able to act on it; they are either not willing or able to actively seek out or utilize local opportunity structures, expressing no particular plans for their future or attachment to the region/city;
C) *conditionally grounded:* young people who express certain conditions either a) to *leave the region*, prefer or perceive it likely to move away within the next three years in case they do not find the educational, vocational or job opportunities they desire

within the declining region/city (*conditionally leavers*); or b) *stay in the region*, prefer or perceive it likely to return to the declining region/city; they express a clear preference to stay in the region and would only consider moving elsewhere if they do not find employment despite efforts (*conditionally stayers*).

5.3 Grounded youth across Europe

Based on the categories of groundedness, we analyse grounded youth across the selected declining regions. Using the interviews of CLEAR WP5 (N=39), we take a closer look at the reasons and conditions that tie young adults to each declining region, focussing on the life course of young adults in the context of regional/local opportunity structures. We explore how European youths are currently building their futures in declining regions as a means to adapt and to make plans as part of their life course.

Firmly grounded

With regard to the category of *firmly grounded youth*, we identified three primary strands of reasonings: a) local opportunity structures; b) local support; and c) personal connection to the region and its people.

The *first* reoccurring reason of firmly grounded young adults centres around the perception of opportunity structures in an effort to build their life courses with the tools locally available to them. For those willing to remain stationary, the region becomes a resource for educational as well as personal growth—and those who perceive the region as a resource are more willing to stay. In the case of Halle (Saale) in Germany, one noteworthy example is Diana, a 25-year-old woman from migrant background, whose agency is reflected in her determination. After migrating to Germany, she successfully integrated into the education system, working part-time after school while visiting a second-chance programme. To her, Halle (Saale) offers sufficient opportunities for young people:

> *For example, I can achieve everything in Halle, but not in a village, because lack of enough good schools or many possibilities. […] And I think Halle is very big, many opportunities, I find the city very beautiful. (WP5_DE_S_H_2)*

Similarly, Hristo, a 20-year-old man from Gabrovo in Bulgaria, who grew up in a state home and is currently a university student and works as a sales assistant, considered that, even though there were more opportunities in the bigger cities, there were still enough jobs and good opportunities for work in rural Gabrovo:

> *It's not the coolest place, because it's a very small town and there are some people who just spoil it… [refers to drug sellers and addicts]. It's okay in terms of career development—you can work… and not only meet your minimum needs. In Sofia you will work only to pay for rent and food. There are many opportunities [in Gabrovo] and you can combine several at the same time. (WP5_BG_N_G_4)*

Thus, most firmly grounded young adults argued that regional advantages were accessible for those who were ready to invest time and effort to achieve their goals. While the case of Hristo demonstrates the young man's internalisation of the meritocratic discourse dominant among Bulgarian policy-makers and educational practitioners, the case of Diana suggests that differences of decline exist within and across EU member countries and regions, each providing different opportunities as well as limitations on the institutional, structural and spatial level, perceived through a national lens of spatiality and LOs.

The *second* reoccurring reason for firmly grounded youth sheds some necessary light on the perceived impact of locally available support on life course construction. For young adults in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions, local support is seen as crucial. For young adults living in declining regions, the availability of different types of socio-economic aid/backing becomes a deciding factor on whether they want or even are able to leave in order to find better opportunities elsewhere. Asen, a 27-years-old Roma from Gabrovo, who worked in construction sites without a legal contract, explained his decision to stay grounded based on his short-term emigration experience:

> *Cos I know a lot of people here from whom I can borrow today 20 leva. I know a lot of people like that... they help me when I get like this... I borrow money and I pay them back. If I'm... for example in... Sofia, let's say—who do you know there, if you don't have money... In Germany they pay more but... It's better, I tell you, to be next to my family... Today I may have earned 50 leva only, but to be with my family, not to worry about them and so on... (WP5_BG_N_G_10)*

With many interviewees having a migration background and/or limited language skills, various forms of support demonstrated to impact young people's perception of their own agency. In the case of Halle (Saale), most interviewees highlight the importance of local projects to attain formal qualifications as well as the significance of locally available personal support. Sharlize, a 22-year-old woman, who, despite being 'forcibly' grounded due to her refugee status, has successfully rooted herself in region, explained the variety of local support available to young adults in vulnerable positions:

> *[...] for example, the [...]-Project here, I went to some... welcome meetings a few times. Yes. Also, I wrote my applications and brought them here, and they checked them if everything is alright, and grammatical errors, and the like. So, there are a lot, like Caritas, they also helped. There is a project called [...] here in Halle, they also like to help. They help those who got in trouble with the police or, for example, we don't get appointments for the foreigners' authority very well. (WP5_DE_S_H_11)*

Finally, the *third* and by far most prevalent reason for firmly grounded youth for all four selected regions, was a feeling of personal attachment to the region and its people. In the case of the rather remote region of Kainuu (Finland), the region's capital was seen a good place to recover from vulnerabilities and previous trauma, to (re)build agency, to find oneself, and to explore one's aspirations and capabilities. As 'surviving' vulnerabilities

took up much of their (mental) resources, the safety and familiarity of the region became very important to young adults, enabling them to focus their resources on recovery:

> *Yes, I will stay in [the region's capital]. I have no reason to leave. My life got broken because people didn't let me to grow roots anywhere. So, I will make my own decisions. If I have to, I will abandon everything, the name I was given at birth, everything. So that I can make sure that I get to keep the roots that I want to keep. (WP5_FI_P_K_4)*

The most dominant narrative to stay *firmly grounded* is the local presence of close social ties. Family, friends, partners, classmates, teachers, neighbours, support groups and social workers are perceived as a relational resource, whether it is a remote space like Kainuu and Gabrovo, or a densely populated area like Tâmega e Sousa and Halle (Saale). The reasons for this were manifold: for a start, familiarity with the region creates a feeling of security that seemingly provides a psychological groundedness which enables young adults to focus on their personal goals. While personal support somewhat plays into this, for many young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions forms of institutional and structural decline on the regional and local level are somewhat compensated through social ties on the relational level. To many interviewees, the feeling of being at home means to know the locals and having friendly relationships. Constança, a 27-year-old woman living in Tâmega e Sousa (Portugal), serves as a prime example of a firmly grounded young adult that feels deeply rooted to her hometown:

> *I wouldn't leave. I can't leave Amarante. There's no point because it's my hometown, and I don't think I can do it. If I had to, maybe, but things are tough out there too, not just here. (WP5_PT_N_T_1)*

In short, firmly grounded youth utilize the limited opportunities locally available to them to their benefit, building individual life courses that fit in with a region they feel connected to. While most interviewees within this category demonstrated an awareness that moving to thriving regions such as metropolitan areas would increase their chance to find a long-term well-paid job, locally built social ties and networks seem to be of equal or even greater importance. Their assessments of the region's training opportunities and job market mostly follow the statements of local educational stakeholders. However, most experts' perception of spatiality primarily revolves around institutional opportunity structures, overlooking the importance of social ties as a factor enhancing the region's attractiveness to young adults.

Passively grounded

With regard to the category of *passively grounded youth*, we identified two primary strands of reasons: a) limited options and the feeling of being stuck; alongside b) limited agency and a mode of primarily reacting to local circumstances.

The *first* reoccurring reason of passively grounded youths centres around a perceived limitation of options and the subsequent feeling of being helplessly 'grounded'. Especially

those coming from ethnic minorities felt an overpowering force of external barriers that constrained their range of options for learning and working. This was particularly palpable in the story of Nikol, a 26-year-old woman from Gabrovo. Her step-parents forced her to stop studying at the age of 15 in order to marry, following the old cultural norm for Roma women despite that she enjoyed going to school. When asked how she *chose* to stay at home rather than go to work, after dropping out of education, she replied: "No, no, I didn't have that choice. To this day, there is not much choice" (WP5_BG_N_G_1). The paternalistic control over her 'decisions', now by her parents-in-law, prevented her to emigrate abroad with her family. Additionally, structural restrictions placed upon young people living in remote or rural regions have been identified as serious long-term detriments, especially in the case of educational and vocational opportunities in Gabrovo. As Isabela, a 27-year-old woman contemplated:

> *There are schools here that... years ago were at a fairly high level, but not any longer and at the moment very few students graduate from them and just drop out... perhaps the problem is that even if they acquire some competences, there are already fewer places to apply them... (WP5_BG_N_G_5)*

However, our comparison of socio-economically declining regions from the selected European countries showed different reasons for similar behaviours of young adults such as passively staying grounded. In Tâmega e Sousa, emotional attachment to the place of familiar origin was found to be one of the main reasons for young adults to stay grounded. Unlike the previously discussed social ties related to firmly grounded youth, said bonds were described by some interviewees as taking away their agency of movement. For those who stay put, there is an uncertainty about the future that manifests itself in the need to live in the present and find a job—*any* job—in order to earn an income that allows them to cover their expenses.

> *[About job opportunities] It's mostly based on minimum wages. I see it for myself. Two people starting their life together—I'm trying to build a house, but at the end of the month, it's like, 'And money?' There's never much left to put aside because you have to pay rent, electricity, household expenses, food, and in the end, your money never really stretches far. So, it's not easy at all. (WP_PT_N_T_8)*

The *second* reoccurring reason of passively grounded youths centres around their own limited agency, resulting in a mode of primarily *re*-acting to local context or circumstances, with either no real plan to move/stay or no personal attachment to their regional surroundings. As a result, a 'waiting' approach to life was common even among young adults with university degrees like Isabela and Anita. Despite having managed to achieve integration into the regional labour market they quickly became dissatisfied with their low-skill jobs, which lead to still unfulfilled dreams about further studies and more challenging work. Yet, both were not taking any steps to change their current situation due to their responsibilities as caregivers at home. Thus, they left the pursuit of their aspirations for an indefinite future in the region. Unlike the passive 'lack of choice' stance

of the aforementioned Nicol, the two women shared the belief that personal efforts were the way out of their adverse circumstances, with Anita stating that:

> *Sometimes life is complicated and a person feels he… wanders in a labyrinth, in a circle, but there is always a light, and he can come out if he wants to. And not only as long as he wants to, but if he makes an attempt, tries hard, because if a person just waits…, he does not get anywhere… (WP5_BG_N_G_7)*

While limited agency can be a result of limited regionally available opportunity structures, some of the CLEAR WP5 interviewees openly admitted to not have given their educational life course much or even any serious thought. Some young adults attribute this to mental health related issues:

> *That is the main thing [finding a job]. Last week I was at the mental health policlinic, talking there. And when the person asked if I have any expectations and like that. Like if I'd gotten a job and then an apartment and then I could have thought about everything else. But I haven't found a job, so everything is like stuck in one place, so I haven't thought about the other stuff. (WP5_FI_P_K_7)*

For others like Jassim, a 21-year-old man from migrant background, the act of learning German has been his key to achieve his life goals. To him, successful integration means actively engaging with the culture and making friends with *local* Germans. To young adults like him, agency is detached from regional/local opportunity structures, demonstrating a weaker bond towards their place of residence, prioritizing their career plans instead:

> *My future is that what I do. I want to become a doctor, doesn't matter if in Halle or in another city, that is my goal. My plans would stay the way they are. (WP5_DE_S_H_8)*

In short, passive groundedness does not necessarily stem from low personal determination or the lack of a plan to construct one's life course. Alongside limited educational opportunities, vocational training and career, socio-cultural factors such as obligations to one's family and/or heritage were identified to limit or take away young adult's agency during a crucial time of educational and personal growth, resulting in a forced passivity to stay spatially and biographically put. Although local educational stakeholders—who have shown a clear interest in keeping young adults in the region—are mostly aware of the difficult situations of young adults, their perception of mobility mostly revolves around comparisons between their declining region/city and the more thriving regions, demonstrating a more binary thinking of mobility, where passivity revolves mostly around a personal lack attitude to act or a dead-end passivity of those that are socio-economically trapped.

Conditionally grounded

With regard to the category of *conditionally grounded youth*, we identified the following strands of reasons: a) personal dreams/experiences; b) job/career opportunities; c) mental peace/social ties. We located a difference between *conditionally stayers* in the case

of Kainuu and *conditionally leavers* in the cases of Halle (Saale), Gabrovo and Tâmega e Sousa, meaning that the Finnish youth in this category showed a tendency to stay within their region, leaving only in case certain conditions were met (e.g., secure/well-paid job), while in the other cases, young adults were inclined to leave their region and only stay in case certain conditions were to be met locally or they could not find (employment) opportunities elsewhere.

The *first* reoccurring reason of conditionally grounded youths centres around personal dreams and experiences that influence the interviewees' decisions, preferences or plans to either remain stationary or to leave the region. For interviewees that wish to leave, the region neither offers jobs nor a safe space for social relationships. Among all selected cases, this was most strongly expressed by Taimur, a 21-year-old male migrant, who had lived in Halle (Saale) for the last eight years:

> *Better not come here. Here it's shit. The worst people here are people that... that..., there are shitty people among us foreigners. I'm a foreigner and I don't accept any foreigners here. They don't want you to reach the top. They don't want you to have a good graduation. [...]. Here in Halle. I describe Halle like this, that I would leave this city immediately, because it isn't good. (WP5_DE_S_H_4)*

In his case, the absence of locally available social relations like family or friendships that cushion the impact of limited opportunity structures or vulnerabilities, accelerates the decision to move. Without support on the relational/interpersonal level, the region's restrictions on the individual life course become more difficult to tackle, as one's economic, social, and cultural capital is seen by young adults to be a crucial factor in how they are able to act as agents of their life course. In some cases, difficulties were marked by low academic performance, emotional/psychological challenges, and even violence. In other cases, family support allowed for the redefinition of the educational path at a later stage or facilitated young adults in pursuing their aspirations. Mariana's case from Tâmega e Sousa illustrates this—as she comes from a family with highly educated parents and a favourable economic situation. Despite facing emotional/psychological challenges and bullying, which had a significant impact on her LOs and had subsequently led to multiple grade retentions, she found support from teachers at a school in another city. This support enabled her to continue her studies in higher education and secure a job that allows her to pursue her studies while still living with her family:

> *My parents, and I as well, realised that [anonymized] secondary school was not the ideal place for me. And it wasn't because, well, they are completely different environments (...) with very different age groups. It really wasn't a beneficial environment for me, so I decided to move to Pombeiro. (...) There, I met incredible people. Although that was when I started experiencing self-harm and everything else, it was a place where I always had support. (WP5_PT_N_T_7)*

The *second* reoccurring reason of conditionally grounded youths is based on the accessibility of job/career opportunities. Again, we identified a different narrative

between the interviewees from Kainuu—who planned to stay and formulated conditions to leave, compared to Halle (Saale), Gabrovo and Tâmega e Sousa—who planned to leave and formulated conditions to stay. Luwi, a 27-year-old man from migrant background, who had previously left Halle to find work, later decided to return in order to complete his vocational training:

> *Yes [I would like to stay in Halle], because I have been away from Halle for two years, and there I did work. Also is in Lower-Saxony, but I didn't want to stay there. Thus, I returned back here to Halle. (WP5_DE_S_H_1)*

This exemplifies a spatial perception of opportunity structures brought forth by local education stakeholders, that young adults actively compare their life course experiences in the context of regional differences, most notably local living and learning conditions such as living expenses, training opportunities and job markets. As a result, if the region is perceived to provide better opportunities or already established social ties, declining regions become a sort of back-up plan for some young adults, a familiar location to return to, if the initial strategy of leaving is deemed a (temporal) failure.

Manuel's case is different. He has always been a student with strong academic performance. He started secondary education in Economics, but despite good grades, he realised that it wasn't the right field for him. Currently, he is still in training but now in his hometown, where he lives with his parents. He acknowledges that he hopes to work and live in Porto, a city he has visited several times and which offers many opportunities:

> *Well, I have imagined myself living outside Portugal, especially about a year and a half or two years ago. I had a conversation with my parents about it, but they always encouraged me to try to find something here first and only consider leaving if no opportunities came up. It would have to be a well-thought-out decision, wouldn't it? But regarding the reality of where I live, I honestly don't see myself spending my whole life here in Marco. I truly feel that, in the near future, I will have to look for a job and, who knows, maybe even move to a big city—perhaps Porto. (WP5_PT_N_T_4)*

Those interviewees with less severe vulnerabilities and/or more resources at their disposal mentioned similar 'pull factors' and expressed their preference of staying in the region as they enjoyed their surroundings and found their social ties to be of great importance. Those with more resources displayed greater agency, which was shown in the deliberate choices they had made at crucial transition points (e.g., school-to-work transitions) and the ways they planned to increase their chances to find employment (e.g., expanding their search for a job to other fields). One of many examples is Niko, a 26-year-old man from Kainuu, who plans to stay but considers moving in case he can't find a job:

> *I would like to find a job [in assisting tasks in a field of social work] without a related degree, but if this does not work out, then I'll study a degree [in social work], especially if I also don't find a job from the field where I got my current degree. (WP5_FI_P_K_5)*

For many young adults from Kainuu, the search for employment was the deciding factor to formulate conditions to leave, meaning, while they had decided to stay in the region, yet if their efforts were not going to yield results within a set time, most could consider moving away for better job opportunities:

> *Like I'd really like to stay, because... Well, I've lived here three years now, and I've come to the conclusion that this place is like another [city X, where used to live before], like on a smaller scale. Many similar elements here. [...] It is pretty peaceful here, which it is not anymore in [city X]. So yeah, I have really grown fond of this place a lot. (WP5_FI_P_K_2)*

Most of the interviewed young people in Kainuu were aware of the locally available conditions and opportunities, as well as how they impact their life course formation. While many viewed that the region's capital has good educational opportunities, the job opportunities for young people were found to be much scarcer. Many of them believed that young people are in a disadvantaged position compared to more experienced, older jobseekers and hoped that employers would show more confidence in young people and provide them with opportunities to gain work experience.

In case of Finland, young people's perspectives on the educational opportunities in the region were much more positive compared to Gabrovo, Halle (Saale) or Tâmega e Sousa. There is reason to suggest that young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations are not as likely to aspire higher education or even consider it as an option for themselves than more affluent youths: it is those young people, whose plans for the future match with the locally and regionally available opportunities, that are the ones that stay (or move) there. One notable example is Piia, a 23-year-old woman with plans to attend university, expressing that the available regional educational opportunities were not relevant to her and that her decision to move away was out of necessity. Yet, she also thinks it likely to return to the region after completing her university degree. Strikingly, her plan to temporarily leave a region in order to return was a rare exception among all interviewees of WP5. Most European youth stated to *either* stay *or* leave.

The *third* reoccurring reason of conditionally groundedness centres around mental peace and social ties, which was primarily the case for young adults in Kainuu and which was most closely related to personal fears, mental health issues, and the tranquillity of nature. For most young people planning to remain stationary, Kainuu's regional capital represented a safe and familiar place, which had all the necessary services within short distances. A place neither too big nor with too many people.

> *I'm doing ok now that I've been coming here [a youth club]. It has helped with mental, like I've been feeling more positive. I was pretty unsociable before I started coming here [...] I've had much fewer of the most negative thoughts. And I'm going forward slowly, I'm not in any hurry. And I'm only 20, I have time to find my direction in life, I'm pretty sure, hopefully. (WP5_FI_P_K_8)*

Many emphasised their social ties to the region (most often family and/or friends, but in some cases also specific experts they had encountered in youth support measures). The peacefulness of the region as well as the closeness and cleanliness of the surrounding nature was mentioned as a positive aspect. Yet, interviewees were aware of the limited opportunities in the region.

> *I didn't really think about it [applying to study somewhere outside the region]. Like I've always been a real homebody. And at that point, a thought about having to move somewhere else further away from home to study was a bit scary. […] So, applying to study here was not a difficult decision. (WP5_FI_P_K_3)*

On the other side of the spectrum, living in a declining region such as Halle (Saale) was felt by some as a detriment to their well-being to those wanting to leave. Being able to secure safe social spaces in form of personal relationships strongly impacts their decision to stay grounded. For those living by themselves in a region offering limited vocational and/or job opportunities, local space itself becomes less attractive, especially for those from migrant backgrounds that are either spatially separated from their families or started having their own families at a young age. For Halle (Saale), where all except one interviewee was from migrant background, not having an established social network greatly reduced the region's attractiveness long-term.

> *I know… honestly… sometimes it is totally boring here. I don't have anything to do, and I don't have any pals. I only have one girl, and my boyfriend. And, that's it. (WP5_DE_S_H_9)*

In short, conditionally grounded youth demonstrated their ability to be agents of their life courses. They create plans/formulate conditions that take local opportunity structures (institutional level) and social networks (relational level) into account. Thus, conditionally grounded youths are *comparers of space*, taking into account available training and career opportunities but also preferences regarding population density, travelling-distances, leisure activities, public parks, and safety.

5.4 Discussion: Staying, waiting, leaving in the life course

Despite some similarities of spatial decline, such as a continuous out-migration as a result of limited career opportunities, the regions showed some notable differences between them.

In Gabrovo, attempts to stop youth out-migration—e.g., a local hospital offering full university tuition for young people to train for nurses—did not receive much response. Meanwhile even local software companies complained about the lack of young recruits who stay *after* being trained for the available positions. Additionally, some young women in Gabrovo are still inclined to locally settle down and to abandon their education due to cultural expectations of taking the main responsibility for family care.

In Kainuu, there are relatively large employers in healthcare and welfare service sectors, mining, metal industry, technology and hospitality, but young people's employment

prospects are still limited (especially for those with low levels of education)—while, at the same time—the region suffers from shortages of skilled labour. Young people aspiring university education have to leave the region to pursue their goals.

In Halle (Saale), a wide range of open training positions (health care and hospitality) are available. Yet, the region lacks skilled personnel—as is the case with all four selected regions. Furthermore, poor language skills paired with interrupted educational histories greatly limit young adults' agency. According to local stakeholders, low application/high dropout rates in training are due to few locally available jobs, as well as the region's historic (reunification) and recent (migration) demographic developments.

In Tâmega e Sousa, education and labour market experts identified a lack of strategic coordination between educational offerings and labour market needs, as well as specific skills that should be prioritised and developed but continue to hinder employability. Moreover, from a spatial perspective, it is noteworthy that there is better coordination in peripheral areas than in the major urban centre of Porto.

As regional decline comes in many colours, there is no one-fit-all solution for young adults—especially for those in positions of disadvantages and/or vulnerabilities—to be sovereign agents of their life course. In all selected regions, out-migration is seen as a viable option. However, we also identified 'staying put' as a wait-and-see tactic for those with social capital in the region. In Kainuu and Halle (Saale), interviewees in vulnerable positions appreciated different kinds of support, suggesting that the *imperative of mobility*, the out-migration of young adults (Corbett, 2007; Farrugia, 2015b; Kiilakoski, 2016) from rural, remote and/or declining regions, is temporally counteracted by considerations of *personal attachment* (Evans, 2015; White & Green, 2011; 2015), or a *sense of (spatial) belonging* (Alexander, 2023; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017). Social networks and personal attachment impact young people's decisions/plans to 'stay grounded', not wanting to leave behind locally anchored social capital (see Bæck, 2019).

The categories of groundedness help to answer this chapter's first research question: *How do young people construct their own life courses within their (locally available) opportunity structures, life histories, educational spaces and social circumstances?*

For the category of *'firmly grounded'* we found a shared narrative of social capital, with a stronger emphasis on family in Gabrovo and Tâmega e Sousa, and on friends, teachers or tutors in Halle (Saale); thus, being grounded means knowing people and places, a personal relationship with the region on the individual and relation level, with most young adults capable to differentiate between their personal feelings for the region and its structural drawbacks; we identified 15 interviewees that fell into this category;

For the category of *'passively grounded'* we found shared positive narrations regarding the region, but some notable differences concerning the motives to stay; passive youths from Halle (Saale) simply 'consumed' the available opportunities (e.g., apprenticeships; low

costs of living), mostly without any long-term plans; in Tâmega e Sousa and Gabrovo, the emotional attachment of young adults to their family or place of origin is particularly strong; they struggle between the wish to stay grounded with the prospect of raising a family close to their (grand-)parents, relatives and friends, and a perceived necessity to strive for a higher qualification and well-paid jobs elsewhere; nine of them belong here.

For the category of *'conditionally grounded'* we identified the conditions used by young adults to decide when and why to leave or stay; to these young adults, the act of moving to another place is part of a plan to achieve long-term goals, i.e., to complete their education, to get employment of their preference, and/or to find a safe place to start a family; while in the case of Kainuu, young adults formulated conditions to leave while planning to stay, it was the opposite for the interviewees in Halle (Saale), Gabrovo and Tâmega e Sousa, stating conditions to stay while planning to leave; fifteen interviewees fell into this category; as part of this category, 'flexibly grounded' youths demonstrate a strong regional identity, moving away to gain formal skills or to find well-paid jobs, with a tentative goal to return to the (declining) region in the long run.

On that basis, the second research question focusses on the aspect of (spatial) agency: *How do young people experience, interpret and frame their LOs as part of their own life trajectories in a spatial context?*

LOs are described by young adults as closely tied to their biographies and experiences, emphasizing the importance of (significant) others as well as key moments of personal success/failure; European youth generally seem to follow the logic of the public discourse regarding the concept of LOs, framing qualifications as necessary steps to secure employment, although some interviewees' statements hint at the importance of informal skills and personal growth as part of LOs;

In the context of *agency*, *firmly grounded* young adults build upon their achievements in education and training to make the best use of existing local opportunities*; passively grounded youths* consider their LOs as low but the best they could achieve in the region and they do not strive to improve them; *conditionally grounded youths* wish to keep their future open, either to see how the region develops before making the final decision or to see how their region fairs by comparison;

In the context of *vulnerabilities*, they are mostly referred to as an unchangeable part of one's biography, something that realizes itself continuously throughout the life course: in Gabrovo, ethnic minorities felt overpowered by external constraints, resulting in interviewees giving up their attempts to actively shape their life course; in Halle (Saale), young people in vulnerable positions benefit from local projects and social networks as part of their life course construction; and in Tâmega e Sousa, ones family's economic, social and/or cultural capital greatly impacts LOs and life trajectories.

5.5 Conclusion: Common ground on grounded youth?

We have identified and discussed the reasons and narratives of young adults to stay grounded within four economically and/or demographically declining European regions. Attempting to create categories of groundedness, we demonstrated that the four NUTS 3 sub-regions represent very unique cases of regional decline despite some similarities at the NUTS 2 level, as we identified distinct spatial and/or bibliographical contexts.

On the *methodological* level, this chapter was able to depict the potency of comparative mixed-method research on the sub-regional level, allowing to combine and compare socio-economic, educational, vocational and employment data available on the NUTS 2 level, with the agency of young adults living in so-called declining regions on the NUTS 3 level. However, it should be noted that the selected categorization of socio-economically and demographically 'declining' regions has to be understood in the context of each country and its regions. As the analysis has shown, interregional differences of decline or what is perceived as limiting opportunities, varies between the four selected European cases. On the *theoretical* level, this chapter provides an example of how to synergize the *Spatial Justice* approach with a *Life Course Research* design for international comparative educational research. The chapter illustrated how the perception of space influences young adult's decisions to stay grounded and their narratives of locally available opportunities, social networks, environmental aspects, family obligations, and/or individual biographies.

KEY MESSAGES

We provide the following key messages resulting from our discussion of the results:

In all four regions, we found cases belonging to all three categories of groundedness, suggesting that young adults across different European regions/countries utilize same strategies to build (spatial) futures in their respective declining regions.

Young adults perceive their spatial surroundings through the lenses of biographical experiences (individual level), educational/vocational/career opportunities (spatial & institutional level), as well as support in form of social ties/networks (relational level).

Spatial opportunity structures on the local/regional level are an important factor for young people's life courses. However, their impact is not unequivocal—those with an active stance tend to see more freedom to make use of their achievements and, if supported by local policies, might become actors for the growth of their regions.

PART II

POLICYMAKING, VULNERABILITY, AND INCLUSION

6. (Perceived) Opportunity Structures – A Cross-Spatial Analysis of the Relevance of Migration and Gender on Job Skills

Hannah Edler, Andreas Martin, Alexandra Ioannidou, Ruggero Cefalo & Xavier Rambla

6.1 Introduction

In response to ongoing inequalities in accessing and continuing education for young adults, that have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the CLEAR project seeks to move away from the perspective of pinpointing learning outcomes (LOs) foremost onto the attributes of individuals in disadvantaged situations. Instead, it underlines the impact the life course as well as intersectional and spatial factors have on individual LOs. This allows for a depiction of LOs in their broader social and political complexities (Ioannidou & Zarifis, 2024). The chapter, therefore, focuses especially on the integration of women and migrants into the labour market.

In CLEAR, LOs are theoretically considered to be co-constructed by spatial structures of (in-)justices, life course trajectories as well as intersectionality. The data generated by the CLEAR project provide compelling insights into the construction of LOs at five different levels (institutional, individual, spatial, relational, and structural) allowing a more differentiated description of intersectional factors (i.e., age, gender, migration experience, socio-economic position, etc.) influencing educational attainment, employment, education-to-work transitions as well as individual motivation, (mental) health and sense of belonging of young adults. Empirically, our chapter first seeks to statistically analyse spatial opportunity structures drawing on quantitative secondary data from EU surveys and, second, aims to deepen these results with the individual perceptions of young adults on spatial opportunities by utilizing qualitative data from narrative interviews with young adults.

The CLEAR project has emphasised the interplay between spatial structures and socio-demographic factors, such as migration, gender, age, and educational attainment, in relation to unequal LOs. For this chapter, we decided to focus on migration experience and gender as both are crucial factors to understand variations in educational attainment, risks of social exclusion and poverty, or unemployment. Also, during the establishment of WP3, a previous microdata statistical analysis was conducted (see Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report) which asked—among other points—whether the factors migration experience and gender impact job skills. The results showed that both migration experience and gender have a significant impact on labour market outcomes. For the purposes of this chapter, we are building on this analysis and expanding it with broader spatial analytical lenses (cross-national and cross-regional).

Accordingly, we adjust and address two central research questions from the CLEAR project combining the spatial and individual level of analysis:

- To what extent can the differences in the labour market opportunities of (a) young adults with migration experience and (b) young female adults, observed in our previous analysis, be attributed to regional and national contexts?
- How do spatial settings affect the perceived labour market opportunities and choices of (a) young adults with migration experience and (b) young female adults?

These research questions align with a larger body of research on cross-European youth labour market integration (YLMI). Undoubtedly, such research offers valuable insights into the challenges and chances of employment for young people and is therefore ongoingly a major multidisciplinary research focus (e.g., Saar et al., 2023; Caroleo et al., 2020). However, young adults do not have equal access to (quality) labour market opportunities nor are these opportunities spatially available to all. Considering spatiality in YLMI further, extensive research has been conducted on the relevance of spatial structures (e.g., Mikkelsen & Agdal, 2024; Zahl-Thanem & Rye, 2024; Otero et al., 2023)—often thematising spatial (im-)mobility (e.g., Hoffmann & Wicht, 2023). Recently, an increasing body of literature on education-to-work transitions in youth research (e.g., Morris, 2025; Caroleo et al., 2022; Reyes et al., 2019) has stressed the importance of regional structures and territorial variations within a country (e.g., Cefalo et al., 2024; Scandurra et al., 2021a; 2021b; Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021). These studies on regionality emphasise that recognising the significance of sub-national territories leads to a more differentiated picture of inequalities than country-level alone.

The relevance of labour market integration of migrants is neither a new phenomenon nor has this topic lost its prevalence in recent years (e.g., Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021; Dumont, 2021). Research shows that migrants experience job skill mismatches more often than non-migrants in the process of transitioning from education into the labour market (e.g., Akgüç & Parasnis, 2023; Visintin et al., 2015). Comparative studies have shown this effect to be consistent cross-nationally (e.g., Montanari, 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & European Commission, 2023; Cim et al., 2020; Biagi et al., 2019). Likewise, a wide range of research papers examine gender disparities concerning (European) labour market integration (e.g., Kowalewska, 2023; Cipollone et al., 2014). Here, education-to-work transitions have clearly been identified as gendered processes (e.g., Wyn et al., 2017; Brzinsky-Fay, 2015). While progress has been made in reducing gender disparities in transitions into the labour market within the EU, cross-national comparisons still reveal gender imbalances, primarily disadvantaging women (e.g., Varsik, 2025).

To address our research questions, we begin by introducing the theoretical context in which we combine three theoretical approaches: the theory of spatial justice by Soja (2010), the concept of regional opportunity structures (Bernard et al., 2022), and the perspective of transition regimes in youth research—particularly the education-to-work transition regime (Roberts, 2025). The first two, address systemic dimensions of

inequality, emphasise questions of justice within space, examine how regional conditions enable or constrain opportunity structures, and account for intersecting positions of disadvantage (e.g., Winker & Degele, 2011). The third conceptual trait frames the multiple transitions young people experience throughout their early life courses and acknowledges the impact of various vulnerabilities, particularly during education-to-work transitions (Roberts, 2022). Bringing together all three approaches enables us to consider the role of spatial units of analysis (national and regional), how they interact with individual characteristics such as migration experiences and gender during education-to-work transitions, and how young adults perceive labour market opportunity structures.

Our analyses rely on quantitative and qualitative work carried out in WP3 and WP5. WP3 involved quantitative analysis of secondary data at NUTS 0 (country) and NUTS 2 (regional) levels and aimed to identify key factors that influence LOs by analysing institutional and socio-economic conditions across the eight CLEAR countries and in 16 regions. In a first cross-national microdata analysis of the 2020 Labour Force Survey data, factors influencing job skills of young adults were analysed in the annex (Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report, pp. 70-83). WP5 comprised qualitative research conducted by the project partners and consists of 169 narrative interviews with young adults in precarious living conditions to attain in-depth information about how young people exercise their agency in dealing with educational success and failure along their life courses and how they reflect upon the relation between the spaces they live and their educational achievements. We analyse microdata of the Labour Force Survey (Eurostat, 2019) by adding the regional level as a unit of analysis. In the manner of an explanatory sequential design, we begin by introducing the respective quantitative data, methods and results. We then extend the statistical results with the insights into young adults' narratives. Using this mixed-method design, we discuss the quantitative results with respect to spatial, migration and gender patterns and interpret them according to our theoretical approaches.

6.2 Spatial (un-)just opportunity structures in youth education-to-work transitions

The conceptual shift through the 'spatial turn' (e.g., Sheller, 2017; Döring & Thielmann, 2009) represents a multidisciplinary orientation towards the importance of space as a central category of analysis. It reflects on how spatiality—the organization, production, and meaning of space—shapes and is shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena. In the second half of the 20th century, the concept of *justice* as the core of spatial research received more attention. Space was conceptualized as socially constructed, dynamic and power laden, see David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (2010, originally 1973) and Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991, originally 1974). Since then, centring justice within the spatial turn has developed into a sustainable analytical approach to capture spatial inequalities (e.g., for overview Ohlsson & Przybylinski, 2023; Moroni & De Franco, 2024; Przybylinski, 2022).

Edward Soja's *Seeking Spatial Justice* (2010) extended Lefebvre's ideas by applying them to contemporary urban issues, arguing that spatial inequality is both a cause and a consequence of broader social injustices. His emphasis on action-oriented spatial strategies bridges the gap between theory and practice and underlines that spatial justice is not merely a top-down but also a bottom-up social process. Soja further argues that "justice in the contemporary world tends to be seen as more concrete [...], more oriented to present-day conditions, [and] more open to a multiplicity of interconnected perspectives" (Soja, 2010, p. 21). Applying this perception of justice to the analysis of the relevance of spatial structures means to consider the complexity of the interplay of different forms of social inequalities within these spaces that directly or indirectly shape the everyday opportunities of young adults. Spatial justice combined with concepts of 'spatial' opportunity structures enable us to ask how different spaces impact the acquisition and utilisation of job skills by young adults. It also allows us to see how intersecting factors such as migration experience and gender exacerbate injustices in various spaces—the "*socio-spatial dialectic*" of justice (ibid., p. 4).

In alignment with the increased interest of researchers to place spatiality at the core of their analyses, opportunity structures have been concretized to different forms of spatiality (Galster & Sharkey, 2017; Galster & Killen, 1995; Cotter, 2002)—most recently in form of 'regional' opportunity structures (Bernard et al., 2022; Scandurra et al., 2021b). Bernard et al. (2022) introduce several elements that shape regional opportunity structures, which can be applied to various spatial units of analysis, whether large or small. This concept is relevant to us for three reasons. First, it marks the interplay of social and spatial drivers of inequalities offering us the chance to consider the interconnectedness of migration experiences and the gender of young adults in different spatial contexts. Second, it presents four distinct analytical dimensions of opportunity structures, namely the labour market, public/private services, community/civic engagement, and the natural environment. Lastly, the concept deepens the analysis by applying three aspects (availability, accessibility, and quality) to examine the internal make-up of the four dimensions of opportunity structures.

Turning to youth transitions, Chevalier (2021) introduces a conceptual overview of the development of youth transition regime research. He emphasises the importance of the transition regime 'education-to-work' in youth research. The youth transition regime concept by Roberts (e.g., 2022; 2020; 2018) places a particular focus on this education-to-work transitions of young adults and complements our spatial conceptualisation by marking the influence of governance on transition regimes on the national as well as sub-national level. Dynamic in nature, the "routes and pathways" (Roberts, 2025, p. 4) taken by youth in education-to-work transitions intersect with individuals' socio-economic background, parental educational attainment, gender, age, migration experience, and many more (ibid., p. 6). This interplay between educational institutions, the labour market,

governance and the individual provide a valuable frame to interpret outcomes regarding job skills of young migrants and young women across national and regional contexts.

6.3 Exploring cross-spatial labour market opportunities for young migrants and women

The first research question, to what extent differences in the labour market opportunities of young female adults and young adults with migration experience can be attributed to regional and national contexts, was examined quantitatively. During the work on cross-national and -regional analyses within WP3 a first microdata exploration based on the 2020 Labour Force Survey (LFS) was conducted. This analysis did not examine the extent to which migration experience or gender influence the opportunities and risks faced by young adults, nor whether these risks are related to the country and region in which the respondents live. This will be examined here with a focus on the opportunities for finding a job that matches one's level of skills.

Data sources

For our analysis we use data from the 2019 EU Labor Force Survey. This is the most recent data with broad coverage of NUTS 2 regions. The analytical sample comprises young adults aged between 20 and 34 (N=409.884) from 31 countries in 220 NUTS[7] 2 regions. In addition to the 27 EU member states, the analytical sample also includes Switzerland, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Cyprus. This increases statistical power and allows the CLEAR countries to be framed in a European context. NUTS 2 regions are not available in the LFS for all countries in the analytical sample. In Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, these are aggregated.

The dependent variables are aggregated levels of job skills. These were summarised using the ISCO08[8] job classification. They correspond to the ISCED[9] classifications and thus enable a direct comparison between educational attainment and job skill requirements (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development et al., 2015). This aggregation helps to analyse vertical skills mismatches and education-employment alignment (e.g., Sparreboom & Tarvid 2017, Zilian et al., 2021, Mytna Kurekova et al., 2014).

Independent variables are gender (N=188.321 female), and migration status. We operationalize migration status using country of birth. Only those who were foreign-born are considered migrants in this analysis (N=48.401). We also control for economic sector and level of education as described in Table 6.1.

Education and sector are the most important factors that can confound the relationship between the independent variables and job skills. Unequal educational opportunities are

7 NUTS = Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

8 ISCO08 = International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008

9 ISCED = International Standard Classification of Education

a particular disadvantage for migrants in the labour market (Teltemann & Schunck, 2016), while gender segregation in certain sectors can significantly reduce job opportunities for women (Leoncini et al., 2024).

Table 6.1 Aggregation of ISCO and ISCED levels to 4 levels of skills

ISCED-11	ISCED-97	ISCED	Aggregated Skill-Level	ISCO08	ISCO88
1	1	Basic education (primary level)	1 (low)	9	9
2,3	2; 3	Secondary education (lower and upper secondary); basic vocational education, initial vocational training.	2 (medium-low)	4-8	4-8
5	4; 5B	Post-secondary education and tertiary education (non-university short programs).	3 (medium-high)	3	3
6; 7; 8	5A; 6	Higher education (tertiary, academic)	4 (high)	1; 2	1; 2

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development et al., 2015

Research methods

To answer the research questions, we decided to use 3-level random intercept and random slope proportional odds models, as they allow us to determine the specific effects for migration status and gender both overall and for a large number of clusters, while also controlling for other individual characteristics. The models also allow us to control for spatial aggregation of variance and the different average levels of outcomes for different regions and countries. This makes it possible to determine the degree of intersectional interaction between region, country, migration status and gender for each country and region. It is possible to observe in the same country that the country level can have the opposite effect to the regional level. The advantage is that the causes of the effects can be attributed very precisely to the spatial levels and the factors that are effective at each level.

To estimate the country and regional effects, we use empirical Bayesian estimation (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). In addition, we use likelihood ratio tests to test whether the influence of migration status and gender is indeed country- and region-specific. It is reasonable to assume that at the NUTS 2 level, infrastructural, settlement structure, and economic factors primarily influence the opportunities available to young adults. At the state level, however, political influences are more significant. These influences can be clearly distinguished by strictly separating the variance components. We estimate a total of six models. Models 1, 2, and 3 examine the influence of migration background. In Model 1, only the zero effect is estimated. This is a random effect model that allows us to assess the importance of spatial levels for the outcome. To do this, we calculate the intraclass correlation (ICC) from the variance (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012, p. 532).

In Model 2, the random slope for migration is added at the state level. We therefore allow the model to vary the effect for migration at the state level. Using the LRT test, we can

determine whether this significantly improves the model. If so, we know that the state level has a significant influence (moderation) on the migration effect. We can also determine how much variance of the migration effect is attributable to the state level. In Model 3, we add a random slope at the regional level and test again with the LRT to see if the model improves and how much variance of the migration effect is attributable to the regional level. We repeat the process for gender. In this case, Model 4 is again the null model, which does not differ from Model 1. Model 5 is the random slope model for gender at the state level, and Model 6 is the random slope model at the state and regional levels.

Results

In the 3-level random intercept model (Model 1), the variance shares of the chances of getting a job with higher qualification requirements are distributed unevenly, with 2.8 % (ICC) at the country level and 1.1 % (ICC) at the regional level. These are rather low values. But this initially applies to all respondents. Firstly, it is important to note that education has a very strong influence on the chances of getting a highly skilled job. For highly skilled individuals (level 4), the chance of getting a highly skilled job is 50 times higher than for someone with little or no qualifications (level 1).

The results show also that, overall, both gender and migration background have a negative influence on the chances of obtaining a job with high requirements. Under otherwise equal conditions in terms of industry and educational background, the probability of obtaining a job with corresponding qualifications is 44.5 % ($1 - e^{-0.59}$) lower for migrants. For women, this probability is 21.3 % lower (Model 1). Both migrants and women experience a vertical and negative mismatch between their qualifications and the qualifications required for jobs across all countries.

If we assume in the next step that the negative effect of the migration experience is not the same in all countries (Model 2), the model should improve significantly if we allow the model to vary the effect for migration at the country level. Model 2 is significantly better adapted to the data than model 1 (LRT Model 2).

Part of the disadvantage experienced by migrants can therefore be attributed to the fact that they live in a particular country. However, this does not account for the possibility that there may be regional differences that are not yet visible at the national level. If the regional level is included (Model 3), it becomes apparent that there are also significant interactions with migration status at this level (LRT Model 3). In this best-fitting model, the probability of being employed below the qualification level as a young migrant is 37 %. Approximately 2.7 % of the total migration effect is attributable to the region. At the national level, 3.1 % of the variance of this effect remains. In model 3, the variance components at the country level and the regional levels are completely separated. In Figures 6.1 and 6.2, the additional region- and country-specific effects are shown. For instance, in Italy (log odd = -0.486), the chance of finding a job with higher qualifications is reduced by a further 21.5 % to the overall negative effect for a young migrant as shown

in model 1. Even when migrants have similar skills or work in similar sectors as non-migrants, they are still less likely to get into higher-skilled jobs. The numbers show a clear disadvantage for migrants—not because they are lacking relevant skills, but likely because of disadvantageous factors that influence their chances of accessing jobs matching their qualifications. These factors also vary at the national and regional levels. Some of these factors will be looked at more closely in sub-chapter 6.4.

Table 6.2 Log-Odds estimates of job skill relevance with random slope for migration

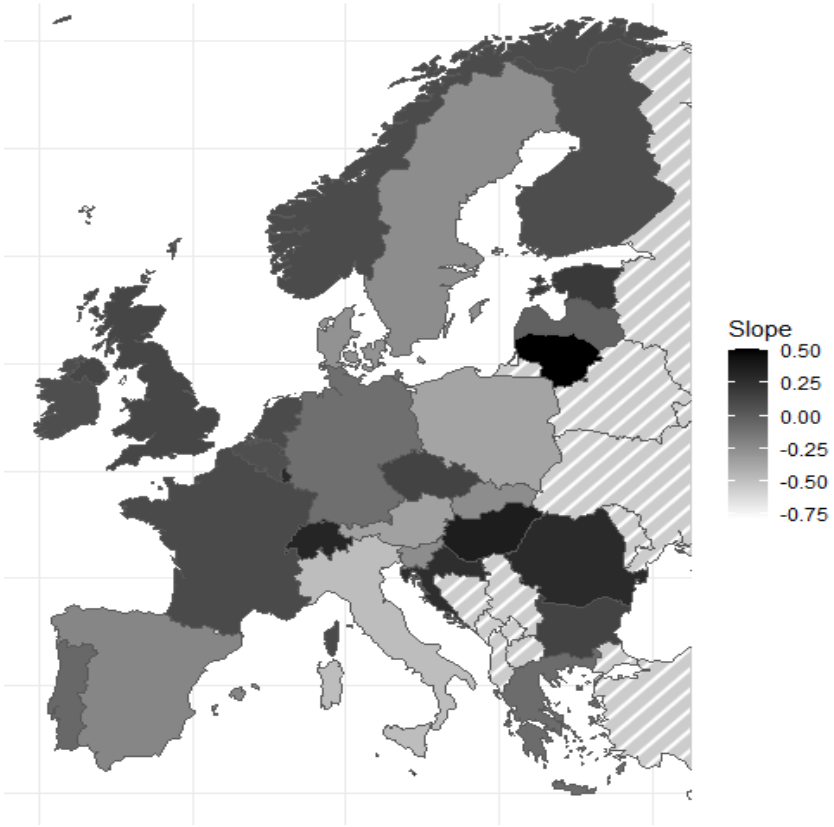
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Migrationexp.	-0.59*** (0.01)	-0.42*** (0.07)	-0.46*** (0.08)
Female	-0.24*** (0.01)	-0.24*** (0.01)	-0.24*** (0.01)
Skill (ref. Level 1)			
Level 2	1.41*** (0.03)	1.41*** (0.03)	1.40*** (0.03)
Level 3	2.38*** (0.03)	2.37*** (0.03)	2.37*** (0.03)
Level 4	3.92*** (0.03)	3.91*** (0.03)	3.90*** (0.03)
Nace (ref. Agriculture)			
Manufacturing	0.91*** (0.02)	0.91*** (0.02)	0.90*** (0.02)
Construction	0.57*** (0.02)	0.58*** (0.02)	0.57*** (0.02)
Trade	0.50*** (0.02)	0.50*** (0.02)	0.49*** (0.02)
Information	2.68*** (0.03)	2.68*** (0.03)	2.67*** (0.03)
Finance	1.47*** (0.03)	1.47*** (0.03)	1.46*** (0.03)
Real estade	1.52*** (0.04)	1.53*** (0.04)	1.52*** (0.04)
Science	1.52*** (0.02)	1.51*** (0.02)	1.51*** (0.02)
Public Admin.	2.07*** (0.02)	2.08*** (0.02)	2.07*** (0.02)
Other	1.12*** (0.02)	1.13*** (0.02)	1.12*** (0.02)
N	409884	409884	409884
AIC	758022.50	757466.73	757294.5
Var Intercept C	0.09562	0.07513	0.07548
Var Intercept R	0.03825	0.03761	0.03677
Var slope mig C		0.14010	0.10885
Var slope mig R			0.09713
LRT		559.77***	176.19***

Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

For the CLEAR countries, that is Finland, Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, this also means that there are major differences between countries and regions. While in Italy the risk of young migrants being overqualified is 61 % higher than for people without migration experience, in Bulgaria it is only 36 %. Bulgaria is therefore over the overall effect for migrants as shown in model 1, as are all CLEAR countries except

Austria, Germany, and Italy. The range is even greater at the regional level. The risks are highest in Dytiki Ellada (67 %) and lowest in Liguria (19 %).

Figure 6.1 Slope migration country log odds



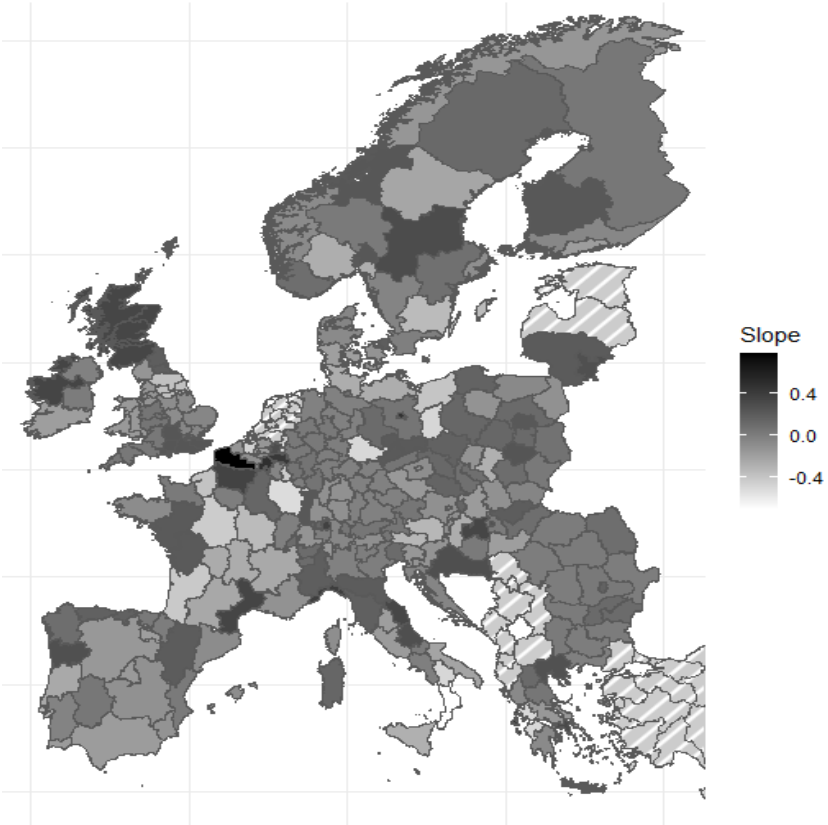
Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

As already shown, young women's chances of finding a job aligning with their level of education are also reduced by 21.3 % (models 1 and 4). Here, too, the effect varies significantly across European countries. If we include the country-specific error term in the model (Model 5), the model quality improves significantly. In this model, the variance share of the country level in the total effect is 1.2 %. Adding the regional level improves the model (Model 6) as well, but to a lesser extent. The region therefore also has an influence on the effect of gender. In this best-fit model, the effect is -20.0 %. The variance share of the country level of the gender effect is 1.2 % in the complete 3-level model (Model 6), while that of the regional level is only 0.6 %.

There are also national and regional differences between the CLEAR countries regarding the effect of gender. While in Finland the probability of young women being overqualified for their jobs is 50 % higher than for young men, young women in Bulgaria have a slight advantage over the comparison group (7 %). At the regional level, the range of regions examined in CLEAR is smaller. In some regions, the risk of women being employed in low-skilled jobs is slightly lower than the risk across all countries and regions (21.3 %). The risks are lower in Kentriki Makedonia (14 %), Saxony-Anhalt (13 %), and Valencia (11 %). In

Norte (39 %), Marche (28 %), and Hamburg (27 %), however, the risks for women are higher.

Figure 6.2 Slope migration region log odds



Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

Overall, the assumptions underlying the first research question that the risk of overqualification can be attributed to the country and regional level are confirmed. Young migrants and young women in Europe face significant risks of vertical mismatches cross-nationally and -regionally. Both levels (country and regional) have a significant influence on these specific risks, yet the proportions of variance—both in terms of the risk of all young people being employed below their skill level and the specific risks faced by young migrants and women—are higher at the country level than at the regional level. Upon further examination, this statistical analysis of cross-national and -regional variations in risks of vertical mismatches among young migrants and women in the eight CLEAR countries reveals complex dynamics that need more explanation. Accordingly, we turn to the inter-regional differences as presented in Tables 6.3 and 6.5.

Cross-nationally, it is further possible to compare each CLEAR country individually by analysing inter-regional disparities per country (right side of tables 3 and 7). These inter-regional results per country (right columns of tables 3 and 7) can be cross-nationally compared. Concretely this means that we can start with Greece and zoom in on the two regions Dytiki Ellada (declining region) and Kentriki Makedonia (thriving region). In the

case of migrants, the Greek declining region poses a higher risk of overqualification (Dytiki Ellada with 67 %) than its counterpart (Kentriki Makedonia with 28 %).

Table 6.3 Country and regional differences in the effect of migration on job skill relevance (Log Odds & Odds Ratios)

Country	Log odds	odds	Regions (NUTS2)	Log odds	odds	Inter-regional disparities per country
Austria	-0,35	0,61	Vienna	-	-	-
			Upper Austria	-	-	
Bulgaria	0,14	0,36	North Central	0.11	0,38	0,07
			South Central	-0.00	0,45	
Finland	0,08	0,40	Etelä-Suomi	-0.06	0,48	0,05
			Pohjois-ja-Itä-Suomi	0.03	0,43	
Germany	-0,10	0,50	Hamburg	0.07	0,41	0,03
			Saxony-Anhalt	0.10	0,38	
Greece	-0,09	0,49	Kentriki Makedonia	0.26	0,28	0,39
			Dytiki Ellada	-0.51	0,67	
Italy	-0,49	0,66	Liguria	0.38	0,19	0,04
			Marche	0.33	0,23	
Portugal	-0,07	0,48	Norte	0.27	0,27	0,33
			Area Metrop. Lisboa	-0.33	0,60	
Spain	-0,22	0,55	Catalonia	-0.09	0,49	0,05
			Valencia	0.01	0,44	

Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

This shows an inter-regional difference of 39 % underlining that the risk of overqualification for migrants in Dytiki Ellada is significantly higher than in the thriving region Kentriki Makedonia. Comparatively in Portugal, the thriving region of Lisbon (60%) exceeds the declining region Norte (27 %) by 33 %—meaning that migrants in the metropole region of Lisbon are at a greater risk to experience a vertical mismatch in their job skills. When applying this analytical logic to all other CLEAR countries, it can be uncovered that overall thriving regions pose a greater risk of overqualification for migrants than declining areas.

Albeit the inter-regional differences between the thriving regions and the declining regions are mostly minor in the other CLEAR countries, such as in Bulgaria (7 %), Finland (5 %), Spain (5 %), Italy (4 %), and Germany (3 %). In total, this means that 15 out of 16 regions that indicate a higher risk of vertical mismatch for this group are all economically thriving regions with overall good infrastructures and broader opportunities.

Looking at the situation of young women, three countries (Bulgaria, Greece, and Portugal) show declining regions as those regions with a greater risk of overqualification. In Portugal and Greece, the inter-regional gaps between Lisbon (16 %) and Norte (39 %) as well as

between Dytiki Ellada (26 %) and Kentriki Makedonia (14 %) are larger with 23 % and 12 % respectively. In Germany, the inter-regional disparity (14 %) is also larger, yet here it is the thriving region Hamburg (27 %) that presents a higher risk of overqualification than the declining region Saxony-Anhalt (13 %). Comparatively, the inter-regional gaps between declining and thriving regions are small in Italy (7 %), Bulgaria (1 %), and Finland (1 %). To sum up, regarding women 13 out of 16 regions are thriving regions that disadvantage women in terms of accessing a job matching their educational qualifications. Altogether, the cross-national comparisons of inter-regional disparities suggest that economically thriving regions can cause greater disadvantages for migrants and women than economically challenged areas—however, in some countries the gap between declining and thriving regions is small.

Table 6.4 Log-Odds estimates of job skill relevance with random slope for gender

	Model 4	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
Migrationexp.	-0.59*** (0.01)	-0.59*** (0.01)	-0.59*** (0.01)
Female	-0.24*** (0.01)	-0.20*** (0.04)	-0.22*** (0.04)
Skill (ref. Level 1)			
Level 2	1.41*** (0.03)	1.42*** (0.03)	1.41*** (0.03)
Level 3	2.38*** (0.03)	2.39*** (0.03)	2.38*** (0.03)
Level 4	3.92*** (0.03)	3.94*** (0.03)	3.92*** (0.03)
Nace (ref. Agriculture)			
Manufacturing	0.91*** (0.02)	0.88*** (0.02)	0.90*** (0.02)
Construction	0.57*** (0.02)	0.54*** (0.02)	0.57*** (0.02)
Trade	0.50*** (0.02)	0.47*** (0.02)	0.49*** (0.02)
Information	2.68*** (0.03)	2.65*** (0.03)	2.68*** (0.03)
Finance	1.47*** (0.03)	1.44*** (0.03)	1.47*** (0.03)
Real estade	1.52*** (0.04)	1.47*** (0.04)	1.52*** (0.04)
Science	1.52*** (0.02)	1.49*** (0.02)	1.52*** (0.02)
Public Admin.	2.07*** (0.02)	2.04*** (0.02)	2.07*** (0.02)
Other	1.12*** (0.02)	1.09*** (0.02)	1.12*** (0.02)
N	409884	409884	409884
AIC	758022.50	757329.64	757170.46
Var Intercept C	0.09562	0.19732	0.18511
Var Intercept R	0.03825	0.03969	0.11041
Var slope gender C		0.04025	0.03940
Var slope gender R			0.02245
LRT		696.86***	163.18***

Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

The cross-regional analysis does not frame thriving CLEAR regions as the main areas posing greater risks for overqualification for young migrants or young women compared

to declining regions. If we consider the top eight regions with the highest risk of vertical mismatch, it is visible that three regions (Pohjois-ja-Itä-Suomi, Valencia and Dytiki Ellada) out of eight are declining regions in case of young migrants and in the case of young women, even half of the regions with the highest risk are declining regions (Pohjois-ja-Itä-Suomi, North-Central, Dytiki Ellada and Norte). For young women, this indicates an overall structural risk for vertical mismatches that exists cross-regionally.

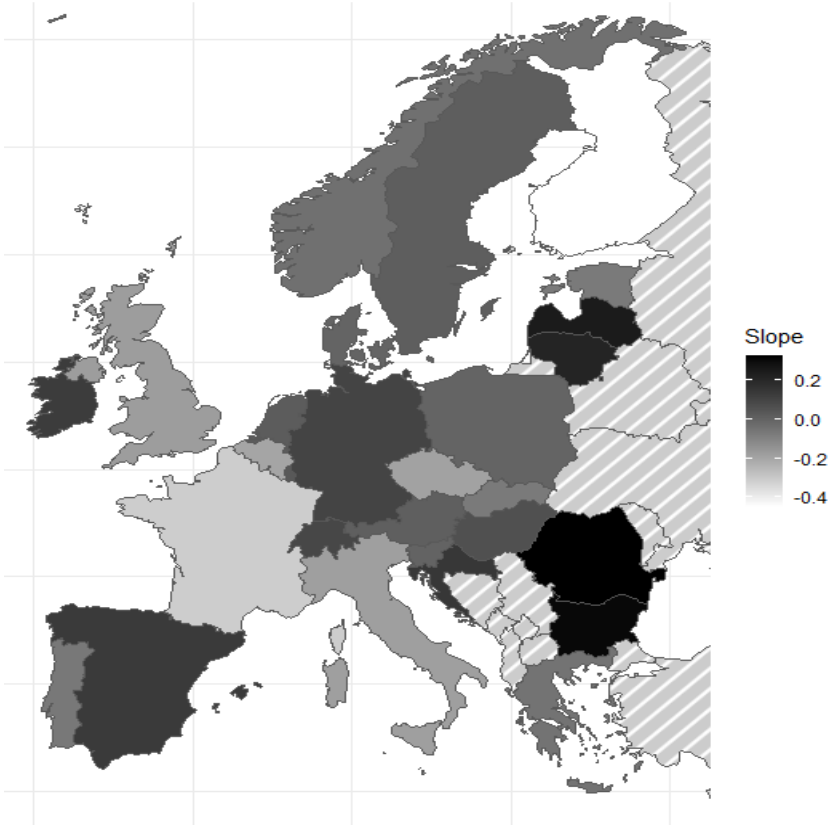
Table 6.5 Country and regional differences in the effect of gender on job skill (Log Odds & Odds Ratios)

Country	Log odds	odds	Regions (NUTS2)	Log odds	odds	Inter-regional disparities per country
Austria	0,02	0,20	Vienna	-	-	-
			Upper Austria	-	-	
Bulgaria	0,31	-0,07	North Central	-0,04	0,24	0,01
			South Central	-0,02	0,23	
Finland	-0,45	0,50	Etelä-Suomi	-0,04	0,24	0,01
			Pohjois-ja-Itä-Suomi	-0,02	0,23	
Germany	0,10	0,13	Hamburg	-0,07	0,27	0,14
			Saxony-Anhalt	0,10	0,13	
Greece	-0,05	0,25	Kentriki Makedonia	0,09	0,14	0,12
			Dytiki Ellada	-0,06	0,26	
Italy	-0,18	0,34	Liguria	0,01	0,21	0,07
			Marche	-0,09	0,28	
Portugal	-0,06	0,26	Norte	-0,25	0,39	0,23
			Area Metrop. Lisboa	0,07	0,16	
Spain	0,14	0,10	Catalonia	-0,01	0,22	0,11
			Valencia	0,12	0,11	

Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

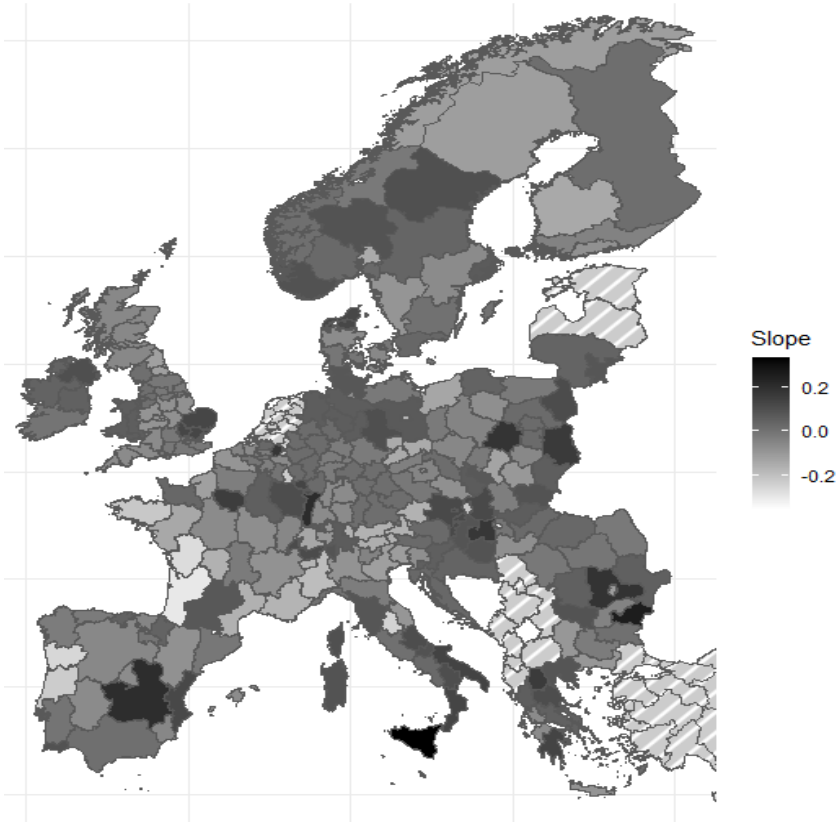
For young migrants, these results present a slightly greater disadvantage in urban centres rather than in rural areas. This cross-regional comparison without consideration of the national level, exhibits a much more nuanced view (see Cefalo et al., 2024; Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021) on the impact declining and thriving regions comparatively have on the risks of overqualification for both groups. This means that overqualification is not merely explained by national structures alone. Rather, national analyses often mask important sub-national variations, especially when it comes to groups in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations. The 33 % inter-regional gap in Portugal or the one of 39 % in Greece powerfully illustrates how aggregated data on a national level (which shows Portugal and Greece performing closer to the CLEAR countries average range) hides larger regional disparities. Further, the cross-regional results point to socio-demographic factors that go beyond spatial opportunity structures.

Figure 6.3 Slope country female log odds



Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

Figure 6.4 Slope region female log odds



Source: Own calculations based on EU Labour Force Survey (2019)

6.4 Perceptions of regional labour market opportunities and choices

How do spatial settings affect the perceived labour market opportunities and choices of young adults with migration experiences and young female adults? In raising this second research question we strive to illustrate how young adults in vulnerable positions perceive the spaces where they live and the opportunity structures, they offer them. Including such narratives considering spatial justice and education-to-work transitions uncovers young adults' awareness of spatial structures as well as their agency to respond to spatial challenges. While the overall analysis of the interviews revealed that young adults are mostly aware of the opportunities available to them and how to access them, a cross-regional qualitative analysis within the CLEAR countries indicates that young people in declining regions are more vigilant about the limiting regional constraints than their counterparts in thriving regions.

To demonstrate how these narratives complement the statistical results, we adopt the concept of regional opportunity structures as defined by Bernhard et al. (2022). This enables us to structure young adults' narratives about regional opportunity structures according to four dimensions: labour market, public/private services, community/civic engagement, and the natural environment (see also section 7.2). However, as the CLEAR data emphasises the first three dimensions, namely labour market structures, public services, and community life, our analysis focuses on how these three opportunity structures shape the spatial awareness of young adults residing in both economically declining regions (Liguria, Dytiki Ellada, Saxony-Anhalt, North-Central, Pohjois-ja-Itä-Suomi, Valencia, and Norte) and thriving regions (Marche, Kentriki Makedonia, Hamburg, South-Central, Etelä-Suomi, Catalonia, and Lisbon). Throughout, we weave in perceptions of intersectionality to further explain the cross-regional risks of overqualification faced by young migrants and women (Deliverable D5.3 International Qualitative Analysis Report, p. 78).

Awareness for regional labour market structures

Considering the precariousness that young adults reported, especially concerning financial challenges, the need for a well-structured labour market matching their educational qualifications was vital to ensure financial stability for themselves and their families. In declining regions though, young adults experienced fewer and less frequent job vacancies compared to their counterparts residing in thriving regions. Additionally, the available regional educational opportunities do not necessarily correspond with the available job opportunities in that same region. This also applies to overall well-situated Finland, where young adults in remote regions, such as Pohjois-ja-Itä-Suomi, struggled with limited work opportunities despite the good educational availabilities. This means that young adults experience a need to adjust their career aspirations or start a new and different educational programme to match the available job opportunities. Young adults with higher educational qualifications (tertiary education) were found to be in an even

more disadvantaged position when searching for job vacancies that matched their highest educational degree in those regions. This is primarily due to the sector specific focus of regional labour markets in rural areas. Construction, lower-paying jobs in services and the industry are more prevalent in these spaces and offer fewer graduate positions. In thriving regions, such as in Etelä-Suomi and Hamburg, young interviewees valued the variety of labour market opportunities, including graduate jobs; however, sometimes a high level of competition for these jobs posed a challenge.

The cross-regional statistical analysis shows that migrants are at higher risk of being overqualified than women. This difference can be explained by inadequate spatial knowledge, which makes it difficult to navigate and recognise opportunities due to immigration. Acquiring the necessary knowledge on spatial labour market structures, that non-migrants learn throughout their lives, takes time and requires high levels of language skills. Accordingly, in some interviews, the need to acquire better language skills was presented as more urgent than the overview of labour market opportunities, since insufficient language skills contributed to limited work options (involving precarious work environments). The cross-national qualitative analysis observed this gap in knowledge specifically among those young migrants residing in Germany. Although, Spain (55 %), Austria (61 %) and Italy (66 %) show a statistically greater risk of vertical mismatch for migrants than Germany (50 %), the interviews conducted in Germany indicate significant shortcomings to provide "a better overview of opportunities for migrants".

Interviewed young women, while observed as ambitious and flexible in adjusting their actions, face gender-specific challenges. The gender divisions that prevail in many labour market sectors in all regions were identified by female interviewees as additional barriers, especially in Austria, Finland, and Italy. In alignment with the statistical analysis revealing a high risk of overqualification in both thriving and declining regions, young women expressed unequal access to the construction and industry sectors (often in declining regions) and the ICT sector (often in thriving regions), which causes education-to-work mismatches. Their growing interest in 'male dominated' fields ongoingly meets stereotypical expectations reducing their chances of accessing such jobs across regions.

Public transportation and services for better education-to-work transitions

When we consider public services, the greater awareness of spatial structures among young adults in declining regions can be further explained by weaker infrastructure and the lack of social and institutional support services. Issues concerning (im-)mobility are prevalent due to the remote location of many of these regions, pushing young adults to commute long distances for a better suited job. Public transportation posed an overall problem to navigate within or outside the region of residence in search of better labour market options. Trends of emigration to reach better labour market opportunities are particularly evident in Gabrovo in North-Central, Bulgaria, but also young adults in Liguria, Italy, report a desire to move to more prosperous regions. A lack of money and reduced

public transport options contribute to fostering immobility of young adults and can pressure young adults into accepting work opportunities not matching their educational qualifications. In thriving regions such as Barcelona in Catalonia, only a few young adults reported a wish to leave. Since transport infrastructure was rarely presented as problematic in thriving spaces, issues surrounding affordable housing and urban (ethnic) segregation were mentioned contributing to discrimination on the labour market.

Young adults underlined the importance of social services and institutional support systems. These included being well-informed about labour market options, receiving help during decision-making processes, or gaining knowledge about different (and potentially more suitable) prospects in other regions. As in the case of public transportation, such institutional support structures were scarce in declining regions. Considering that some declining regions suffer from a mismatch between educational options and available work opportunities, weak institutional infrastructure prevents awareness of available knowledge on spatial structures—early on. Sometimes, young adults in declining regions, such as in Norte, Portugal, consider their own shortcomings as the main reasons for their limited opportunities rather than spatial constraints. They were taught through social and institutional settings to focus on "own efforts and hard work". Such institutional narratives (e.g., meritocracy) were evident cross-regionally in Germany, Austria and Finland. The thriving region of Etelä-Suomi is a good example to stress that an abundance of support systems does not necessarily manage to ease education-to-work transitions nor prevent young adults with mental health issues from blaming themselves for unsuccessful entries into the labour market. Such overcomplexity of available social services fails to make the needed support accessible. Young migrants, especially in Germany and Austria, added that the immense bureaucratic barriers to recognise previous qualifications or work experiences largely impacted their entry into the labour market and into a job matching their previous educational pathways. Young mothers in particular find themselves in disadvantaged situations, since they often report a lack of necessary institutional and social support in managing both childcare work and paid work. This limited support increases the risk of working in "low-paying jobs within the secondary labour market" (this risk increases with early pregnancy cases). Therefore, (young) mothers especially cannot fully appreciate spatial opportunities.

Social ties and feelings of regional belonging

The interviews further revealed the importance of feelings of belonging and regional attachment. Ambitions to stay in a region and engage with the given spatial opportunities depended largely on personal support. While some young adults indicated their plan to migrate to another region, others expressed the desire to remain where they lived, such as in Dytiki Ellada (Greece) and Valencia (Spain). In these cases, interviewees expressed a sense of belonging to their place of residence because they wanted to live near their families as they positively impacted their life trajectories. This demonstrates how, when

social ties are strong, young adults see beyond restrictions on their opportunities. The research team in Greece coined this the "people effect". Young adults in declining regions sometimes voiced their desire to live in larger cities as they appreciated the openness and socio-cultural opportunities available. The perception of less xenophobia, racism, or other forms of discrimination could be a strong factor influencing migration into thriving regions, even though the risk of overqualification may be equally high or higher there than in declining regions (see statistical results).

However, social networks can also reduce the chances of accessing labour market opportunities that adequately match one's skills and experience. Most young migrants reported discrimination and racism. Such exclusionary structures occurred in educational settings, on the labour market and in search of housing. Moreover, the intersection of gender, socioeconomic factors as well as migration and belonging to an ethnic minority worsens the successful integration into the labour market for women. For instance, Roma women in Greece and Bulgaria pointed to strict patriarchal structures that limit their job opportunities not merely due to the rural regions, in which they often live, but also due to limited gender roles that prevent independence and autonomy. In some cases, interviewees explained that their religious affiliation with Islam combined with their female gender identification exacerbates experiences of discrimination. This means that even when young women are aware of opportunities and strive towards them, institutional and structural gaps in support decrease their chances of finding a stable job and one matching their skills.

6.5 Conclusion

The statistical analysis of cross-national and -regional variation of vertical mismatch risks among young migrants and women in the eight CLEAR countries, complemented by qualitative narrative interviews, reveal complex dynamics and point to some paradoxes. Spatial settings impact perceptions of labour market opportunities and choices on how to respond to regional challenges. The young adults' narratives reveal broad awareness of regionally specific spatial constraints, albeit more strongly in declining regions. Statistically though, thriving regions at least equally affect accessing opportunities. A cross-regional analysis of spatial variations did not only match the narratives of young adults well; it further allows a nuanced insight into regional disparities that would otherwise be overlooked on a national level. Additionally, a dialectic between structural opportunities and young adults' agency to cope with them is consequently evident.

Based on the theoretical background, our analysis highlights a systemic misalignment between young adults' LOs in terms of skills and local labour markets, intensified by regional, gender, and migration-related inequalities. Addressing these issues requires integrated policy approaches and inclusion efforts. Both migrants and women face structural and cultural barriers that hinder successful education-to-employment transitions and reinforce vertical skill mismatches. The root causes are often systemic,

including labour market rigidity, sector-specific development, available regional opportunity structures and social norms.

These factors create vicious cycles of injustices: poor services and infrastructure limits access to adequate job opportunities. This leads, among other factors, to vertical skills mismatches, especially for young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations, and further reduces their mobility and labour market prospects. Thriving regions manifest different inequalities, e.g., through competitive labour markets, urban segregation and costly housing. Regionally tailored policies therefore need to be aware of the complex shortcomings in declining regions without framing them as the only areas of imbalances in opportunity structures. Rather, the establishment of policies that additionally tackle the unequal access to opportunities in economically prosperous regions are vital. Declining regions should invest in infrastructures and services, thriving regions should ensure inclusion. To put it in a nutshell, spatial policies must target region-specific shortcomings that reach further than merely regional economic growth: the interplay of spatial structures with intersectional structures largely contributes to injustices.

6.6 Limitations

There are several methodological limitations. Firstly, the NUTS2 regions in the eight CLEAR countries vary greatly in size, which makes interpreting the results between countries and across thriving and declining regions significantly challenging.

About statistical modelling: No explanatory factors were examined at the country and regional levels that could account for the observable influences of countries and regions. All factors below the regional level such as municipalities, communities, districts, neighbourhoods, and families remain invisible. Furthermore, the effects identified here cannot easily be interpreted as causal.

The qualitative analysis includes an imbalanced sample of interviewees with different vulnerabilities, such as migrants, marginalised ethnic groups, and native-born young adults from low-income families, with learning disabilities or mental health issues. These different vulnerabilities give rise to a variety of possible interpretations of young adults' overall perceptions of their opportunities. These interpretations should be treated with caution, given the limited data. While the different groups of young adults show some similarities (spatial living conditions, life course trajectories and intersectional factors), there were hardly enough interviews conducted within each group to allow for structural comparative analyses.

KEY MESSAGES

Resulting from our analyses, we can derive three key messages:

National analyses show the greater impact of the country level on risks of overqualification, but it often masks important sub-national variations, especially when it comes to young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations.

Declining regions seem to suffer from scarcity of job and infrastructure opportunities; thriving regions fail at inclusion. Thriving regions often amplify disadvantages for groups in vulnerable situations due to competitive housing and job markets.

Young adults recognise spatial structures beyond their own places of residence, but the complexity in regional disparities clarifies that they can hardly be informed about all spatial opportunity structures. Intersectional, individual and institutional structures often exacerbate their well-being and shape life trajectories lastingly. Young adults still actively engage with these challenges by seeking ways to be mobile, searching for support and information, and adjusting plans to existing opportunities.

7. A Southern European Portrait of Learning Outcomes

Xavier Rambla, Federico Rossi & Konstantinos Pagkratis

7.1 Introduction

The contribution of education and training to learning is increasingly controversial. While psychologists have identified the crucial cognitive processes, nowadays burning debates about the "learning crisis" and "lifelong learning" have added further layers of complexity to the issue. Learning outcomes (LOs) have become a polysemic expression to which very different connotations are associated.

Previous chapters of this report argue that a deep investigation of LOs requires careful analyses of the life course of learners, intersectional inequalities and spatial justice. In this chapter, we will explore how, in three Mediterranean regions of the European Union, educators, employment officers and young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations construe shared meanings, navigate institutional contexts and eventually shape common understandings of learning in everyday life. We will examine the portrait that emerges from interactions between eighteen-to-thirty-year-olds who are coping with their transition from education to employment, and educators and employment services officers who either deliver or manage training courses and career guidance programmes. This analysis will frame LOs within the individual agency of the youth, the opinion of professionals, the weight of intersectional inequalities and the social construction of space.

The chapter especially addresses issues at the individual, spatial and relational levels, mobilising in particular *Life Course Research* and *Spatial Justice* approaches. It examines the interface between policymaking and the social construction of vulnerability in a particular type of regions. With reference to the aforementioned contexts and with the framework that will be described later on, the following research questions are considered:

- How do young people construct their own life courses within their opportunity structures, life histories, educational spaces and social circumstances?
- How do spatial settings affect the choices, opportunity structures, and logics of action of young people?
- How are transition opportunities in the education and labour market shaped depending on spatial contexts and regulations (countries/regions)?

The initial section frames the issue within the socio-economic structures of the three selected regions and highlights the benefits of comparing them. A further section lays out a theoretical framework that examines the views on learning that circulate policy discourses and the public opinion. Then, three specific sections analyse the perspectives of young people and professionals in the regions. The final discussion pools the findings of the three sections dedicated to each region, particularly regarding sources of dissonance between the perspectives of educators and youths.

7.2 The selection of regions: Kentriki Makedonia, Marche and Comunitat Valenciana

Out of the eighteen research sites of the CLEAR project, the chapter draws on *Kentriki Makedonia* in Greece, *Marche* in Italy and *Comunitat Valenciana* in Spain to explore the construction of LOs in peripheral regions. In general, the selected sites share several economic, social and institutional conditions commonly observed in the peripheral regions of Southern Europe.

Firstly, the European Commission (n.d.) Regional Innovation Scoreboard classifies *Kentriki Makedona, Marche* and *Comunitat Valenciana* as 'moderate innovators', that is, neither of the three regions has achieved the higher levels of education, employment and innovation of the regions classified as 'innovation leaders' or 'strong' innovators. Since the 1970s, economic geographers have observed improvements in real incomes and labour force participation in global cities and technological hubs. However, disparity between these prosperous regions and many de-industrialized areas and mid-sized cities has worsened (Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2019; Pagliacci et al., 2019) and many inhabitants of declining regions have developed a feeling of marginalisation (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Thus, the selected regions, which present similar characteristics in this sense, facilitate a close comparison of the shaping of LOs amid social relationships between learners and educators in peripheralizing places and outside the global cities in which specialists have investigated the experience of young people so far (Cuzzocrea, 2018).

Secondly, in most of Italy, Greece and Spain, the population lacks the same skill levels found in the more prosperous regions of the European Union. The lower educational brackets are larger, while the higher brackets are smaller compared to the average. A smaller portion of the labour force is employed in knowledge-intensive sectors. Additionally, per capita income and employment rates are below average, while exclusion rates from the labour market and education are higher (Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report). According to the approach of the whole report and the underlying research project, the chapter will focus on the experience of young people who are exposed to several circumstances of social vulnerability.

Finally, Greece, Italy and Spain are overhauling their institutional approach to skills development. The *European Education Area* (European Commission, 2020) and the *Skills Agenda* (European Commission, 2021) have recently endorsed collaboration between education systems, public employment services and employments to deploy career guidance, Vocational Education and Training (VET) internships and validation of prior learning schemes, which establish official definitions and equivalences between LOs. Although coordination between the stakeholders is incipient, the three countries are experimenting with this policy design both at the national and the regional level.

7.3 The characters of the portrait: professionals and young learners

The chapter analyses the interaction between education and employment officers and VET students through a sociological lens. While the professionals must interpret a great deal of course descriptions and career counselling instructions to do their job, the students are expected to learn foundational and technical skills. The action of the former eventually depends on the reaction of the latter, which at the same time is conditioned by the availability of programmes and services in their locality. The strands of literature on the welfare services' state (Bonvin et al., 2018) and the roots of young people (Cuzzocrea, 2018) have been instrumental in conducting this analysis of two different social actors who influence each other so directly.

The analysis applies the concepts of life course, intersectional inequalities and spatial justice at the individual level of the experience of the youth. It also examines the institutional level of life courses by presenting the perspectives of the street-level practitioners who eventually address the needs of young learners.

This analysis looks at the implementation of LOs in socio-economically weak regions, in the context of the above-mentioned territorial disparities. It is interesting to explore to what extent educational policies manage to foster learning and simultaneously to address the needs of young people in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations who have been or are at risk of social exclusion in the selected regions.

While the initial activities of the welfare state consisted of distributing benefits to (economically) disadvantaged groups, it has progressively intermingled with educational projects of delivering personalised services in a wide range of fields including education and employability. Previous research has demonstrated the inevitable contradictions of socio-educational services in which the rules are not so uniform as in distributive policies (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016). Schools, diverse VET providers and employment services require specialised work to improve the skills of learners amid inevitable uncertainties emerging from variable take-up rates of the programmes, uneven acknowledgement of the needs of learners, ambiguous metrics of assessment and constant pressure to meet certain benchmarks (Bonvin et al., 2018).

In Europe, research on career guidance has explored the interface between educational and employability services, or rather, between regulated education and training programmes and heterogeneous active labour market policies that are targeted to jobseekers in very different and uneven local areas of economic activity. The resulting evidence indicates that these services generally adopt undifferentiated approaches to the needs of an extremely diverse population, despite this happening differently across territories (Sultana, 2011; Alexander, 2019). These studies argue that such an approach induces learners to comply with one-size-fits-all social norms (Rinne et al, 2019), and to internalise an ethos of continuous resilience that detaches their experiences from the feeling of sharing a collective problem with other people (Zelinka et al., 2022). Often, a

consequence of this perspective is that social problems are spuriously reduced to education problems that can only be solved by changing the preferences and the practices of the people enrolled in education and training programmes (Valiente et al., 2020).

Recent initiatives of education policy and skills development come to confirm the previous findings that an undifferentiated approach is the common pattern throughout the continent. Several leading catchwords convey the idea that young people must enrol in training programmes to find their own way through the uncertainties generated by the 2008 Great Recession, the COVID19 pandemic and the ever-present challenges of technological innovation. Rather than applying knowledge in specific jobs and organisations, 'skills' are interpreted as an individual property that learners must accumulate. In accordance, the common understanding is that LOs are individual assets, such as academic credentials and professional qualifications, which can be accumulated by enrolling in schools and participating in various upskilling and reskilling initiatives, including training programs, micro-credentials, and learning accounts (European Commission, 2021; 2023).

However, previous research on the experiences of young learners does not indicate that they aspire to climb a hierarchical ladder. Although many of them feel personally responsible for their transition from childhood to adult life, young people frame their prospective learning within an active exploration of their sense of belonging to the places where they live, study and find their first jobs (Antonsich, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Farrugia, 2020). For them, it is crucial to determine whether their life projects align with the prevailing image of various places, be it cities, de-industrialised regions, or remote rural areas (Cuzzocrea, 2018; Kettunen, 2023).

The analysis looks at the interface between professionals' view of LOs and the life experiences of young people. Instead of comparing the national policies of Southern countries, the chapter considers the three regions as entry points for a broader discussion of education and young people's experiences. The refusal of methodological nationalism, backed by the overall CLEAR project approach, is thus tied to the need to observe the relationships between professionals and young people in specific places, rather than searching for their interpretation of national lifelong learning policies and institutional arrangements of youth transitions. It is well-known that national approaches rely on assumptions about youth citizenship which young people themselves do not share (Walther, 2017).

On these grounds, the following sections will analyse evidence collected in the three regions to investigate how professionals and young people perceive LOs in regions with limited opportunities. Table 7.1 shows the distribution of the nine male and ten female professionals that CLEAR interviewed in the three regions. Table 7.2 maps out the main socio-demographic characteristics of the young interviewees in the regions.

Table 7.1 Characteristics of interviewed professionals

Characteristics/Region	Kentriki Makedonia (Greece)	Marche (Italy)	Comunitat Valenciana (Spain)	Total
Male	2	3	4	**9**
Female	4	5	2	**11**
Total	**6**	**8**	**6**	**20**
Sectors	Hospitality, health care, IT	Hospitality, health care, IT	Hospitality, IT	N/A

Source: Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report

Table 7.2 Characteristics of interviewed young people

Characteristics/Region	Kentriki Makedonia (Greece)	Marche (Italy)	Comunitat Valenciana (Spain)	Total
Male	4	5	7	16
Female	5	5	3	13
Non-binary	1	0	0	1
Average age (years)	24	20	24	23
Resident in peri-rural or rural area	6	8	5	19
Resident in urban area	4	2	5	11
Immigrant background or other minority status	5	8	3	16
Total	**10**	**10**	**10**	**30**
Main factors of vulnerability	Poverty, Unemployment, Social discrimination	Low socio-economic background, migration- and family-related issues	Poor working conditions and precariat	N/A

Source: Deliverable D5.2 National Qualitative Report

Kentriki Makedonia (Greece)

Kentriki Makedonia is a Northern region of Greece with a significant geographical diversity. Besides the second largest city in the country, Thessaloniki, it encompasses rural areas and important tourist resorts.

In the region, the interviewed professionals elaborated on the regional economy in terms of labour shortages and poor coordination. These challenges are further intensified by a consistent lack of investment in education and skills development by many employers. The interviewed professionals stressed the importance of engaging organisations that genuinely prioritize workforce training and long-term capacity building. They looked for employers who were committed to developing their staff—not only for individual career growth but also for strengthening organisational resilience. They recognise the importance of executives and managers taking responsibility for their own professional development. By actively identifying and addressing skills gaps within their teams, they

expected that this target group played a crucial role in fostering innovation, adaptability, and competitiveness in an evolving labour market.

> *Although the number of employers mentioning shortages diminishes in the main opinion polls, about 66 % still consider that filling some positions is difficult. (WP4_EL_K_T_LM_1)*

> *However, in Kentriki Makedonia we lack an integrated system to manage human resources in the tourism sector. We cannot articulate the action of all the competent bodies without this framework (WP4_EL_K_T_E_2)*

In the region, the public employment service (DYPA) catered to the economically disadvantaged by means of subsidised courses that enrolled many women with a migration status.

> *Many students who are at risk of poverty enter the school because it is free of charge and is also subsidized. The money is little but they need it and also need the job prospect. (WP4_EL_K_T_E_2)*

> *There is no exclusion policy for that matter. If they belong to minorities or if they are migrants, it is irrelevant really. As long as they speak the Greek language and fulfil the legal requirements, they are welcome. Most beneficiaries are women. (WP4_EL_K_T_LM_1)*

Young interviewees complained of school pedagogies and expressed a preference for light VET programmes both in the urban and the rural areas of the region. Below, the complaint of a student about academic courses also indicates that he received poor career guidance. Interviewees consistently pointed to inadequate career guidance as a major barrier in navigating educational and employment pathways.

> *I don't like theoretical lessons. It was soooo boring for me. All the history and schools of thought and all of that... my preferred course was chemistry but I also liked music because I had a little background... I think that the most influential course for me was probably music. I also liked the teacher [...] I never really cared about the grades. All I wanted was to pass the courses. With the minimum effort. Male student from an urban area in Kentriki Makedonia (WP5_EL_K_T_5)*

Many young people deliberated and made decisions on the grounds of sketchy information about the available pathways. In some cases, young people realised that their educational and career decisions were based on incomplete or superficial information about the available pathways. This lack of reliable, accessible guidance contributed to misaligned expectations or underutilization of skills, and, in some cases dropouts, unemployment or job dissatisfaction.

> *I am now thinking going to IEK [post-secondary vocational training institute], where I also received my hairdressing national diploma to continue studying. I want to be either a beauty expert or nail expert. But again, I am a bit reluctant of going back to study. [...] I don't want a heavy programme now with reading and studying and exams.... I need a job more than studies. [...] For my future plans... ermm... I don't*

know. It is all a matter of making a decision. The more I think about it though the more I tend to lean on going to IEK and study beautician and nail-expert Female interviewee from a rural area in Kentriki Makedonia (WP5_EL_K_T_7)

The young learners that were interviewed in this region did not bother much about the match of education and employment. Their main concerns had to do with the labour market and quality of life in the region.

Many prioritised finding a job because they needed an income in the short term as well as because they were sceptical about the need of education to secure employment. In cities they observed that the agri-food industry offered some opportunities.

I believe it is small but has a lot of potential. I don't know what all the young people really need in life but I know many young people who live and work here, in the rice industry, fishing industry as well [mussels culture] and people also have resources here. I see that young people whose parents work in the rice industry have more money than others. Perhaps they also have more opportunities. (WP5_EL_K_T_8)

In rural areas, agriculture was the key activity, and therefore inheriting a farm seemed to be the main issue. As a result, young people growing up in these communities often faced limited exposure to alternative career pathways, with their professional future predetermined by family circumstances rather than personal aspirations or market opportunities.

Most of the time it is the family that sets your life course. I also wonder sometimes what I would do if I didn't have the farm. I can't answer this question. Perhaps work as an employee somewhere, part-time maybe... is this better? No, I don't think so. This is why I am still optimistic about the future, or at least I will struggle for a better future here... There is not real support from the education system or similar services. I mean... they do provide you with a lot of information, but this information is useless if you don't own land here and don't know how to make a living out of it. (WP5_EL_K_T_1)

A group of respondents had suffered from many disadvantages deriving from migration and exclusion from education and employment for some time. However, they thought that the region offered opportunities and a comfortable life.

Greeks have more opportunities obviously. But I will too once I receive the citizenship. I would like to live in Peraia or Kalamaria. It is quiet and less noisy but more expensive. I think in these areas it would be better. To live. For jobs... I don't think so. (WP5_EL_K_T_10)

If some of us succeed and escape from the current situation that... happens, study and succeed and find a job, we will be able to straighten up and society may see us in a different light. We are just like everyone else. (WP5_EL_K_T_9)

Marche (Italy)

Marche is a Region located in Central Italy, characterised by two main medium-sized cities—Pesaro and Ancona—located on the more urbanised coast and many rural and

peripheral areas in the inner part. Historically, apart from the touristic sector, its economy has been trained by small manufactures and family-run firms, which have been seriously hit by the 2008 economic crisis and the 2020 pandemic, leading to intense de-industrialisation. Despite having seemingly better socio-economic performances with relatively low rate of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET), young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) and youth unemployment compared to the national average, the region is rapidly declining, larger shares of the younger cohorts are moving out and immigration has significantly slowed down.

In the opinion of VET professionals, poor coordination between their programmes, lower and upper secondary education and the local labour market is a big issue in the region. These mismatches occur at various levels: on the one hand, professionals complain about other actors—especially, lower secondary teachers and parents—portraying VET as second-class pathways; on the other hand, they often argue against traditional public schools' teachings for not providing the right skills for a smooth transition of young people into the labour market.

> *The biggest gap is in job coaching. There is a lack of soft skills, young people are not prepared for the world of work, they are not prepared for managing the stress, which in the tourism sector is very high. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_2)*
>
> *I am very much against the advice that is given at the end of lower secondary school because I think it is limiting, but I say it as a testimony, [Vocational school] is usually recommended to young people who don't particularly enjoy studying, who are seen as more practical. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_1)*

The mistrust between actors dealing with VET and formal education ones is further reiterated in the idea of the former that credentials and qualifications are somewhat overrated for fostering the employability of a person and that soft skills, specific technical competences and familiarisation with the labour market are the elements that are actually needed.

> *The ITS [Higher Technical School] is an important answer, because it gives to a person the possibility to say 'Ok, I'm training, I quit the idea that only a degree can get me a good paid job', which is often the exact opposite! (WP4_IT_M_P_E_3)*
>
> *We find ourselves with the need to include educators within social and health structures—protected residences as retirement homes or centres for Alzheimer treatment—without having persons adequately trained because they have no teaching programmes about elderly care or even in health or social work areas. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_2)*

Such a situation is also linked to unfulfilled demands of economic actors with professionals often reporting complaints of employers about how young people enter the labour market, highlighting how the lack of certain skills connects to the social esteem assigned to occupations that are frequently very precarious.

> *A month ago, we had a meeting with entrepreneurs who said that young people are often on their cell phones and arrive late. In fact, there is a confrontation, young people are asking for one thing, so for example work is no longer a priority compared to other things. We must also say that this is against a salary that is no longer enough to do anything. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_3)*

Soft skills are becoming a burning issue, not least because some professionals blur them with almost self-exploitative work ethics. They keep comparing young people with allegedly hard-working older generations. Yet, professionals also seem at least partially aware of the problematic aspects of this perspective and end up finding themselves in a middling position between young people's expectations and labour market demands.

> *One thing is being a factory worker, another is assisting a person. Old-school workers, before saying that they were not going to work because something has happened, would have tried to find a thousand possibilities and maybe they would have come to work anyway, even with fever—and I'm not saying that this is necessarily right. Well, these things are not happening anymore. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_2)*

> *On the one hand, it is true that there aren't any more those soft skills we used to have [...] On the other hand, I must say that young people are not completely wrong. In the end, they are asking for something that could be right because they are asking for flexibility and maybe to work from 8am to 4pm instead of fragmenting working hours and dedicating your life to work. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_5)*

Indeed, expectations of young interviewees in Pesaro-Urbino convey a different view. Their short- and long-term plans are the outcomes of complex mediation between their parents' expectation of social mobility and their own willingness to be independent. In the short term, some accept jobs but face difficulties in finding a balance between work and future education paths. In the longer term, they note that education—and particularly, higher education—may contribute to their personal fulfilment but not so much to their employment.

> *I'm working in a factory in the afternoon because I don't want to ask moneys to my mom or dad and saying them that I need this and that. I want to be independent, but the factory is not a work so [good], you know; thus, from that point view, I understand why they want me to go on. [...] Thus, [they tell me to go to university] to have a lighter job, an easier one, a more normal job, different from that in the factory. (WP5_IT_M_P_1)*

> *Interviewer: Do you think this [job] is affecting your studies?*

> *Interviewee: Yes, because it takes a lot of time. I'm working Saturday and Sunday, I work 12 or even 14 hours and do two working nights. You cannot study, it's normal that [your results] are low in school. (WP5_IT_M_P_5)*

The tension inherent to a local labour market offering relatively easy-to-find but highly precarious jobs leads them to consider moving. Some young people, despite being seemingly attached to their places, think of living in either large cities or abroad for some

time, where they perceive to have more opportunities to build a future matching their expectations in terms of jobs but also personal growth.

> *I wanted to stay in my hometown. Then, I actually though well about it I said to myself: 'Maybe it's better to go away', even to have more opportunities because here everyone already knows everyone.' (WP5_IT_M_P_6)*
>
> *Here, I see many shops opening and closing. It's a bit daunting to see all these places that are closing or even see some shops that I know since I was a child to fail and close. It gives you less hope: what if I'd like to do the same? It's daunting. I'd like to live abroad, to travel across the world. I don't want to remain here, I want to go everywhere because I like to discover, explore, be free and know cultures and countries. I'd like to learn everything about everything. (WP5_IT_M_P_4)*
>
> *Concretely speaking, maybe in 10 years things will be completely different, but at the moment you cannot have too many ambitions here. You are limited by the place you are living in, since possibilities are inferior compared to a big city like Milan, Rome, Paris or London. (WP5_IT_M_P_2)*

Notwithstanding, young interviewees share a general sense of optimism about the future and the realisation of their aspirations, which are often expressed in terms of having a 'good job', vaguely defined as one that is decently paid, relatively stable and personally engaging, albeit not necessarily providing self-identification. In this sense, the main issue seems to be the conciliation between times of work and leisure, and the possibility to be independent and autonomous persons, which somewhat provide the other face of the coin to aforementioned professionals' claims.

> *I hope to have a job that allows me to be personally satisfied, that I like and that maybe allows me to travel, to do new experiences, do things that I'd like to do. (WP5_IT_M_P_2)*
>
> *Honestly, I tried [to work in a factory] and that's not life, I think. Working 8 hours per day, 5 days a week make no sense to me, especially in the factory. A heavy job for my whole life... I cannot imagine a life like that. [...] I don't know which path to take, I don't even know where to start to understand what I like. I'm still at the beginning, I don't know what to do and I'd like to understand where to start. (WP5_IT_M_P_3)*
>
> *First of all, I have to find a job and try to obtain the driving license as soon as possible. It is an issue of freedom in the end, you become more independent. You take the driving license, you find a job... a job in which you are well paid... even in the factory, any job as long as I'm doing something. And that's it, [I want to] take back my life in my hands. (WP5_IT_M_P_7)*

Comunitat Valenciana (Spain)

Although not so popular among the best-known tourist destinations, Castelló, the Northern province of the *Comunitat Valenciana*, which is located on the Eastern Mediterranean coast of Spain, stages a string of coastal mid-towns with a sizable hospitality sector and a mountainous area specialised in agriculture and cattle-raising.

Although an industrial district of tile manufacturing thrived decades ago, nowadays many factories either have closed or significantly reduced their activity.

The professional interviewees highlighted the persistent effects of previous economic crises and lamented biased strategies of local development.

> *Castelló is suffering from the effects of the pandemic, the crisis and the war. The tile industry is firing many workers because its business model is not working any longer (WP4_ES_V_C_LM_1).*

> *Castelló could become an appealing destination for affluent tourists who paid for better, high-quality services. [...] However, the regional government and most municipalities remain unaware of this potential and don't do much to take advantage of it (WP4_ES_V_C_E_4).*

A prevailing opinion distinguished the longer and officially recognised courses delivered by schools and the shorter courses funded by the employment service. At the time of the interviews, the growing intake of schools included a few students in disadvantaged situations among others with a more comfortable socio-economic background. The staff of the public employment service worked in courses addressed to middle-aged semi-skilled workers and outsourced short-term training for low-skilled workers to local non-profits.

Many professionals complained about the poor design of local VET system. Thus, schoolteachers regretted that the territorial distribution of VET specialties was not sensible and that adolescents had to choose among these options without appropriate career counselling.

> *A major problem is that the range of VET specialties is very narrow in the province. Only a few high schools teach highly demanded specialties in the capital and the nearby towns (WP4_ES_V_C_E_3).*

> *When many adolescents complete their lower secondary education, they don't know anything about VET specialities, and nobody tells them. Our intake comes from all the towns located in the downlands. Although we are a few kilometres away, however, there is not public transport to come (WP4_ES_V_C_E_2).*

The non-profit VET providers enrolled mostly immigrant and low-skilled candidates in short-term training programmes that aimed at accelerating job placements rather than helping students achieve official qualifications.

> *We cannot reach overseas immigrants without a residence permit. We run basic skills programmes since 2000, which were paid by our organisation in the beginning and the ESF+ nowadays. But these immigrants are not allowed to work (WP4_ES_V_C_LM_1).*

> *We can only set up courses that are really demanded. What would the graduates of a training on graffiti painting do here? However, employers prefer VET graduates to our students, who cannot complete a school-based, two-year long VET school programme for several reasons (WP4_ES_V_C_E_1).*

Remarkably, the students of both school-based VET and the vocational training programmes delivered by non-profits coincided to consider Castelló was a nice place to live where opportunities were limited but sufficient. Students in cooking and food service courses in a school were well aware that most local restaurants hired unqualified staff with very low wages. However, they insisted on an untapped potential of the local geography, which might generate better paid jobs.

> *Some restaurants deliver low-quality, cheap food at the expense of the many opportunities of Castelló. The mountains are nice and offer authentic and tasty food. I worked for a local one that tried to do that, but the owner retired and sold it to people who only offer basic meals for a low price (WP5_ES_V_C_1).*
>
> *Castelló is the best place for hospitality in Spain because it has mountains and beaches as well as grilled meat and fried fish. [...] I would love to finish my education and find a job here, but I am open to what life provides (WP5_ES_V_C_7).*
>
> *If you pursue your purpose with passion and work hard you can do well here. [...] You can carry a modest life, as I say, you have a job, come home and get your pay at the end of the month, However, I want to set my own business, because if something is yours, you can be more creative (WP5_ES_V_C_3).*

Some students coped with the dissociation between their aspirations and the local labour market by relying on individual merit. They considered that everybody could find a way of succeeding amid adversity even in peripheral places.

> *There are few opportunities here because at the end of the day we live in small towns and there are more people, commerce, more of this in big cities. However, since COVID, many programmers are working remotely. Some of my friends who graduated at a university are working in this way (WP5_ES_V_C_5).*
>
> *There are enough training centres in the Valencian Community. Some people struggle with their education because learning is hard when neither students nor teachers are motivated (WP5_ES_V_C_4).*

Students in more disadvantaged situations that enrolled in short-term vocational training portrayed a sombre yet still optimistic account of local opportunities.

> *Castelló is a small town and a big village that you can walk in one hour. Several non-profits cater for young people living in vulnerability, and the public employment service also helps. It is a city of opportunities with a good labour market and a thriving economy (WP5_ES_V_C_9).*
>
> *Young people are not interested in higher education here. I don't know why, but many university students come from other regions. There are many training programmes: marketing, room cleaning, forklift operator, administrative tasks, waiter and the like. You can take these short-term trainings and get a job afterwards (WP5_ES_V_C_10).*

7.4 Provisional conclusions: A broken portrait

In *Kentriki Makedonia*, *Marche* and *Comunitat Valenciana*, the views of professionals on LOs are not aligned with young people's exploration of their local context. A cross-cutting examination of these two perspectives sheds light on this dissonance.

Our findings align with the conclusions of life course research (Walther, 2017), which emphasise that the institutional context contributes to shape the opportunities of young people. Teachers and the officers of employment services are primarily interested in the career paths young people pursue after leaving school. Their responses reverberate with the undifferentiated accounts of career guidance as reported by Sultana (2011). In the three countries, they consider that poor career guidance is more decisive than proper educational projects. These are signs of the take-up problems that plague the welfare services state (Bonvin et al., 2018).

Despite the considerable emphasis on basic skills and youth opportunities in the last decade, the interviewed professionals do not discuss to what extent alternative schemes work better or worse. The absence of this theme is another sign of a problem of the welfare services state, namely: ambiguous metrics of assessment (Bonvin et al., 2018).

Apparently, the common dilemmas of the welfare and educational services that are designed to compensate for social inequalities shape the thinking of these professionals. They are responsible for courses and career guidance that are not always delivered to the appropriate target group. We can add that, in the three countries, they are not equipped with the theoretical knowledge that might help them come to grips with these problems.

The point is that teachers and public employment service officers frame learning within official policies that aim at provoking impact at the local level. These impacts hinge on enrolment in certain programmes and job search in a short term, since they must avoid that young people are not in employment, education and training for a significant period. To this purpose, they face dilemmas such as filling courses and satisfying employers' demands although they can neither challenge prejudices against vocational education nor adjust workplaces to the emerging vindication of flexibility. They are delivering a welfare service amid tensions regarding up-take rates, ambiguous metrics of assessment and pressure to achieve certain benchmarks under uncertain conditions that do not necessarily take the experiences of beneficiaries (or students) into full consideration (Bonvin et al., 2018).

However, the discourse of young people introduces subtle implications of this conversation for spatial justice. For most young interviewees, the burning topics are completely different. Rather than technical adjustments, they want to know about the eventual opportunities in regions where they feel comfortable. They are not complaining of uneven territorial development or distribution of education and training. Instead, they are primarily focused on coping with their sense of place and their growing perceptions

of limited opportunities in the region where they are living. If they feel satisfied with the local labour market, education is not indispensable to find the available low-wage and precarious jobs. When they discuss learning in a more general sense, then they must ponder the advantages and disadvantages of moving out of their region. This finding underpins the previous conclusions of the literature on young people's sense of place and belonging in peripheral European regions (Cuzzocrea, 2018).

Therefore, the portrait of LOs in three Southern regions of the European Union is broken because professionals and young leaners are immersed in very different logics. The official image of linear social lifts, upskilling programmes and individual investment in education and training does not correspond with the actual outcomes of interaction between street-level professionals and the alleged beneficiaries of the *Skills Agenda* and the ongoing reforms of education and training. By taking the relevant literature on welfare and youth studies into account, this chapter has unveiled some drivers of this discrepancy. The findings remind of cross-cutting policy implications related to the distribution of resources, the recognition of identities and the relevance of space. An indispensable takeaway of the analysis reverberates with the intellectual underpinnings and the practical recommendations of the whole CLEAR project. When space is conceived as a flat comparison among very heterogeneous places, the professional perspectives of educators and employment officers seldom meet the concerns of young people. If official frameworks allowed for projects of local development that were rooted in the spatial location and the social conditions of people living in diverse places, that dialogue would be much easier. This observation may seem challenging at first sight, but eventually it simply entails balancing the image of competing regions (e.g., in terms of GDP per capita or innovation indexes) with the image of places where people can live a meaningful life (e.g., by prioritising social care, lively communities and sustainable production and consumption).

KEY MESSAGES

Our analyses have resulted in the following key messages:

Street-level educators and employment officers should be allowed to voice the contradictions between the rationale of policies and the experience of young people.

The concerns of young people with the potential of developing their life plans in a place should be considered a valuable input of policymaking. Rather than a personal problem, these concerns address the core of an authentic political debate.

Balanced evaluative designs that consider quantitative and qualitative evidence as well as participatory procedures should bridge the gaps between the perspectives of professionals and young students in very relevant ways. Careful, multi-sided and detailed critiques of current programmes are indispensable tools of policy learning as expected by the commitment of the EU to a better governance framework.

8. The Territorial Dimension of Learning Outcomes: Multi-level Governance Systems and Youth Opportunities in European Countries

Ruggero Cefalo, Yuri Kazepov, Eduardo Barberis, Tero Järvinen, Siyka Kovacheva & Plamen Nanov

8.1 Introduction

Comparative analysis of learning outcomes (LOs) and school-to-work transitions (SWT) seeks to explain how institutional characteristics shape national differences in educational attainment and employment outcomes. Cross-case comparisons often overlook that policies are implemented through multiple scales and territorial levels (for instance, countries, regions, provinces and municipalities), and that countries present internal spatial divides and varying levels of territorial differences in economic, socio-demographic, LOs and labour market performance. Considering subnational variations can lead to two distinct interpretations. On one hand, it may challenge the validity of classifying national systems or regimes, raising questions about their heuristic utility. On the other hand, it could offer a way to enhance these classifications by incorporating spatial differentiation as a key variable of SWT systems. Our argument is explored through a comparison of LOs and SWT systems in four EU countries belonging to distinct welfare regime types: Italy, Austria, Finland, Bulgaria. These countries present significant differences in their general welfare structure, and particularly contrasts in both learning and SWT outcomes, that are usually interpreted as performances of different transition regimes (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2018; Walther, 2022).

The paper follows a diverse cases design (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) to explore the range of variation of the phenomena of interest. We use and expand data on regional opportunity structures in LOs from WP3; data on institutions and multilevel governance of vocational education and training (VET) and active labour market policies (ALMP) from WP4; experts' insight on spatial justice from WP6 (Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/Cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report; Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report; Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report). We investigate the role of multilevel governance structures and spatial disparities in shaping LOs. With respect to the overall CLEAR framework, the chapter adopts a Spatial Justice perspective focusing on the institutional, spatial and relational levels of the analysis. In the chapter, we try to understand how spaces affect LOs and to what extent they are reflected in educational policymaking and multilevel governance. Specifically, we address the following questions:

- How are regional and national inequalities in LOs changing and how can these changes be explained?
- To what extent do LOs differ between and within the case studies? How are education and labour market policies articulated in multilevel governance settings?
- To what extent are differences in the educational opportunities of young people attributable to regional and national contexts?

In following, the chapter proceeds in four steps: *first*, we provide an insight into the current research debates on multi-level governance; *second*, we briefly present our methodological design; *third*, we exhaustively analyse our case studies; *fourth*, we discuss our results in light of the project's key objectives and provide concluding remarks.

8.2 School-to-work transitions and territories: a scarce but growing literature

In the attempt to systematize similarities in national configurations of institutions shaping transitions, comparative research literature identifies different SWT regimes investigating the set of institutions and rules that govern and supervise the passage from school to employment (Pastore, 2018) tracing connections with SWT, life course and LOs. This research strand emphasizes the complementary role of education, employment and active labour market policies (ALMPs), as well as public employment services (PES). In addition, scholars assume a certain coherence between transition regimes and principles behind wider welfare state regimes *à la* Esping-Andersen (1990), and following elaborations on his works (Cerami, 2006; Baumeister & Sala, 2015):

a) Nordic countries are characterised by a universalistic regime, inclusive services and education, including high investments in ALMPs and training directed at unemployed or youth with scarce working experiences (among CLEAR countries: Finland);
b) Continental countries are characterised by an employment-centred regime and the State actively supports vocational training and skills matching, in collaboration with private actors and social partners, through a dense network of ALMPs and PES (among CLEAR countries: Austria);
c) Anglo-Saxon countries are characterised by a liberal regime and the labour market is fluid and flexible, fragmentation and privatisation of relevant shares of ALMPs and PES;
d) South-European countries are characterised by a sub-protective regime and social protection is often underdeveloped and segmented. Public provision of ALMPs and PES is largely ineffective and scarcely funded so that youth depend extensively on family networks (among CLEAR countries: Italy);
e) Post-Socialist countries display hybrid combinations of trajectories in the transition to a market economy (see: Buttler et al., 2023). This wide group does not constitute a regime on its own, as it includes significant internal differentiations (among CLEAR countries: Bulgaria).

Comparative education and social policy analysis tend to underestimate the role of the territorial dimension of social citizenship (Kazepov & Barberis, 2017). However, studies documenting the rescaling of social policies below and above the nation-state and research on persisting spatial inequalities between and within EU territories substantiate the need for investigating the variations in design, implementation and outcomes of social provision below the national level. This is particularly stringent for LOs.

Our starting point is the specific interplay among four analytical elements that allow to elicit the spatial implications of territorialized policy provision. These four elements are: 1) sovereignty; 2) policy design; 3) politics and 4) context. It is in fact the peculiar mix they present in European countries that contributes to explain converging or diverging paths at subnational level. These elements are then specifically analysed with respect to LOs and SWT.

1) *Sovereignty: The state and multilevel governance in Europe*—The first element pertains to the sovereignty that a state has in defining its own policies and the territorial level to which they apply.
2) *Policy design: Instruments and tools for social cohesion*—The second element is *policy design* and refers to policy instruments, mechanisms and tools, through which governments attempt to realize their aims and goals (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). Education and ALMP are key policy sectors in today's societies for shaping SWT.
3) *Politics: Local agency and bottom-linked governance*—The territoriality of local politics is structured by governance processes. In this regard analysis on school to work transition and skill formation singled out the role of public actors (such as schools, employment services, training providers), private companies, social partners and semi-public institutions such as Chambers (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012).
4) *Context: Social needs and opportunities at the local level*—This element relates to the context within which needs are produced and policies are implemented, too often neglected in (comparative) analysis.

The interaction among these elements plays a key role in SWT systems and their impact on LOs and their spatial differentiation.

8.3 Methodology and case study overview

We draw on the typology of youth transitions regimes as a heuristic framework for comparison, to select our cases according to a diverse case study design apt to explore the range of variation of conditions and outcomes (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The main SWT policies considered are VET provision, apprenticeship, ALMPs and PES, implemented in different subnational contexts. A time-sensitive lens emphasizes the main developments in the last two decades affecting the outcome of interest. The case studies' section provides and overall description of the cases, that will be then discussed comparatively using the dimensions we identified in the previous section.

Table 8.1 provides a first overview on key selected indicators of LOs (early leavers from education and training (ELET); young people not in employment, education and training (NEET); employment rate of upper secondary educated youth), dispersion rates at the regional level (NUTS 2), expenditure in PPS and in percentage of GDP related to upper

secondary education, active labour market policies (ALMPs) and public employment services (PES).

Table 8.1 Selected indicators of learning outcomes, ALMP and VET

Indicator/ Country	Austria	Bulgaria	Finland	Italy	EU average
ELET, 18-24 years	8.4	10.3	8.4	11.5	8.1
NEET, 15-29 years	9.1	14.8	9.5	19	10.9
Employment rates, 15-34 years	86.5	78.3	79.6	67	79.9
Regional Dispersion ELET	28.3	33.6	22.2	31	33.6
Regional Dispersion Employment	5	6.1	2.7	17.2	5.4
Regional Dispersion NEET	24.6	28.4	21.4	38.1	26.2
Expenditure in pps per upper sec student	12041	4729	7511	7575	8226
ALMP training expenditure in % GDP	0.48	0.01	0.34	0.12	0.11
PES expenditure in % GDP	0.229	0.038	0.1	0.026	0.139

Source: Eurostat, 2025d+f-l

In terms of LOs, the structures of opportunities for young people in Austria and Finland tend to be more favourable compared to Bulgaria and Italy. Territorial disparities in NEET and employment are more pronounced especially in Italy and also in Bulgaria, while in Finland the dispersion rates are significantly lower than EU averages. Aggregated indicators show the existence of subnational variation in SWT outcomes that interact with complex multilevel governance structures.

In terms of policy effort in education and active labour market policies (training and public employment services), Austria displays a high investment per upper secondary student than Italy and Finland, and especially Bulgaria. The investment of Finland and Austria is higher than the EU average for training in ALMPs, with Italy being close to the European average. Austria stands out for comparatively high investment in employment services and Italy for very low efforts in this direction, Bulgaria performs below EU average in both items.

8.4 Case studies: Austria, Bulgaria, Italy and Finland

Austria

Jurisdictions and policies

The intervention mechanisms of the Austrian state are organised through its "weak" federalist structure (Erk, 2004): the federal government has the legislative and administrative responsibility for crucial policy fields, such as education and training as well as of active policies, that are defined mostly at the central level and implemented through the national network of public employment services. In contrast, other policy fields, such as housing policies, childcare and social assistance are more decentralised.

The nine federal provinces or regions (*Länder*) are in charge of delivering social policies, but they highly depend on financial means granted by the central state, that operates through financial compensation (*Finanzausgleich*) to limit differences in service provision.

The Austrian education system is centralised and standardized. Regulations, examinations and procedures are uniform, and the qualifications attained are recognised throughout the country. This said, the *Länder* participate in financing training and have the opportunity to pursue some specific educational goals that are reflected, for instance, in the varying importance of the different school tracks (Bacher et al., 2017). As for employment policies, the federal level is by constitution responsible for the overall policy development and the coordination of labour market policies. Policy measures are designed at the federal level in a standardised way and delivered by regional and local offices. Financial resources are transferred from the federal level to the Public Employment Service, including budgets for personnel and expenditures. Within the Public Employment Service, the national organisation sets out the goals for the regional branch (NUTS 2) and the regional branch for the local branch (which are normally located at strategic cities/regional centres). On the one hand, earmarked budgets get through executive boards and down to local offices with details on targets (numeric goals in different categories). On the other hand, some federal programmes allow more adaptation to local needs. Finally, beside the mainly centralised ALMP provision, federal states' governments can add layers of localised measures, design and implement interventions and institutionalised subsidising bodies to account for the local context. Primarily, the European Social Fund (ESF) supports these initiatives with additional funding from the federal state.

Austria displays above-average values in expenditure in education and ALMPs, youth employment rates are above the EU average, while unemployment and NEET rates are comparatively low. Education builds several trajectories of potential integration for young people, although early tracking still contributes to the segmentation of educational paths and labour market careers. At the age of 10 pupils are sorted in parallel channels (*early tracking*) that set towards a vocational or pre-academic trajectory. A core element of the Austrian system is the strong vocational orientation. The VET system is constituted by work-based (dual apprenticeship) and school-based tracks (vocational and technical schools—*Berufsbildende Mittlere Schule* BMS and *Berufsbildende Höhere Schule* BHS). BHS graduates are comparable to higher education graduates regarding employment and unemployment, as both have employment rates above 80 % and unemployment rates below 4 %.

Dual vocational training accommodates a relevant share of secondary school graduates, combining part time vocational schooling and structured learning on the job. School-based VET tracks have higher prestige and links with the most innovative sectors of the economy (i.e., engineering and business), but a lower participation of the social partners.

The dual system is less prestigious but sees a stronger involvement of private companies providing training of the social partners (Lassnigg, 2011). Apprentices are mostly employed in small and traditional firms, but open positions are declining and difficult to access for certain subgroups of youth, i.e., low-skilled often with migration background. In response to the crisis of apprenticeship, the Austrian government supports small and medium enterprises offering training through several subsidies.

The main actor in active labour market policy is the *Public Employment Services* AMS, which is responsible for all unemployed and workers in need. Jobseekers register with AMS for unemployment benefits, and at the same time are monitored in their progress of finding a new job. Employers register job vacancies and collective redundancies with AMS. The Public Employment Service is responsible for designing measures for labour market integration including subsidies and incentives and for securing employment. Training courses are provided by external partners specialised in adult (re-)training and education such as the *Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut der Wirtschaftskammer Österreich* (WIFI) and *Berufsförderungsinstitut* (BFI), operated by the two main social partners: *chamber of economics* (WKO) and *the chamber of labour* (AK). Service delivery is mostly standardised and use a target-group oriented approach without referring to a territorial dimension. The main goal of AMS is to re-integrate persons into the labour market but continued training for the youth, in particular, through placement in VET programs or supra-company vocational training programs.

Actors and contexts

Due to the involvement of the state, social partners and private firms in vocational training, Austria is classified as collective skill system (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). Employers, social partners and public actors coordinate to develop collectively industry specific skills within the dual system, but this happens to a lesser extent for school-based VET, that presents instead less formalised ties with the economy with reduced formal competences of social partners.

Although the Public Employment Service has regional and local offices, they have limited possibility to design measures specifically for regional or local contexts. In that sense, active labour market policies might mismatch with the economic needs of the region. However, the central management of AMS leaves some discretion to localised implementation as unions and business representatives influence the executive board of AMS. In Vienna the main focus of local ALMPs provision shifted to the integration of immigrants and refugees, especially after 2015. The city saw the most increase in refugees and made a political commitment by organising German training classes and job placement for refugees.

Territorial differences are moderate but significant in Austria, mostly among the more touristic Western regions, the industrial Eastern regions and the case of Vienna. Interestingly, Vienna has the highest youth unemployment and NEET rates among

Austrian regions. While a dynamic economy contributes to generally positive SWT outcomes, migration inflows and growing segmentation affecting low educated youth lead to higher unemployment rates in the capital. The share of pupils in dual apprenticeship rises where industrial employment is higher, peaking in Upper Austria (Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft, 2019). General schools and school-based VET are more popular especially in an international service hub like Vienna. The skill formation profile of the city mainly turns to high-tech and advanced services in the tertiary sector of the economy, with strong demand for high-qualified workers. Hence, the dual system is weaker—Vienna hosts 21 % of the Austrian population and workers, but only 15 % of the apprentices (Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft, 2019; Oberwimmer et al., 2019)—and employment opportunities for low-skilled, often with migration background, are shrinking. Vienna also presents a unique institutional configuration of ALMP provision: the *Vienna Employment Promotion Fund* (WAFF), engages primarily in the provision of lifelong learning and complements the local section of PES. Given the challenges, the main focus of local ALMPs provision shifted to the integration of immigrants and refugees, especially after 2015; and to the public provision of supra-company apprenticeship (5,300 positions in Vienna on a total of 12,000 in the whole country in 2018, see Institut für Bildungsforschung der Wirtschaft, 2019).

Bulgaria

Jurisdictions and Policies

Bulgaria is a unitary state and the central government carries out the state policy and manages the state budget. The governance is organised at three levels: central, district and municipal, with the districts having mainly statistical and administrative functions and the municipalities having some administrative competences and limited financial autonomy. In Bulgaria the centralisation of policy prerogatives is very high in the fields of education and employment policies, concentrated in the Ministry of Education and Science which has a strong control over the educational institutions.

The Bulgarian employment policy is designed centrally and implemented by state institutions and social partners. The main institutions responsible for the employment policies are: The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy; the Employment Agency and the Labour Offices which act as regional structures for the provision of services. The main funding comes from the state budget, followed by European funds (for particular programs) while local initiatives rely on municipal sources. Employment measures target both the unemployed and employers. The *Employment Promotion Act* (2002) allows employers to receive subsidies for hiring unemployed persons under specific measures: traineeships for young people for a period of 6 months; training of unemployed persons without working experience for a period of 12 months and others.

The Bulgarian policy in the field of pre-school and school education is also centralized and managed by the Ministry of Education and Science. On a regional level, the country's

education policy is implemented and supervised by 28 Regional Education Departments, one in each administrative district of the country. The state delivers funds to public schools and universities through delegated budgets based on the number of pupils/students and various national programmes and European funds provide additional resources for innovation, teacher training and improving facilities. The municipalities are responsible for providing education facilities and student transport and control over spending of funds on some delegated activities. The main VET providers are the State, municipal or private schools, vocational, art and sports schools, VET colleges, and licensed vocational training centres. State education standards specify the content of VET qualifications.

Bulgaria has below-average values in expenditure for education (despite the trend toward rising teachers' salaries in the past 5 years). With the amendments to the *Pre-school and School Education Act* (2016), the end of primary education is now after the 7th grade and secondary education is divided into low (3 years) and high (2 years). Secondary education is provided by general or vocational secondary schools both of which allow access to university after the completion of 12th grade.

The *VET Act* (2016) defines two target groups: school-age learners and adults. There are more learners in VET than in general education: 57.8 % of all students. Secondary general education schools may also open VET classes by a special order of the education minister, a popular option in small towns and rural areas. Dual VET was introduced in 2014 and upgraded in 2019 but remains unpopular reaching only 8 % of students in VET (Institute for Market Economics, 2024). Moreover, students from vocational establishments have a much higher non-completion rate than those from general schools, the quality of VET is often low and the involvement of employers remains minimal (Institute for Market Economics, 2025).

Actors and Contexts

By law, the Bulgarian state implements both employment and education policies in consultation with nationally representative employers' and employees' organisations and representatives of NGOs. Cross-sectoral cooperation between ministries, departments and agencies is required for the design of strategies and concrete policy measures. In practice, the effectiveness of this cooperation is very low and public debates are regularly shaped by continuous calls from various pressure groups for reforms of the Bulgarian education system. The expert interviews we conducted in WP4 gave evidence for links between schools and employers which, however, were established and maintained mostly through teachers' and former students' personal contacts. Moreover, employers assisted schools with the provision of short-term training only and were not involved in curriculum development.

The social partners in VET have decision-making and advisory roles in the development of state education standards and in updating the National Qualification Framework. They

are also members of examination boards set up by VET providers. Our fieldwork in WP4 found that this often remains a formality. Most of the interviewed employers believed that the established VET programs were outdated and did not form the necessary knowledge and skills in students so that employers had to introduce their own training programs for newly recruited employees.

The vocational training as part of the active labour market policy is most often carried out by external service providers: private training centres and NGOs. In practice, the regional and local Labour Offices largely work to implement measures developed centrally and have limited opportunities to design programs adapted to the needs of the regional and local labour markets. A significant characteristic of the implemented policies is their focus on increasing the employability of young people rather than on providing them with opportunities for further training and retraining in real work settings (Angelova & Boyadjieva, 2020; Krasteva, 2023). Private HR agencies are becoming increasingly popular in recent years as an alternative option to facilitate the transition from education to employment to the state policies. NGOs are also significant actors in the field, working on various national or international donor programs targeting low skilled youth, ethnic minorities, refugees and other groups in multi-disadvantaged situations.

This actors' configuration interacts with the territorial cleavages, that are very high in Bulgaria. Spatial factors demonstrate strong variation across regions along most socio-economic indicators. The resources which enable greater educational and employment attainment, and hence higher levels of well-being have significantly increased after the country's accession to the EU but have not yet led to diminishing regional inequalities. The allocation of resources which enable greater educational and employment attainment has been largely concentrated in one of the country's NUTS 2 regions—the South-Western region, which not only outperforms the country's other five regions, but on some indicators performs better than the EU average (Institute for Market Economics, 2024). The pattern of rising regional inequalities has been accelerating in the past sixteen years, influenced by the economic policies in Bulgaria, including the distribution of European funds and the regional fiscal politics (Nenov, 2023).

The VET provision in the country is fragmented, centralisation concerns mostly the programs of training and the standards for validation, but there is no effective central coordination and no real attempts to reduce educational inequalities between the regions. A report recently published by the Institute for Market Economics (2025) shows the uneven distribution of vocational schools in the country which do not meet the declared staff needs of employers. Our fieldwork in the North Central and South-Central regions (WP4) revealed a very low involvement of the regional and local stakeholders in the design of the VET programs developed on the central level and a lack of feedback from local labour market actors on the quality of training to the training institutions and the central educational authorities.

Italy

Jurisdictions and policies

Since the 1972 decree on regional authorities, Italy has transitioned from a centralized to a regionalized state, a trend accelerated in the 1990s and furthered by the Constitutional Reform of 2001. However, this shift remains incomplete, with varying progress across policy areas and regions: five out of twenty regions have special constitutional status, and recent bills aim to enhance asymmetric regionalism. Fiscal decentralization has increased post-2001, but subnational authorities heavily depend on state transfers—even though less and less earmarked.

Educational provision remains largely centralized. Despite reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy (in 1997; 2017) and shared responsibilities with regions (in 1998; 2001), hierarchical principles still dominate governance (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014). Regulations, exams and procedures are uniform, with nationally recognised qualifications. However, this centrally governed system faces significant strain due to long-lasting unequal regional outcomes. Uneven economic and institutional capacities locally amplify inequalities in educational outcomes, as students advance to higher levels of education. Conversely, vocational education and training (VET) and active labour market policies (ALMP) are primarily under regional jurisdiction. While the state sets key principles and standards, in practice, spatial checks and balances are not so effective. VET provision and outcomes are regionally variable, lacking a comprehensive monitoring and assessment system. Regional frameworks regulate training programs, while the national recognition of regional qualifications, initiated in 2015, is still ongoing. Investments in ALMP also vary according to regional priorities and labour market conditions. Centralization and coordination efforts, particularly through post-pandemic measures such as the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (NRRP) funded by the European Union's Next Generation EU have emerged. Overall, the multilevel governance system remains fragmented in both its organization and outcomes, with high stratification and de-standardisation.

Italy's expenditure on education and ALMPs is below the EU average, with ALMP funds mostly directed toward fragmented employment incentives. This adds up to limited engagement from firms and social partners, failing to counterbalance funding and organizational weaknesses of the Italian skill formation system (Cefalo & Kazepov, 2024).

School-to-work transitions are equally problematic, with high NEET and unemployment rates. Alarmingly, data show no improvement over the past decade, likely due to weak recovery and persistent systemic issues following the 2007 crisis, which directly impacted the Italian economy until at least 2013 and disproportionately affected youth and lower-education individuals. These data show the ineffectiveness of underfunded ALMPs and PES in supporting youth transitions, forcing many youths to rely on family networks for job search and material support (Ascoli & Pavolini, 2015).

In Italy, educational tracking begins at upper secondary level (age 14), following comprehensive primary and lower secondary education. Students choose among three main types of five-year schools (generalist, technical, and vocational, further divided into more than 30 curricula) or three-to-four-year regional vocational courses. Schooling is compulsory until 16, with education or training required until 18. The central state is predominantly responsible for the provision of education (Ballarino, 2015), except for regional vocational training.

This tracking system is embedded in a broader context of low social mobility, perpetuating inequalities (Schindler et al., 2023). Despite reforms, the divide between education and training persists: limited interaction between education and the labour market delays work-related skill acquisition (Pastore, 2018). VET tracks often mimic general education, with limited focus on practical training (Ballarino, 2015). Non-university tertiary education remains marginal, despite recent investments.

Consistently with this institutional framework, the Italian economy, dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises in traditional sectors, shows limited investment in training, research, and innovation. Consequently, the education pay gap is comparatively narrow, as high qualifications are undervalued. Spatially uneven development exacerbates these issues, with skilled workers concentrated in urban hubs, and very diverse local economic dynamics (Trigilia & Burroni, 2009). Strong divides persist along different territorial cleavages, such as North/South and metropolitan/non-metropolitan areas.

The apprenticeship system is similarly complex, with three types: two dual apprenticeships for upper secondary or tertiary qualifications combining vocational education and on-the-job training, and one formal apprenticeship leading to a professional qualification defined by collective agreements and integrating regional institutional training with workplace experience. Nonetheless, apprenticeships generally yield limited training and employability outcomes, being often utilized as cheap temporary labour and ranked low in career preferences. Apprentices are largely perceived as low-skilled workers, not as trainees aiming for future careers (Cefalo & Kazepov, 2024).

Actors and contexts

The Italian governance of education and training (and welfare provisions) is best described by the keyword *fragmentation*, evident from multiple perspectives.

In terms of policy areas, fragmentation is pervasive across policy domains. Siloed approaches remains widespread, with labor market, training, and education policies operating as distinct fields with limited interaction (Deliverable D4.1 International Policy Review Report). This separation stems from both cultural factors (e.g., the belief that education should not be overly influenced by labour market demands) and organizational barriers (e.g., labor market and training policies are managed by regional authorities, while education falls under state jurisdiction).

VET exemplifies this, with multiple, poorly integrated tracks that confuse users. Not surprisingly, youth interviewed for the CLEAR project reported that they often discovered regional VET as a fallback option after school failures (WP5). State-regulated school-based VET rarely interacts with local labour markets; regional VET tracks lack standardization, are hard to navigate, and are subject to frequent changes. Private partner involvement is limited, with effective collaborations seldom scaling up due to the SME-dominated economy that struggle to invest in training.

In terms of spatial governance, the devolution of responsibilities to regional authorities has not been accompanied by adequate coordination mechanisms or checks and balances to ensure uniform service provision across the country. For example, school autonomy has shifted significant responsibilities onto street- and mid-level bureaucrats without addressing pre-existing spatial inequalities affecting their institutional capacity.

PES is another case in point. Recent investments in activation policies—such as the Youth Guarantee and the activation component of the minimum income scheme *Reddito di Cittadinanza*—showed substantial differences in the functioning and capacity of PES across regions. These disparities arise from organizational weaknesses, resource limitations (Italian PES are underfunded by international standards; see Pastore, 2018), and political dynamics. Bonoli and Trein (2022) highlight how the "shifting games" among institutional tiers undermine collaboration and compromise the effectiveness of these measures.

VET provides another striking example of regional inequality, as VET opportunities are concentrated in Northern regions, where private partnerships are stronger. Six Central-Northern regions account for over 70 % of all apprentices in Italy, while three Northern regions (Lombardia, Veneto, and Piemonte) are responsible for 94 % of dual apprenticeship contracts within regional VET (L'Istituto nazionale per l'analisi delle politiche pubbliche, 2021).

Fragmentation is reinforced by the quality and quantity of recruitment in public administration (from school teachers to regional officials). Financial constraints have long been considered a central issue but recent significant investments, particularly through Italy's recovery and resilience plan, suggest that funding alone is not a solid explanation. Limited institutional capacity, weak governance ties, rigid legal frameworks, and burdensome bureaucracy are relevant issues.

Spatial inequalities have long been a defining feature of Italian history and continue to shape its society and economy. The most prominent and politically salient divide is the uneven North-South development. During the 1970s and 1980s, this macro-regional gap narrowed consistently, due to economic dynamics, internal migration, and targeted investment campaigns (Brenner, 2004). However, the transition to a post-Fordist economy and the fiscal crisis of the state led to a renewed widening of this divide—a trend that persists to this day.

This divide is visible across most indicators of education and labour market, contributing to an interlocking pattern of geographically concentrated disadvantages over the life course. Northern regions tend to align with EU averages, while Southern regions rank among the worst across all European regions (Scandurra et al., 2021a). Yet, spatial differentiation is far more nuanced, with notable variations even among regions within the same geographical area as noted in WP3. Yet, this is not the only significant spatial inequality. Looking at the richest areas of the country, the economic engine of Northern Italy has been long faltering.

The shift toward an advanced tertiary economy has been partial and selective: inequalities between urban hubs and 'inner areas' (rural and small-town areas experiencing territorial marginalization, shrinking populations, and limited access to opportunities/ services) have received particular attention in both policy and academic arenas over the past decade.

At the same time, there is evidence of growing inequalities within urban areas themselves. Peripheries in both large and medium-sized cities have faced increasing social problems with vulnerabilization of urban peripheries and youth from an immigrant background. Migrants sustain a "low-skills equilibrium" in many local economies—especially in Northern Italy, where socio-economic conditions are often worsening more rapidly than in the South (Cefalo et al., 2020).

Italian respondents to our expert survey underscore the centrality of spatial cleavages in shaping educational outcomes, particularly the interregional divide in learning opportunities (WP6). Consequently, cooperation and shared responsibilities across governance levels are considered a potentially effective response to entrenched disparities. However, respondents' outlook remains pessimistic, as the coordination between governance levels remains contentious (Del Pino & Pavolini, 2015).

Finland

Jurisdictions and policies

Finland is a unitary state with a decentralized administrative structure. State administration consists of central, regional and local levels. In education policy, the highest state-level authority is the Ministry of Education and Culture, responsible for preparing educational legislation and its share of the state budget. The tasks of the Finnish National Agency for Education are to implement national education policy and prepare the national core curricula and requirements for qualifications. In employment policy, the key actor is the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, responsible for the legislation on public employment and business services, national labour policy implementation and allocating resources in employment policy.

Regions (at the NUTS 3-level) are placed between national and municipality-level authorities in policy planning and implementation. Regional councils' responsibilities

include general level regional policy planning and the planning and implementation of specific regional policy programmes. The programmes can be implemented in co-operation with industry, enterprises and civic organisations. Since 2023, Finland has 21 wellbeing services counties. They are self-governing regions that are responsible for organising healthcare, social welfare and rescue services, previously managed by municipalities.

Municipalities provide important services, such as of education, culture and public transportation. Most municipal tasks are statutory, but they can also have tasks based on local needs and demands. Inter-municipal cooperation is a common way to arrange public services in Finland. In fields other than regional development and land use planning, it is voluntary (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & SNG-WOFI, 2022).

In European context, Finland displays above-average education expenditure (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). The country relies almost exclusively on public funding for education. Finland has a nine-year comprehensive school system including primary (grades 1-6) and lower secondary education (grades 7-9), teaching pupils with different abilities and backgrounds together until age 16. There are no national tests in compulsory education. Due to delayed tracking, the first choice all students face is whether to continue with an academic or vocational track after comprehensive school, with no dead-end tracks preventing progression to higher education (af Ursin et al., 2024).

Finland has a school-based VET-system, which means that apprenticeships are low in proportion and are mainly undertaken by adult learners (Jørgensen et al., 2019). Initial (for young people) and continuing (for adults) VET are organised under the same legislation and principles. In Finland, it is also possible to complete a combined degree of upper secondary general education and VET (so called dual-qualification), although its position in upper secondary education is marginal (Lietzén, 2023).

There are three types of VET qualifications: initial, further and specialists, with most (66 %) being initial (Basic) qualifications (Statistics Finland, 2025). In addition to vocational qualifications, also parts of the qualification can be completed. Moreover, also non-degree training are organised in VET, which include for example, preparatory education for degree education (TUVA) and preparatory education for work and independent living (TELMA). Part of vocational training is organised as labour market training with local public employment services, targeting the unemployed (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2019).

Active labour market policy (ALMP) measures in Finland include education and training programmes for the unemployed, public employment services, subsidized employment, and activation through unpaid internships, rehabilitative work activities, or employment courses. Adopting ALMP has meant a shift from structural to individualising approach to disadvantage, focusing more on vulnerability and employability than on personal

development and citizenship. In this policy framework lack of education and unemployment are treated as individual problems and personal issues rather than as structural deficits. The policy focus is on boosting the employability of individuals, while inequalities in societal opportunities are ignored. In Finland, significant policy changes in this respect have occurred during the last decades, making young people more individually responsible for the success of their transitions (Jørgensen et al., 2019).

In the field of education policy, there has been a shift towards neoliberal ideas, with reduced centralised steering and increased decentralisation, deregulation, and local decision making since the 1990s. Together with decentralisation of education, Finland has implemented school reforms based on the ideas of educational markets, individual's free choice, competition, effectiveness and performance. This has led to an increase in educational inequality nationally as well as within cities, between and within schools (e.g., Berisha et al., 2017; Thrupp et al., 2023).

Actors and contexts

Main actors in VET in Finland are the Finnish Parliament, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Agency for Education, municipalities, joint municipal authorities, associations, foundations and corporations. The Parliament decides on the VET funding and on the maximum number of students at the national level. The Ministry of Education and Culture grants permits to organise vocational training and rights to grant vocational qualifications. The National Agency for Education provides national guidelines for VET curricula and qualifications that guide the implementation. VET organisers are municipalities, joint municipal authorities, associations, foundations and corporations, with contents and qualifications of VET developed in active cooperation with working life (Finnish National Agency for Education). The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre assesses and evaluates degrees and students' competences in relation to the national criteria.

In ALMP, a key actor is The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, which directs and supervises labour administration, plans and implements national employment policy, and allocates resources. Local TE Offices are main local level actors. They help in finding jobs, provide advice on education and training and offer career planning. (Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment). The Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), represents and defends the interests of Finnish business and is also strongly interested in influencing educational policies, as is Finland Chambers of Commerce including regional Chambers of Commerces. The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) defends the employee interests in the skills system and markets.

VET programmes vary to some extent regionally depending on the skills demand of the local labour market. There is active co-operation between the social parties. Employers provide on-the-job training places, apprenticeships, and traineeships for students. The National Agency for Education appoints working life committees for different fields of VET. The members of the committees represent employers, employees and the self-employed,

as well as the education sector. The task of the Working Life Committees is to contribute to ensuring the quality of VET and strengthen the connection and co-operation between VET and working life. Working life actors participate also in developing the contents of vocational qualifications (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2023).

The material and social well-being are distributed rather unevenly across the Finnish regions. Economic prosperity and social well-being are concentrated in the metropolitan area, while living standards are lower in the Northern and Eastern regions of Finland. Simultaneously, there has been a concentration of population in the large cities, particularly in the capital area. There are significant disparities between Southern Finland and Northern and Eastern Finland in socio-economic structures and educational opportunities and outcomes. Southern Finland is more urban and it exhibits higher employment rates, stronger opportunity structures, and lower rates of poverty and educational exclusion. In contrast, the Northern and Eastern Finland have demographic challenges, such as youth emigration, and limits in vocational and educational opportunities. Gender differences are also notable, as rural areas show lower employment rates for females compared to males, unlike the urban regions. There are urban and rural areas throughout Finland, but Southern Finland is more urban than Northern and Eastern Finland. Moreover, there is a trend that people are moving towards Southern Finland and Metropolitan areas, where the educational and labour market opportunities are better. So Northern and Eastern Finland have many declining areas and negative population growth.

8.5 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, we present a comparison of the territorial articulation of LOs in Austria, Bulgaria, Italy and Finland. Through the case studies we analyse multilevel governance structures and spatial disparities to explore how they affect LOs.

Austria shows a significant level of coordination, both vertically across jurisdictions and horizontally within policy sectors. The central government plays a key role in terms of coordination and resource allocation (comparatively above average), in cooperation with the subnational units (Länder) that are primarily responsible for implementation. Mechanisms of adaptations to local challenges (i.e., immigration) involve the horizontal coordination of actors, as in the case of the strong VET-labour market link. There is also a moderate degree of discretion for Austrian *Länder* in adapting national programmes and, to a certain extent, in designing specific activation and lifelong learning programmes.

In education, the moderate institutional space for subnational variation interacts with the local characteristics of the economy. Apprenticeship is weaker in areas with lower industrial development, but the central provision of PES and ALMPs is complemented by local programmes funded by the *Länder*, providing some scope for compensation. The case of Vienna stands out, as the city tailors service provision trying to address challenges such as immigration, lack of apprenticeship positions, and internationalisation.

In Bulgaria, the institutional structure and decision-making in the education system are highly centralised, lacking the flexibility needed to effectively respond to the labour market needs and rarely reflecting the specificities of local contexts. Recent reforms of the education system have failed to address its high centralization and rigidity. Vocational education remains underfunded and unpopular, with high dropout rates, while tertiary education remains inaccessible to many young people due to regional disparities and is unresponsive to economic trends.

The territorial disparities in vocational education underscore the shortcomings of the centralised education system, including outdated curricula overemphasizing traditional grading systems, insufficient specialised preparation of teaching staff, lack of modern technological equipment at schools, and limited support for lifelong learning. The low involvement of regional and local stakeholders in designing and assessing the quality of training, and the lack of regular tracking of the career progresses of vocational school graduates, are among the factors that hamper alignment with the demands of local labour markets and responsiveness to different learners' needs (Economic and Social Council, 2024).

In Italy, subnational jurisdictions hold significant regulatory, expenditure, and management responsibilities. However, weak national coordination results in uneven funding and implementation. Institutional fragmentation exacerbates territorial disparities in VET, apprenticeships, and ALMPs. Structural inequalities remain so deeply entrenched that even ambitious initiatives to close spatial gaps often fall short, failing to account for place-specific needs and the institutional limitations of subnational authorities. Consequently, the regions that are most in need of investment are often the least equipped to seize the opportunities provided given the stark disparities in the capacity of employment centres and social services. For instance, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee was hampered by the fragmentation and lack of administrative capacity of the PES (Pastore, 2018). On the same vein, the implementation of the NRRP proved that many poorer local authorities lacked the institutional capacity to navigate the bureaucratic demands of the recovery measures. The lack of effective checks and balances continues to hinder better outcomes, leaving the coordination of governance and the reduction of inequalities as unresolved challenges.

In Finland, the key regional challenges are related to labour shortages and availability of a skilled labour force. These issues stem from various factors, such as demographic changes at regional level and the low attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) programs. To improve the availability of the skilled labour force, there is active cooperation between education institutions and employers. Local employers provide on-the-job training, apprenticeships, traineeships, and summer jobs for the students. This collaboration forms an important channel for companies in the sector to secure their

future workforce. Employers also participate in the development of educational programs and the planning of educational reforms to better align skills supply with demand.

Coordination (or lack thereof) of vertical and horizontal relationships within a policy sector appears to be an important mechanism affecting LOs. In Austria and Finland, central VET frameworks are associated with regional (Austria) and local autonomy (Finland), providing capacities for adaptation of VET and ALMP provision to local needs in presence of moderate spatial disparities. This is associated to comparatively positive LOs (in reference to ELET, NEET, youth employment) and moderate territorial variation.

Conversely, the Italian and Bulgarian configurations appear less effective in limiting territorial variation in LOs. In both cases, the analysis identifies a lack of central coordination stemming from fragmented de-centralisation (Italy) or a rigid centralisation (Bulgarian) in presence of strong territorial disparities. The Italian configuration exacerbates inequalities producing a jeopardized landscape of good practices and long-term disadvantages, where better-off areas enjoy most benefits of decentralisation. In Bulgaria, rigid centralisation hampers contextual adaptation, hindering the quality and accessibility of VET and ALMP provision without limiting pre-existing spatial disparities.

KEY MESSAGES

From the discussion of the findings, we can offer the following key messages:

Inequalities in learning outcomes affect not only countries but also their regions, due to complex combinations of jurisdictions, policies, politics, and different local/social contexts.

Spatial disparities in learning outcomes are more pronounced in Italy and Bulgaria than in Finland and Austria.

Multilevel governance structures in VET and ALMP allow for certain degrees of local and regional adaptation within a central coordinating frame in Finland and Austria. Conversely, the lack of an effective central coordination in presence of steep territorial disparities exacerbates or reproduces inequalities in Italy and Bulgaria.

9. Learning and Living in Urban Spaces: Comparison of Multi-Disadvantaged Life Contexts of Young People in Barcelona, Hamburg, Lisbon, and Vienna

Jozef Zelinka, Sara Gil, Natália Alves, Liliana Zeferino, Nikoletta Jablonczay & Yuri Kazepov

9.1 Introduction

Learning outcomes (LOs) are seldom related to the spaces, in which they unfold. While indicators of socio-economic background, cognitive and psycho-emotional abilities, or family history are used to explain low achievement, the impact of spaces on the quality of LOs has received limited attention. The current scholarly debates on the impact of urban spaces on learning and education address diverse issues. On the one hand, there is substantial research on the impact of the immediate environment, such as air pollution or the availability of green spaces, on academic performances (cf. Lin & Van Stan, 2020). On the other hand, scholars emphasize the vulnerability and risk of youth marginalization in urban spaces, which is often aligned with low levels of skills and education (Davino et al., 2021) as well as with higher exposure to stress and mental disorders (Buttazzoni et al., 2021; see also Chapter 4 in this Report). Finally, the various indicators applied to measure urban vulnerability point out that more data on the subjective dimension of urban vulnerability is needed (Vázquez Brage, 2024). Against this background, the chapter aims to compare the life contexts of groups in multi-disadvantaged, vulnerable positions and elaborate on the impact of urban spaces on learning.

Urban spaces are the most visible product of human activity since the beginning of human civilization. The development of first settlements has completely revolutionized humanity and led to unseen levels of expansion and growth. Nowadays, cities are inhabited by most of the world's population and concentrate the economic, political, and cultural life, accumulating the human and financial capital for education, research, and technology to flourish (Etzkowitz & Dzisah, 2008). While urban spaces create multiple educational and working opportunities at various levels and scales of educational governance (Dale et al., 2016), they also pose serious challenges for different groups of population, especially for young people with multiple disadvantages.[10]

The latter result from complex interaction between different factors and produce life contexts, in which young people learn and develop their life courses. Against this background, the chapter seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What learning and living conditions do urban spaces offer?
- How do multi-disadvantaged life contexts affect the quality of LOs in different urban settings?

[10] With multiple disadvantages we refer to groups of young people who have fewer chances to reach their goals in the life course, particularly due to lack of structural opportunities and the existence of institutional barriers.

The chapter is based on research conducted in four metropole cities—Barcelona, Hamburg, Lisbon, and Vienna. While Lisbon and Vienna are capital cities, Hamburg and Barcelona are second largest national cities and important regional centres. The selected cases represent the Central European as well as the Southern European countries equally. In addition, while the selected cities and their agglomerations can clearly be defined as urban spaces, the chapter acknowledges that it is far more difficult to precisely delineate what belongs to a semi-rural or a semi-urban space. Rather, the cities in this case serve as focal points and functional regions that attract and centralise economic, political, cultural, and educational capacities of the surrounding territory with not only regional, but a distinctive national and global importance. When focusing on the living and learning experiences in urban contexts, the cities' outreach and wider impact is therefore always considered. Within the cities, a special attention is paid to districts or boroughs with particularly low performance indicators to better address the multi-disadvantaged life contexts. These include in particular young people from migrant background, with low socio-economic profile, fragmented educational pathways, unrecognised prior qualifications, and higher prevalence of mental health issues. The chapter's goal is to compare their life contexts and work out common lines and differences in the composition and impact of urban spaces on the construction of their LOs.

The chapter unfolds in three steps: *First*, it contextualises the cases and offers first insights into the composition of and challenges in the selected urban spaces. *Second*, it analyses the findings using the theoretical lenses adopted in the CLEAR project—Life Course Research, Intersectionality, and Spatial Justice. *Third*, it discusses and relates the findings to the overarching research question. A brief conclusion completes the chapter.

9.2 Contextualisation of the cases

The section aims to contextualise the selected cases and offer a brief introduction into their specific urban contexts. This is done in two steps: *first*, by shortly describing the key characteristics of the cities and their most deprived districts/boroughs, and *second*, by discussing key performance indicators and the demographic situation in the cities and subregions.

City characteristics

Barcelona and its metropolitan area are a highly dynamic region within Catalonia and count as one of the most prosperous regions in Spain. The service sector dominates the economy, generating over 90 % of its Gross Domestic Product and employing the highest number of people. Barcelona is also a central transport hub, in goods (harbour) and passenger transport (airport). The population structure of Barcelona shows a progressively ageing tendency, with the decline in young population and birth rates. The city has experienced a notable increase in the non-EU population, primarily from Morocco, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, but also from Northern Europe. This shift in migration trends has impacted the socio-economic profile of the city's population and,

consequently, its housing market and local commercial fabric. In this regard, social inequalities in Barcelona and its metropolitan area have a clear territorial dimension. Neighbourhoods with higher socio-economic deprivation indices exhibit poorer indicators in terms of health, well-being, life expectancy, and educational outcomes (Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2020). Although the city has witnessed a declining trend in Early School Leaving, disparities based on students' socio-economic status continue to persist, with foreign students, male students, and those attending schools with higher concentration of students in disadvantaged positions achieving lower outcomes in terms of grade repetition and graduation rates. Barcelona has historically exhibited high levels of school segregation, leading to concentrated clusters of students in socio-economic vulnerable positions and those with special educational needs (Benito & González, 2007). Especially in compulsory education, school segregation significantly exceeds residential segregation (Bonal & Zancajo, 2020), with the social composition of schools being strongly influenced by the dual public-private network, with foreign-national students and those in socio-economic vulnerable positions disproportionately concentrated in the public sector (Institut Metròpoli, 2023).

Hamburg is one of the Germany's three city-Länder, with an important economic, political and cultural function. It has a significant commercial and logistical infrastructure, with the seat of international companies like Airbus, Beiersdorf, Lufthansa or Unilever. Hamburg has reportedly had poor learning performances, especially visible in one of its seven boroughs—Hamburg-Mitte. The central borough offers plentiful touristic attractions with nearly 8 million visitors in 2024. It is also a vital business location, since most companies in Hamburg are located here (a total of 43,700 companies, 37 % of which are small businesses). Besides that, Hamburg-Mitte is the most important cultural, artistic, and research centre in Northern Germany, home to several universities, art galleries, and concert halls (Handelskammer Hamburg, 2025). Among the city boroughs, Hamburg-Mitte has the highest rate of young people leaving school without a qualification or certificate, and the highest rate of unemployed young people. In terms of social composition, the borough concentrates the highest share of government sponsored houses and benefit recipients. Hamburg is the wealthiest German and European region in relation to its Gross Domestic Product. Among its boroughs, Hamburg-Mitte has the lowest rates (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2023). Hamburg-Mitte is a bricolage of modern business sites, industrial zones, transnational hubs, shopping malls, and residential areas. It is home to a multi-cultural society, young population and, compared to other German cities, a safe place for living. The living costs in Hamburg-Mitte are comparatively high, which is why many people reside in other boroughs or nearby cities that are well-connected to the centre.

Lisbon and its larger metropolitan area correspond to 3 % of the Portuguese continental territory but is home to 51 % of foreign residents in the country. The region is an increasingly important location for technology and innovation, with a significant number

of companies in research and development. 29 % of the companies in the country are located here (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2022). Lisbon faces several significant social challenges. One of them is the scarcity of affordable housing, which leads to deprived neighbourhoods, social exclusion, and discrimination. One of these neighbourhoods is the city district Amadora, which hosts a significant share of the foreign population. Amadora reports high rates of early school leaving and one of the highest levels of domestic violence. Due to a housing policy incapable of meeting the needs and the precarious financial situation of migrants, many immigrants end up settling in the territory through processes of illegal occupation and construction of precarious housing—shantytowns, particularly on vacant land and former military areas (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. Despite the decrease in registered unemployment, the low levels of qualification among the working-age population contribute to high levels of job insecurity, low wages, and poor health profile of the local population associated with poverty factors (Núcleo Executivo CLAS da Amadora, 2018).

Vienna is the most populated and one of the wealthiest regions in Austria. Its demographic composition has been rapidly changing due to migration, making it one of the fastest-growing urban areas in the EU (Stadt Wien, 2024). Economically, Vienna has undergone a significant structural transformation since the 1990s, shifting from a manufacturing-based economy to a tertiary-sector-dominated labour market (Riederer et al., 2021). While this shift has increased opportunities for high-skilled professionals, it has also created low-paid, precarious service jobs, contributing to the polarisation of the labour market (Hamnett, 2020). As a result, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience job insecurity, temporary contracts, and part-time work. Vienna's 10th district, Favoriten, faces the highest unemployment rate, as well as low income, and the highest share of people with low educational attainment. Austria's early tracking system at age 10 significantly affects Vienna's educational landscape (Valls & Flecker, 2022). Research indicates that this system reproduces social inequalities, as students from lower-income and migrant backgrounds are disproportionately placed in the non-academic track, limiting their access to higher education (Flecker et al., 2023). One key challenge is language acquisition, as there are no standardised German language assessments for newly arrived students, leading to inconsistent language support. The school division further reinforces educational segregation, with migrant and working-class students overrepresented in non-academic tracks. Vienna's economic structure makes youth labour market integration more complex than in other Austrian regions. While Austria's dual education system effectively supports school-to-work transitions, participation rates in vocational programs are lower in Vienna, and access to high-quality apprenticeships is highly competitive (Lindner et al., 2023).

Demography and performance

When considering the demographic situation and performance in key economic, educational, and social indicators, it is important to acknowledge the scarcity of data and their different statistical measurements. While the aim of the chapter is to compare different urban contexts, the data are not always available at the same levels, or use different methodology. For this reason, the chapter uses a combination of data at the level of cities (demographic indicators) and the NUTS2 regions as larger regional units (performance indicators) (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Demographic and performance indicators

Demographic indicator/City	**Barcelona**	**Hamburg**	**Lisbon**	**Vienna**
Population density (inhabitants/km^2)	16,637.5	2,530 (2023)	5,572.4 (2022)	4,890
Foreign population	24.56 %	20.02 % (2023)	28.62 % (2023)	35.4 %
Performance indicator/NUTS2 region	**Catalonia**	**Hamburg**	**Grande Lisboa**	**Vienna**
Regional Gross Domestic Product[11] (2023)	€39,400	€72,000	€48,500	€52,500
Youth employment rate[12] (2024)	32.4 %	48.7 %	25.9 %	41.6 %
Low educational attainment[13] (2024)	22.3 %	12.1 %	13.1 %	13 %
Early school leavers[14] (2024)	13.7 %	12.6 %	6.6 %	11.9 %
At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion-Rate[15] (2024)	20.5 %	24.5 %	16.5 %	28.2 %

Sources: National/regional statistical bureaus[16] (demographic indicators), Eurostat (performance indicators)

This is especially the case of Barcelona, where the data collected by Eurostat are at the NUTS2 level of Catalonia, as well as the case of Lisbon, where the data are collected at the NUTS2 level of Grande Lisboa. Most of the data are collected for the statistical year 2024, in some exceptions for the year 2023. Performance indicators are calculated at NUTS2 level, which is the same for Hamburg and Vienna, but limited for Barcelona (→ Catalonia) and Lisbon (→ Grande Lisboa). The performance indicators stem from Eurostat data and

11 Calculated per capita and applying Purchasing Power Standard (PPS) (Eurostat, 2025a).

12 Young people aged 15-24 years who are employed within the youth labour force (both sexes) (Eurostat, 2025b).

13 Young people aged 25-34 years with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (both sexes) (Eurostat, 2025c).

14 Young people aged 18-24 years who left formal education or training before acquiring any certified qualification (both sexes) (Eurostat, 2025d)

15 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 (both sexes, all age groups) (Eurostat, 2025e).

16 Barcelona (Statistical Institute of Catalonia, 2025), Hamburg (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024), Lisbon (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2025), Vienna (Statistik Austria, 2025).

include economic (regional Gross Domestic Product and youth employment), educational (Low Educational Attainment and Early School Leavers), as well as social (At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion-Rate) characteristics.

In terms of demographic situation, the indicators of population density and the percentage of foreign population portray a diverse picture. Lisbon is the most densely populated city in Portugal and more populated than Hamburg and Vienna. Barcelona in its place ranks among the most populated cities in Europe and even its metropolitan area (over 9,000 inhabitants/km^2) is far more populated that the rest of the cities. Vienna is by far the most populated city in Austria and Hamburg is the third most populated city in Germany after Berlin and Munich and the most populated region in Northern Germany. In terms of foreign population, which places more demands on educational and labour market integration, all cities show remarkably high percentage of foreign nationals. This number does not include people from migrant background, who have already obtained the citizenship of the respective host country. Generally, the younger the population, the higher the percentage of foreign nationals. In the sample, Vienna has the highest number of foreign nationals and when including people from migrant background, this number amounts to nearly half of the city's population. A similar structure is observable in Hamburg, where nearly 75 % of young people below 18 years are from migrant background. In Barcelona and Lisbon, the share of foreign nationals is equally significant and remarkably higher than in other parts of the countries. Thus, the demographic picture of the selected cities demonstrates their attractiveness for domestic as well as for foreign population. It also hints at the challenges for the educational system to assist in the integration of learners to the labour market.

As economic indicators demonstrate, Hamburg has by far the greatest economic output among the selected cases, followed by Vienna and Lisbon. While Catalonia performs weaker in the sample, the actual number for Barcelona is comparable with Vienna and Grande Lisboa. All cities perform well beyond the EU average (€40,000). Further, Hamburg shows high rates of youth employment, followed by Vienna, while, on the contrary, Catalonia and Grande Lisboa struggle to generate sufficient labour market opportunities for young people, also due to seasonal work. When contrasted with educational indicators, the economic strength of the city does not automatically translate into better education quality.

Educational indicators also vary among the cities. Low educational attainment persists especially in Catalonia, with the three other cities surprisingly at the same levels and below the EU average (17.3 %). In terms of Early School Leaving, Grande Lisboa has the lowest rate among the selected cities and is even lower than the EU average (9.3 %). Other cities show slightly higher percentage of Early School Leavers. Interestingly, while the urban agglomerations can generate wealth and economic growth comparably higher than in other regions, not all population groups can benefit from the economic success.

The social indicator characterising the exposure to poverty or social exclusion shows the disparity between the selected cities. While Catalonia and Grande Lisboa are rated below the EU average (21.0 %), with the latter significantly lower than all other cities, Hamburg and especially Vienna have high portions of population exposed to vulnerability, presumably foreign nationals and people from migrant background. The observed tendency occurs despite their high youth employment rates and high economic output.

Urban contexts – summary

The introductory contextualisation of the selected urban spaces has revealed several commonalities and yielded first insights into their specific composition. On the one hand, all cities report high levels of foreign population and competitive economic attractiveness. On the other hand, they diverge in performance and demographic indicators.

The urban space of Barcelona is characterized by its central role in the region, attracting inhabitants from surrounding areas who come to work, study, or use the city's services, as well as a large number of tourists. The city has a high population density, aging population, and persisting system of residential and school segregation. Particularly relevant is the segregation based on foreign origin. While the city does not have clearly defined deprived areas—since low-performing learners are dispersed throughout the city and especially in working-class districts—it still faces high youth unemployment rates. A considerable proportion of young people have low educational attainment, and their labour market profile aligns with only a limited segment of the service-dominated economy.

The urban space of Barcelona is characterized by high population density, aging population, and persisting system of school segregation. While it lacks deprived areas, as the low performing learners are scattered across the city and its working-class districts, it faces high unemployment rates among young people, a considerable number of which has a low educational attainment. Their labour market profile matches only some of the jobs offered by the service-dominated economy.

Hamburg is a prosperous city and both a tourist and a migrant magnet. While it hosts multiple businesses and generates many employment opportunities, a large number of young people do not enter the labour market. This has systemic and bureaucratic reasons, such as the provision of language courses or the recognition of prior qualifications. However, it is also connected to the economic structure of the city, which favours highly educated people to work for the companies located in Hamburg, thereby raising the housing and living costs for the local population.

Lisbon's urban space has a rather low population density, high rates of foreign nationals, as well as high rates of unemployed young people. However, it has a remarkably low level of early school leavers and people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The social fabric of the city seems to play a significant role in creating supportive measures to avoid

exclusion. At the same time, its economic structure can only partially integrate people with low educational attainment, which, coupled with unaffordable housing, corroborates the precariousness of young people in multi-disadvantaged positions.

Finally, Vienna's urban context is characterized by a polarized labour market, creating job opportunities for high-skilled workers and precarious labour force at the same time. Equally, the city's social structure, with people from migrant background presenting a significant share of the population, reveals the existing disparities, with minorities occupying low-paid positions and being tracked into non-academic courses. This tendency strengthens path dependencies and impinges on the quality of educational outcomes.

9.3 Analysis of the urban contexts

The section aims to compare and discuss the selected urban contexts from CLEAR's three core theoretical perspectives: Life Course Research, Intersectionality, and Spatial Justice. This is done in three steps: first, by briefly describing the methodological approach; second, by presenting the re-analysis of the project's findings related to the learning and living experiences of young people; and third, by comparing the urban contexts and reflecting on their impact on LOs.

Methodological approach

The selected urban contexts are part of the CLEAR research project that examines the interplay of multiple factors and actors involved in the construction of LOs. The project's fieldwork has been conducted in eight EU countries at two research sites each, among them Barcelona, Hamburg, Lisbon, and Vienna. The research data are derived from semi-structured interviews with local policy practitioners and professionals in education and training (N=27), who work in three different sectors of economy—hospitality, health care, IT. They also stem from narrative interviews with young people (18-29 years), especially those in vulnerable positions (N=43), as well as from expert survey on policy coordination with national and regional policymakers. Based on these findings, the chapter seeks to analyse the multi-disadvantaged urban life contexts of young people and elaborate on the construction of LOs in urban settings.

After contextualising the urban spaces, the research results have been re-analysed according to the CLEAR project's overarching theoretical perspectives. From the perspective of *Life Course Research*, the analysis was focusing on the connection of spaces and life projects: How do educational outcomes (credentials, qualifications) help young people in navigating their life projects in urban contexts? To what extent are urban spaces perceived as facilitators of learning? What is the relation between urban spaces and young people's future plans? From the perspective of *Intersectionality*, the emphasis was placed on the perception of the spaces: How do young people perceive urban spaces they live in—as threats, places to thrive, as irrelevant for their lives? To what extent are the factors causing their vulnerable status related to the urban spaces? Finally, from the perspective

of *Spatial Justice*, the main emphasis was on the relation of young people to urban spaces: What is the degree of young people's spatial embeddedness or detachment? How does this relation change over the life course? What role do spaces play in young people's identity?

The next step consists of comparing the different urban contexts in order to understand how they enter the construction of LOs and affect young people's quality of life. This analytical exercise is framed by a series of guiding questions: What does the spatial embeddedness and/or detachment of young people tell us about the meaning of education for young people? Do young people become more active learners if better integrated? What do urban settings tell us about the quality of education and do they automatically translate into poorer LOs? What does the ability to navigate the life courses in urban spaces tell us about young people's educational achievements?

During the preliminary work, the results have been elaborated separately for every case. In the next phase, the cases have been juxtaposed and compared with the aim of developing overarching themes alongside the guiding questions. As a result, the analysis offers an integration of different analytical levels (individual, institutional, spatial, structural, relational), theoretical perspectives, and stakeholder views.

Learning and living in urban contexts

The subsection presents several overarching themes that characterize the interplay of urban contexts and the construction of LOs.

Spatial dispositions of young people

Urban contexts frame the living and learning experiences of young people as well as their structural opportunities and institutional settings. The spatial topology varies among the cities and creates different layers of disposition. In extending Bourdieu's reading of disposition, which resembles a permanent internalization of external social structures (Bourdieu, 1980), the spatiality of places equally affects how young people behave in the perceived urban spaces.

For some, the more ghettoized neighbourhoods (e.g., Amadora in Lisbon) nurture a sense of separation and stigmatization that continues to be performed and lived by young people, even when leaving the district's administrative or physical boundaries. It is also experienced as a view that other people share on them, as Rui points out: "A lot of people think that if you're from this neighbourhood, you'll end up on the streets or doing bad stuff. That gets to us. Sometimes we even lose the will to try." (WP5_PT_L_A_11) The strong impact of the spaces on self-confidence affects young people's subjective agency, i.e., the will to try and aspire new things irrespectively of the objective constraints.

In other cases, the administrative boundaries of deprived neighbourhoods are less decisive or visible in young people's decision making. Hamburg's central borough, for example, barely impacts young people's understanding of their urban space, as it mostly

resembles an artificial administrative unit. What matters are community spaces, be they institutional (second-chance schools, charities, social projects), public (sportsgrounds, cafés, street markets, squares), confessional (churches, temples, mosques), or even functional (bus and train stations, shopping malls). Especially among refugees and migrants, community spaces serve as identity markers and, at the same time, as possible constraints of their social mobility. As reported from the migrant community in Hamburg, individual success might often be interpreted as breaking out of the 'minority' community, and, as a consequence, losing its social and emotional support.

Finally, in more strongly, yet more symbolically segregated urban spaces, such as in Vienna or Barcelona, the competitive urban environment, language proficiency, formal credentials, and socio-cultural capital become the gatekeepers for educational and social success. The persistent mechanisms of social reproduction systematically grant more information, trust, and guidance to students from more privileged, educated families: "There are differences made according to milieu... they are trusted to do more, and are already given different information" (local professional, Vienna). Thus, their spatial disposition has been granted by and intertwined with their symbolic status, which provides them with institutional advantage. On the other hand, young people in disadvantaged positions, institutionally labelled as "educationally disconnected" (local professional, Vienna), are disproportionately funnelled into supra-company apprenticeship programs rather than mainstream vocational training or academic tracks. Although these programs are formally inclusive, their peripheral locations and the stigma attached to them serve to separate these youth from more central and prestigious educational and employment pathways.

In summary, the spatial disposition results from the interplay of the perceived and experienced physical, institutional, and structural spaces, and frames young people's self-identification, behaviour, and educational aspirations. While some young people adjust to their social and spatial environments, others resist to be identified with their dispositions. As Beverly Skeggs observed, "[a]djustment may not happen. There may not be a fit between positions and dispositions." (Skeggs, 1997, p. 81)

Ambivalent spatial attachment

Young people develop different perceptions of and attachment to urban spaces throughout their life courses. This depends on the specific period of their life courses they spend in the cities, as well as on its duration.

When born and raised in the urban areas, young people perceive them as familiar, natural, and safe. They develop a sense of pride and belonging, even if the city or its district create more constraints than opportunities: "Most of my classmates lived next to me. The school was just around the corner. [...] That closeness made it easier to chat during lessons. There was little distance between us, and that made it harder to concentrate." (WP5_PT_L_A_18). In this example by Eno, urban space simultaneously

emerges as a place of socialisation and as a barrier to educational progress, revealing the ambivalence surrounding the connection between space and educational success. Especially during the transitional periods, the decisions of young people are often informed by the expectation to upscale their economic and social status. Some, as Iqbal, are more successful when moving from one urban space to another:

> *I lived in Berlin for a year, and unfortunately in one year I had zero percent [progress]. Zero percent. After three months of moving to Hamburg, I found an apprenticeship, a nice apartment, a good job with a good salary and feel really comfortable here in Hamburg. (WP5_DE_H_H_10)*

Others move to the cities from rural spaces and foreign countries, which is accompanied with eye-opening, empowering effects, such as the ones experienced by Mercedes: "Here, you have more opportunities to find work, more access to support depending on your situation, help from professionals. You have cultural workshops, art, performance, cinema, theatre. There's a variety of cultures. Of cultures, of art." (WP5_ES_C_B_10) In any case, by moving to a larger urban centre, young people hope to enhance their own employability and social status. Indeed, transitional periods are marked by the recognition of the ambivalence of the spaces they live in: On the one hand, their poor living and learning conditions result in part from the spatial surroundings. On the other hand, the same spaces that constrain them serve as emotional resorts, with memories of childhood and youth, social bonds, and rooted family structures. Breaking out of the familiarity of the spaces during the transitional period marks the peak of the conflict over the ambivalent meaning of spaces and their role in sustaining and enhancing their life courses. It also impacts, as the example of Iqbal demonstrates, how spaces influence the ability to progress and aspire educational and life goals: "As I have mentioned, I lived in another state before. That's when I lost all my morals, potential, energy, self-awareness, everything. I just didn't want to live in Berlin, I just wanted to survive." (WP5_DE_H_H_10)

For young people in multi-disadvantaged life contexts, their spatiality serves as an anchor, which stabilizes during times of insecurity, but which at the same time bonds them to and labels them with the space they occupy. Heaving the spatial anchor to sail for new adventures requires both the institutional navigation and the individual clarity about the destination.

Stakeholders' views on youth in vulnerable positions

Different educational stakeholders approach youth in vulnerable positions differently. Some educational policies are devised at national level and require a more prospective, long-term reasoning. In Portugal and Spain, policy experts predict that statistical measurement of LOs will play a significant role in their enhancement. On the contrary, their Austrian and German counterparts see the social environment of young people as a possibly more decisive factor in affecting the quality of LOs. In urban spaces, it is crucial to recognize the specific demands and limits of youth in vulnerable positions. In Portugal,

non-achievers remain a key policy issue. In Spain, and particularly in Barcelona, it is the correlation between residential and school segregation. In Austria, the focus is on better acknowledgment of non-formal and informal LOs of young people, while in Germany, policymakers worry about the misuse of statistical data on low achievers by extremist parties for their political agenda.

At the local level, market demands are the primary source of concern. For professionals in education and training, young people appear to be lacking skills and capabilities, but also motivation and resilience for certain job profiles. In low-skilled occupations, such as health care, the academization of vocational education and training (VET) leads to skills shortage, and those who remain in the programmes often lack practical skills, responsibility, or have to cope with their own challenges, as a local professional in health care in Hamburg reports: "Many of these people are not yet ready for training. This has become very clear in recent years. It's a bit of a question of whether these are still Corona consequences." (WP4_DE_H_H_E_5) In high-skilled occupations, such as IT industry, the graduates of the courses are demanded on the labour market and find an occupation almost immediately. However, further tracking sorts out the excellent students from the rest, as a local professional in IT from Lisbon stresses:

> *There are those students who stand out, and they do not go directly to companies; most of them continue their studies. Those who enter the labour market directly are usually those who were not very good students and want to work. Therefore... I do not know if they bring much benefit to the companies because they are not excellent students, just good ones. (WP4_PT_L_A_E_1)*

In this case, the success on the labour market heavily depends on the grades achieved in formal education and replicates a strong path dependency. What policy practitioners, as a local labour market professional from Barcelona, increasingly point out, however, is the loyalty, responsibility, and work attitude of young people:

> *When we make a selection process, we have looked at knowledge, logically, [...] but the first questions we ask, or at least in our field, are attitudinal. First, if they are a stable person, emotionally, more or less, if he's a person, let's say... who wants to work, if he's a person who wants to train, if he's a person who wants to grow professionally... in other words, a whole series of attitudes, let's say, or professional ambitions. (WP4_ES_C_B_LM_3)*

What is demanded by local labour market does not always fit with young people's possible actions. In the Viennese case, young people have experienced institutional detachment when being assigned apprenticeships by the public employment service, as is the case of Mika during her time in Vienna: "They sent me to a kindergarten that was two hours away. It was exhausting. I lived nearby, but they didn't care." (WP5_AT_U_L_7) Such experiences reflect more than bureaucratic rigidity; they signal a rupture in the young person's relational geography. Spaces that once felt familiar now act upon them with indifference, fostering a sense of alienation and overriding their agency, as is the Toni's case: "AMS

[Austrian Public Employment Service] just said, 'We are going to place you here.' I didn't have much say in it." (WP5_AT_V_F_13) Such interventions, misaligned with personal goals and disconnected from dialogue, can derail developmental pathways, leaving lasting effects on how young people perceive institutions and their futures. These spaces do not simply fail to empower; they actively produce disempowerment by denying young people a voice in shaping their trajectories.

In none of the national or local policies are young people, especially those in vulnerable positions, actively engaged. While they might be perceived as unwilling, unmotivated, or having unrealistic expectations, their urban life trajectories require quick adaptation. What is offered as empowerment, in particular various employment services seeking to activate them, is in fact perceived as a form of surveillance and steering. Demotivation and disengagement are thus more likely attempts to retain autonomy, than a full professional resignation.

Spatial ownership and identity formation

Urban spaces offer living and learning opportunities for diverse groups in multi-disadvantaged positions, who interact with and integrate into the urban spaces with different pace and to a various degree. Some of these groups are residing in the cities since their birth, others are newcomers, be it as internal or international migrants. In this regard, urban spaces emerge as a structuring element in the process of identity formation, which includes the relation to, and ownership of the surrounding spaces.

For many, the neighbourhood is not only a physical territory, bur an identity marker, a narrative of origin, and, simultaneously, a symbolic boundary with the 'outside'. Young people do not merely inhabit their spaces; they are interpellated by them, negotiate meaning, assign value, and actively respond to their material and symbolic configurations. Especially among migrant communities, the former spatial identity enters the new process of spatial identity formation, often both as a stepping stone and a hindrance, as the experience of Thabisa demonstrates: "At the beginning it was difficult. My classmates mocked me because I didn't speak Portuguese well. I was from Cape Verde, but not from the same island. They thought they were superior." (WP5_PT_L_A_14) Thabisa's testimony illustrates how one's place of origin can be experienced both as a source of belonging and as a reason for exclusion, even within migrant communities with similar backgrounds. Territorial identity thus becomes marked by internal power relations and hierarchies. Ellen, on the other hand, expresses the impact of territory on her educational and emotional adaptation following migration: "I moved here, to Quinta do Marrocos. My Portuguese wasn't good; the teachers had no patience. I couldn't make friends, I felt isolated. The school was close, but it felt distant." (WP5_PT_L_A_3) In her case, urban space is experienced as a relational limit, geographically close, yet symbolically distant, revealing the effects of spatial inequality on the identity formation.

Further on, while urban spaces offer diversity and opportunities, they do not automatically translate into inclusion or recognition. Young people frequently describe their neighbourhoods and educational trajectories as pre-scripted and undervalued. Lena, for example, shares how both her school environment and residential identity combined to diminish institutional expectations about her future: "I had the feeling that the teachers at school didn't take me seriously. They always said, 'Yeah, with you, we don't need to try too hard, you'll end up in one of those courses anyway'." (WP5_AT_V_F_9) In Lena's case, urban space is not simply where disadvantage unfolds, it is part of what constitutes it through repeated misrecognition and lowered expectations by institutional actors. In addition, while some residents are more successful in utilizing their privileged spatiality, others see themselves excluded from their own spaces due to their economic unaffordability, which is a recurring topic in the cities, as experienced by Narco:

> *Because living here just drains you. My mother is 55 years old, and she can't afford to live alone, she's renting a room with random people. It's a shitty place. [...] For partying, Barcelona is awesome, for sure. If you want to have fun and go wild, it's amazing. But living here seriously, I don't think it's very doable. (WP5_ES_C_B_6)*

Thus, for the urban spaces to be accepted and valued by young people in multi-disadvantaged positions, they must provide them with the sense of recognition, openness to change, and accessibility for their needs and desires. This spatial ownership, the notion of being a part and partaking in the urban space, strengthens identity formation of young people as learners, achievers, future decision-makers, etc.

Urban spaces as variables

The life courses of young people in vulnerable positions seldom follow a standard educational path. Rather, they are characterized by fragmentation and disruption, detours and comebacks, interruptions and new beginnings. At times, young people lack the ability to choose their preferred spaces, be they physical, institutional, geographic, or administrative. Instead, they learn to adapt to them, find the least resistant pathways, and maintain their limited energy and time necessary to occupy them. In this regard, spaces serve as variables in young people's life courses. During some periods, they offer stability and support, in other circumstances, they provide the opportunity to grow and thrive, and sometimes the individual success means simply to break out of their constraints, as Toni: "If I ever get financially stable, I will leave Vienna. It's too hard here. Maybe Switzerland or somewhere quieter." (WP5_AT_V_F_11)

Some urban context, when providing safety and refuge, can turn into sources of inspiration and activation, so that young people, as Afia, wish to return to the city what they have obtained from it: "Now, I feel as I've got something to do here, I feel a part of it because now I feel like I can contribute something to the, how do I say, development." (WP5_DE_H_H_1) This experience underscores the productive site of spaces, the fact that they not only provoke changes, but are themselves subject to change and transformation.

For others, like Ricardo, urban contexts establish and maintain their own rules and limitations: "I'm doing year 12 now [in a second-chance programme], but I know that what really matters is who you know. Without contacts, even with a qualification, it's hard. Around here, getting a job is more about who you know." (WP5_PT_L_A_12) The urban spaces, as seen by Ricardo, distribute wealth and opportunities unevenly and even institutional credentials or formal grades cannot guarantee a successful transition to the labour market.

To sum up, urban spaces do not possess either negative or positive characteristics, but their appropriation during the various stages of young people's life courses can have lasting impact on their quality of life and learning. The less privileged groups, however, are not merely passive victims of spatial inequalities. They are also active agents who construct critical diagnoses of their territories and formulate strategies, real or imagined, for displacement, investment or identity reconstruction, depending on the interplay of the existing spatial, institutional, and structural parameters. Against all odds, they are "able to construct themselves as spatial 'insiders' (although against the ever-present charge of being an 'outsider')." (Gray & Manning, 2022, p. 1414 [original emphasis])

Multi-disadvantaged life contexts – summary

In summing up the analysis of multi-disadvantaged life contexts, it is important to note that their exhaustive examination requires a much deeper elaboration and that not all data could have been included. Nonetheless, the overarching topics have already provided a series of critical perspectives.

On the one hand, the relation between urban spaces and educational outcomes has become even more apparent. Especially in the case of groups in vulnerable positions, spaces are experienced more sensitively and with greater influence on one's educational and life aspirations. Their ambivalent role in young people's life courses, both as a stabilising as well as a disrupting element, underscores the importance of viewing them as thoroughly relational and variable. For some, they offer infrastructural support and a possibility to thrive. This applies in particular for the more privileged groups with strong social status (natives, residents, high socio-economic status, etc.). For others, spaces are experienced as immobilising and depriving of physical and mental capacities, and many times connected with the (formal or symbolic) requirement to justify one's own actions—as job seekers, recipients of social benefits, or as school dropouts. Their seeming unwillingness and low recorded achievements result not only from their visible structural or institutional constraints, but also from their invisible, while internalized, spatial dispositions.

On the other hand, spaces are contested arenas thwarted by political and private interests. In the large urban centres, this is best recognisable in the contexts of limited social housing and the extremely high costs of living. Those who can afford living in the urban centres have already succeeded in securing high standards of living. Others

experience disadvantage simply due to the lack of affordable spaces to learn and educate themselves. Their living spaces are reduced to low-threshold public places or functional sites, such as shopping malls. The latter, for example, offer fancy stores and recreational amusement, yet they hardly can compensate for and inspire young people's ambitions. In this regard, the chapter urges to recognize the inadequate spatial division of population, which tracks young people's life courses without them knowing it. As a consequence, young people not only have to be comparatively more active and spatially mobile (Farrugia, 2015b) than their privileged counterparts, they also have to reformulate their spatial identity.

9.4 Discussion

In this section, the chapter's findings are first complemented with the results of local participatory actions conducted in all four cities, and then embedded in the current research debates at the intersection of education and urban/spatial studies.

As part of CLEAR's participatory activities, a series of *Innovation Forums* (IFs) have been conducted in all four cities[17], in which local policymakers, practitioners, educational and labour market professionals, counsellors, teachers, and young people (N=39) have been invited to reflect on the project's findings and exchange their experiences, perceptions, and ideas. The results of the IFs help to understand the complex urban realities and could be roughly divided into three sections: young people's life contexts, local policy implications, and future research.

In terms of young people's life contexts, what became obvious during the discussions was that young people in multi-disadvantaged positions often experience institutional alienation and rigidity. Feeling invisible and devaluated by the institutions, they perceive that their socio-economic, emotional, spatial, and mental health conditions are overlooked and absent in their educational and career assessments. In response to that, local practitioners see the necessity to intensify a more systematic cooperation between all stakeholders, include non-formal and informal skills and practical experiences into assessment criteria, de-stigmatize non-linear educational trajectories and second-chance education, actively engage young people in the policy design, and promote the inclusion of young people's lived experiences into the decision-making models in youth support. The future research should especially address the role and impact of informal educators, significant others (teachers, counsellors, friends), as well as guidance services in and outside the formal education system in supporting young people's learning aspirations. Thus, urban contexts operate as an aggregate of spatial dispositions, institutional framings, structural opportunities, and social settings that interact with young people's life trajectories and decisions. Those who occur in (temporary and relational) multi-disadvantaged positions have both to tackle the (direct or symbolic) socio-spatial

[17] The results from the Innovation Forum in Barcelona have been reduced to its first round only.

marginalisation and retain their sense of dignity and ambition to pursue their life projects. In this regard, three observations could be made.

The first observation considers the relation between the spatial and the social components of learning and education. As the findings indicate, the compensation of formal educational requirements and qualifications with second-chance programmes and the recognition of non-formal/informal skills takes into consideration only the institutional level of disadvantages. However, re-entering the formal educational and career pathways is closely tied to spatial mobility as well. According to recent studies, spatial mobility among VET applicants significantly increases with longer search durations and adaptation in their decision-making processes. Especially young people "with lower status aspirations adjust their willingness to be mobile depending on regional opportunities." (Hoffmann, 2025, p. 18) However, the spatial mobility in urban settings unfolds differently. While it might be assumed that shorter spatial distances promote social mobility, the socio–cultural distances (Kalalahti, 2023) as well as the exposure to differently institutionalised contexts (Wicht et al., 2025) may paradoxically complicate the social upward mobility.

The second observation relates to the spatial dispersion of educational landscapes and social inequalities. As Willem Boterman and colleagues observe, "[e]ducational landscapes are highly differentiated, as they bring together the historically grown geography of education of a city with the multi-layered institutional context in which it is embedded." (Boterman et al., 2019, p. 3070) In line with recent studies, the chapter argues that residential and school segregation differ both within and across urban contexts (El-Mafaalani & Kemper, 2017), with school segregation exceeding residential segregation (Boterman et al., 2019). In more deprived and low-income neighbourhoods, as the research on US cities illustrates, "schools enrol more disadvantaged students, experience greater absences and disciplinary measures, have fewer experienced or certified teachers, pay teachers lower salaries, and have lower achievement and achievement growth." (Owens & Candipan, 2019, p. 3192) Similarly, in the chapter's city sample, the urban contexts consist of sedimented institutional, architectural, and socio-cultural layers of (dis)advantage, which can hardly be countered with educational measures only and which, at least to some extent, randomly attribute different dispositions to different groups of population.

The third observation relates to the development of specific urban youth subjectivities. Current economies and the allocation of wealth and life opportunities in the cities have "concentrated 'youth-fulness' within urban spaces and produced youth as an urban subject position." (Farrugia, 2015b, p. 848 [original emphasis]) Urban spaces are thus experienced as youth spaces and associated with power, joyfulness, productivity, and a sense of centrality in relation to the more remote parts of the country. Young people from the chapter's sample construct their subjectivity using various temporal and spatial

components: their fragmented life histories, anticipated, at time idealised life prospects, insecure and unstable current occupations, intimate and familiarised neighbourhoods, as well as institutional offers. All combined, urban youth symbolically meanders through the city with an uncompleted subjectivity that is still under construction. Such openness and exposure to vulnerability reveals the ambivalence of the concept of disadvantage—its tendency to label young people as passive victims and passive agents at the same time, ignoring the productive potential of adaptive techniques and sensitivity to spatial and social injustices that young people develop along their pathways (McLeod, 2012).

9.5 Conclusion

The chapter has attempted to analyse and compare multi-disadvantaged life contexts of urban youth in order to understand what learning and living conditions do urban spaces offer and how do such contexts affect the quality of LOs. The answer to this question can be formulated in a series of interdependencies.

On the one hand, a stronger sense of belonging and recognition seems to correlate with greater engagement and motivation of young people. Those attached to marginalised neighbourhoods often perceive education as exclusive and stratified, a filtering mechanism privileging groups with the "right" background. Conversely, when education is embedded in supportive, locally situated networks and recognises diverse life experiences, it regains value as a potential pathway to dignity and self-realisation. This is particularly visible when institutions incorporate young people's voices and value non-formal and informal competences. However, the analysis also reveals that educational engagement is not only shaped by integration, but by young people's individual and collective aspirations, sometimes influenced by "migrant optimism", where higher expectations lead to stronger efforts to succeed. In this respect, vertical (e.g., second-chance schools, supra-company training, coaching) and horizontal networks (friends, siblings, youth workers) play a crucial role in supporting youth navigation and reinforcing bounded aspirations.

On the other hand, the amplification of social and spatial inequalities in urban sites has marginal provable impact on the quality of LOs. While cities are marked by deep spatial, institutional, and symbolic inequalities and divisions, the latter do not automatically translate into poorer LOs. Rather, the coexistence of intensified inequality and rich institutional provision challenges the systemic failure to accommodate fragmented life courses and plural learner identities. In some urban contexts, the education system is symbolically selective, favouring those who conform to institutional norms and penalising those with non-linear or fragmented life trajectories. In other contexts, cities can also enable quick recovery, professional and educational re-entry, as well as social/civic re-engagement. Thus, urbanity amplifies both risk and potential—it does not predetermine under-achievement.

Finally, the navigational capabilities of urban youth tend to be under-represented in their educational achievements. Navigating urban life contexts requires young people to develop sophisticated strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and resilience. Educational achievement in this context reflects not only academic skill but also navigational competence, the ability to decode rules, build relational anchors, and manage instability (see also Chapter 3). Those who succeed are often not the most talented, but the most adept at translating disrupted trajectories into formally recognised achievements. The chapter highlights that success in education cannot be separated from the broader capability to navigate in dynamic and instable life situations. Young people's ability to move through the physical, social, and symbolic spaces is not only a condition for, but also a result of (formal or informal) educational achievement. Thus, the latter cannot be reduced to individual effort or merit, but rather calibrated with the structural and institutional plasticity to absorb diverse biographical pathways.

KEY MESSAGES

The analysis of the life contexts of young people has led to the following conclusions:

Urban spaces amplify social and spatial divisions and inequalities, yet this has marginal impact on the quality of young people's LOs. Rather, it points to the systemic failure to translate the rich institutional provision into meaningful support of those in vulnerable and multi-disadvantaged positions.

School and residential segregation correlate to a certain degree, with school segregation affecting more directly young learners. While deprived neighbourhoods concentrate inequalities and spatial divisions, they also provide emotional, symbolic, and community support to assist in overcoming structural limitations.

The navigational capabilities and adaptive subjectivities of urban youth remain unrecognised by the institutions as educational achievements. Urban youth face a complexity of structural, institutional, and spatial frameworks which coincide in producing settings favourable only to a privileged group of residents.

PART III

BRIDGING RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

10. The Research Landscape on Learning Outcomes: A Structural Topic Modelling Analysis

Tiago Neves, Luís Filipe de Araujo Pessoa, Jozef Zelinka, Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Tanja Sturm & José Pedro Amorim

10.1 Introduction

The concept of learning outcomes (LOs) is widely used at different levels, from the political to the academic, to the professional. Yet, both its definition and application are variable and contested. Indeed, the scope of the concept varies greatly, from a narrow focus on measurable knowledge and skills, to broader outlooks that consider fewer tangible attributes, such as attitudes, critical thinking or ethical understanding. Further, there are relevant ideological clashes regarding the purpose and effects of LOs: while some emphasize their positive role as organizers of learning processes, others criticise what they deem to be a utilitarian approach to education and the imposition of a one-size-fits-all approach. These clashes are inextricable from disputes regarding assessment and accountability, which range from praises to the enhanced transparency and comparability enabled by LOs (Adam, 2004; CEDEFOP, 2009) to condemnations of their disregard for non-measurable aspects of education (Biesta, 2009; Murtonen et al., 2017). Finally, despite attempts to align LOs across EU countries—such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), or the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)—the approaches to LOs can differ significantly from country to country, reflecting varying educational philosophies, policies, and labour market needs (initiatives such as the *OECD Learning Compass 2030* and the *CALOHEE - Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Europe* attest this fact). These questions appear all the more pressing in times of intensifying populism and extremism, which make it crucial to consider the understandings and potential reconstructions of educational systems and their related outcomes. Therefore, in this chapter, we attempt an exploratory mapping of the research landscape on LOs:

- What are the main research areas on LOs and how do they intersect and diverge?

Research on the outcomes of education and learning processes abound as discussed in previous research activities in CLEAR (see Zelinka et al., 2025b). The conducted synthesis review stressed that, over the recent past, both policy and research debates surrounding the quality of learning and LOs have been based on inconclusive and misleading premises. The review demonstrated the flagrant mismatch between expectations of LOs and their actual definition. While students, teachers and other involved actors are driven to constantly deliver high-quality LOs, none of them are made aware of what exactly this

means. What is considered as their achievement, what is left out of the picture and what educational purposes does the endless collection, evaluation and comparison of data serve? Furthermore, such expectations of LOs are not fulfilled because LOs have been associated with a flat understanding of learning which sidelines the life course of people, the intricacies of policy implementation, the inequalities which divide societies, and the disparities between European educational contexts.

This chapter tackles this variety in usage and application through a Structural Topic Modelling (STM) analysis of the international literature on LOs. It considers both qualitative and quantitative studies, published in articles in research databases, that address the definition, implementation, assessment and measurement of LOs. Given that STM enables the analysis of large sets of documents in relation to contextual variables, it can be used to identify dominant concerns, study variations in discourse over time and space, detect trends in political priorities and ascertain the perceived impact of specific policies. It is expected that this work will enable mapping out constellations of the main themes that characterise the research landscape on LOs, thereby offering a clear(er) picture of their prevalence, intersections and divergences. In other words, it is expected that this work will provide an illuminating bird's-eye view over what are—and have been—the main research concerns of the scientific community in what regards as LOs.

The chapter evolves in four steps: *First*, we describe the research approach of the STM and its application in the research on LOs. *Second*, we characterise the case selection, including the collection, pre-processing, and modelling of the topics. *Third*, we present the findings of the STM analysis and describe the resulting categories and models. *Fourth*, we discuss the findings in relation to the current debates on LOs and education at large. The chapter closes with final remarks on the role of STM in analysing the construction of LOs.

10.2 Structural Topic Modelling as research approach

Literature on LOs is highly diverse and focuses on a vast number of topics. While a number of texts are all about LOs, they address the topic from quite different angles and perspectives, namely by focusing on the meaning or on the use of LOs. These texts can be said to be about the same topic, but their content, that is, the words making up the topic and their connection, vary substantially from text to text. STM is a topic modelling method that not only assists in discerning different types of topics, but also in uncovering latent topics within a corpus by seeing texts as a distribution of topics (topic prevalence) and topics as a distribution of words (topic content) with reference to metadata collected for each text in the corpus (Ullstein, 2024; Roberts et al., 2016). Thus, as a research approach, STM is a reasonable solution to tackle the challenge of increasing volumes of textual data, be these interview transcripts, social media data, or policy documents (Roberts et al., 2019). Here, STM comes in handy in addressing some of the limitations of handling large-scale texts by means of more traditional qualitative methods (Rodriguez & Storer, 2019; Chakrabarti & Frye, 2017).

Besides uncovering hidden patterns and themes in documents that would otherwise remain unrecognized, the STM's quantitative framework also enhances the replicability and transparency of social research. Beyond analysing textual patterns through the co-occurrence of words, STM can incorporate document-level metadata as covariates, such as author information, date, location, age, or any other category relevant to gaining a deeper understanding of the data. In short, STM provides for a structured analysis and can offer richer insights compared to other topic modelling methods. Among the main benefits, STM empowers researchers to quantify qualitative data and enhance interpretability through metadata integration.

The workflow in STM consists of four main steps: (1) *Document Ingestion and Pre-processing*, by which the documents and the respective metadata are loaded and the documents pre-processed (including lemmatization, removal of punctuations, numbers, stop words, and infrequent or very frequent words); (2) *Model Estimation*, by which an statistical model for topical and content prevalence is computed taking into account the co-occurrence of words and the influence of the document-level metadata (covariates) on the prevalences; (3) *Evaluation*, by which several models are inferred and assessed through various metrics, aiming at determining the one with the best fit for the underlying data; and lastly (4) *Analysis and Interpretation*, by which the topics content and relationships between topics and covariates are analyzed through several visualizations and tables, allowing researchers to interpret the results and draw insights into how different factors influence topic prevalence and content (Roberts et al., 2016, pp. 990–994).

There are different types of analysis and approaches to interpretation, depending on the applications of the methodology. Several visualizations and artifacts were used to interpret the topics content, including the topics distribution; the most frequent, salient, and exclusive words by topic; the most prevalent documents by topic; the topics proportion by documents; the intertopic distance map, and wordclouds. Additionally, visualizations of the covariates effect on the topic and content prevalence, as well as the topics correlation, were used to identify further topic structures and relationships between metadata and topics/content.

10.3 Case selection

In this section, we briefly describe how the data was collected and pre-processed for the STM analysis and how the topics for the modelling were selected.

Data collection

The data collection was conducted in an initial phase of the CLEAR research project, in April 2024, and included a comprehensive search across publicly accessible databases (N=28). The search was based on pre-established criteria to ensure that the research articles cover CLEAR countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal,

Spain), are written in English, and have an explicit reference to LOs (see Zelinka et al., 2025b).

The initial search yielded 220 articles, of which 44 were excluded from the sample. Of them, 13 articles had no focus on CLEAR countries, 17 articles were not published in scientific journals, but as policy briefs, book chapters, or news articles, 8 articles were not written in English, and 6 articles could not be obtained due to institutional safety restrictions or were otherwise unavailable. The remaining 176 articles were collected and saved on institutional servers.

In the next step, the article contents were extracted and saved in tabular files. For the STM analysis, we used only the main text body, except abstracts, keywords, titles, sub-titles, image captions, tables, figures, mathematical formulas, or references. We have, however, included footnotes whenever they contained relevant information.

Besides the main text, we also collected the articles' metadata. This included a) the name of the first author, b) the name of the scientific journal, c) the source (DOI or URL, if available), d) publication year, e) abstract, f) keywords, g) the Web of Science impact factor, as well as h) the Google Scholar h-index. Not all metadata were available for the *corpus*: 18 articles were published in outlets that do not have a Web of Science impact factor; 9 articles were published in journals that do not have an *h*-index; 16 articles had no keywords; and one article was missing the abstract.

In addition, during a screening process, we indicated a) whether the article focuses on the concept of LOs in education, b) whether it makes an explicit reference to the concept of LOs (or whether it uses the concept as a label), and lastly, c) the article type (non-exclusive) – empirical study, theoretical discussion, or systematic review. The extracted texts (i.e., documents) and the respective metadata (including the publication metadata and the mentioned categorization) have been analysed using STM method.

Pre-processing

In the cleaning process, the column names and data types of the raw data were standardized, and the articles' content spread through multiple columns was merged. Besides the content-related features (title, abstract, keywords, and actual content), the dataset contains the following metadata:

- *textual*: journal name, first author
- *numerical*: year, impact factor (Web of Science), *h*-index (Google)
- *boolean*: focus on LOs (i.e., publications that focus on the concepts of LOs in the context of education); reference to LOs (i.e., publications that makes an explicit reference to the concept of LOs); empirical (i.e., publications that are empirical studies); theoretical (i.e., publications that are theoretical discussions); and review (i.e., publications that are literature review).

After cleaning the dataset, the documents were pre-processed in order to standardize terms, remove irrelevant ones, and construct the terms-document matrix for the *corpus*, which is the basis for the model estimation. The main procedures employed in this step were: lower case conversion; removal of stop words, numbers, punctuations, non-alphanumeric characters, and terms with less than three letters; and word lemmatization. The pre-processing of the dataset resulted in a vocabulary containing 16,272 words.

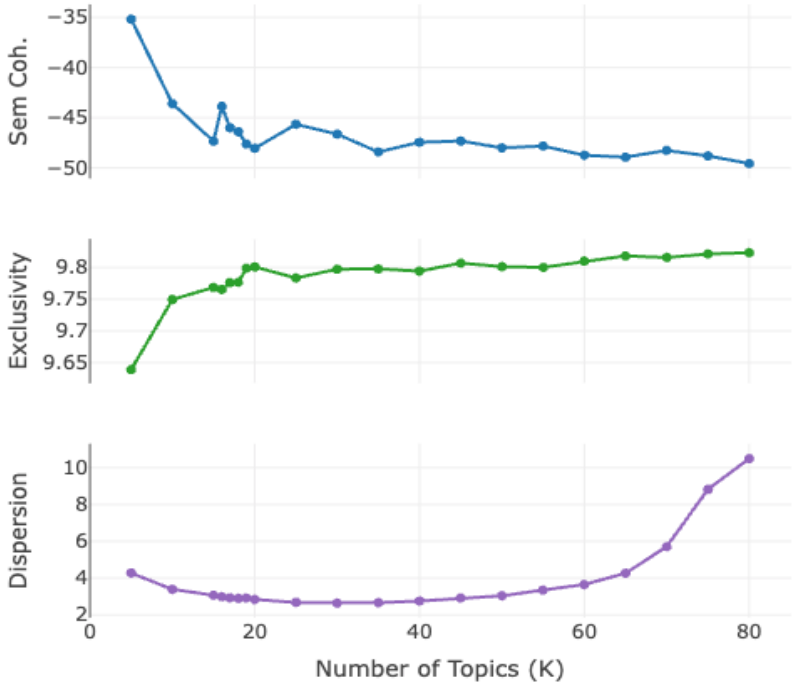
In addition, we pre-processed the following metadata and used them as covariates in the topic model: the articles' boolean features were aggregated in one categorical variable, representing the respective combination of the categories; the impact factor and *h*-index were categorized according to seven equally distributed intervals of their respective values range: very high, high, medium-high, medium, medium-low, low, very low.

Our next step was to explore different threshold values for rarely occurring terms, aiming at reducing the vocabulary (consequently, also reducing noise and the time to estimate the models) without losing relevant contextual information. We tested threshold values within the interval [2, 9] for the minimal occurrence of terms in different documents and assessed the amount of terms and documents removed for each value (the maximum threshold value corresponds to 5 % of the *corpus* size, i.e., 5 % of 176). This analysis suggests that removing terms that occur in 7 or less documents is the best choice. A higher value would lead to a relative smaller reduction of the total number of words considered for the model construction. Besides that, setting a higher threshold could hinder the discovery of some niche, emerging, or relevant topics. Terms that occur in more than 70 % of the documents were also excluded, as they are less likely to discriminate different topics. After removing 13,851 of 16,272 terms (62,106 of 145,268 tokens) due to frequency, our corpus had 176 documents, 2,421 terms, and 83,162 tokens.

Modelling

The estimation of the topic model requires setting *a priori* the number of topics (K) to be modeled. To find an optimal value for K, we estimated several models for different values of K, starting at 5 and increasing its value by 5 until a maximum of 80 topics, and assessed the following metrics: semantic coherence, exclusivity, and dispersion. The metrics for different number of topics are depicted in Figure 10.1. The results suggested a stagnation of the metrics roughly at $K = 15$, $K = 20$; from $K > 25$, the dispersion starts to increase, suggesting a worse fit of the models and no quality improvement of the topics for larger K values. For smaller values of K, we notice a trade-off between semantic coherence and exclusivity, indicating that topics become more exclusive, but less coherent. An additional investigation of models for K within [15, 20] revels that $K = 16$ leads to an increased semantic coherence, while exclusivity remains high (although not at the maximum) and the dispersion low. It suggests, therefore, the best balance of the metrics (see Figure 10.1 below).

Figure 10.1 Metrics of STM model fitting metrics across different number of topics (K)



Source: Author's own elaboration

Moreover, we tested different hypotheses and modelling of the additive and interaction effects of the covariates year, impact-factor categories, and combined boolean categories on the topical prevalence. Although some effects were identified, the results suggest that they are not statistically significant and that a larger dataset is required to assess the interaction effects of the covariates on the topical prevalence.

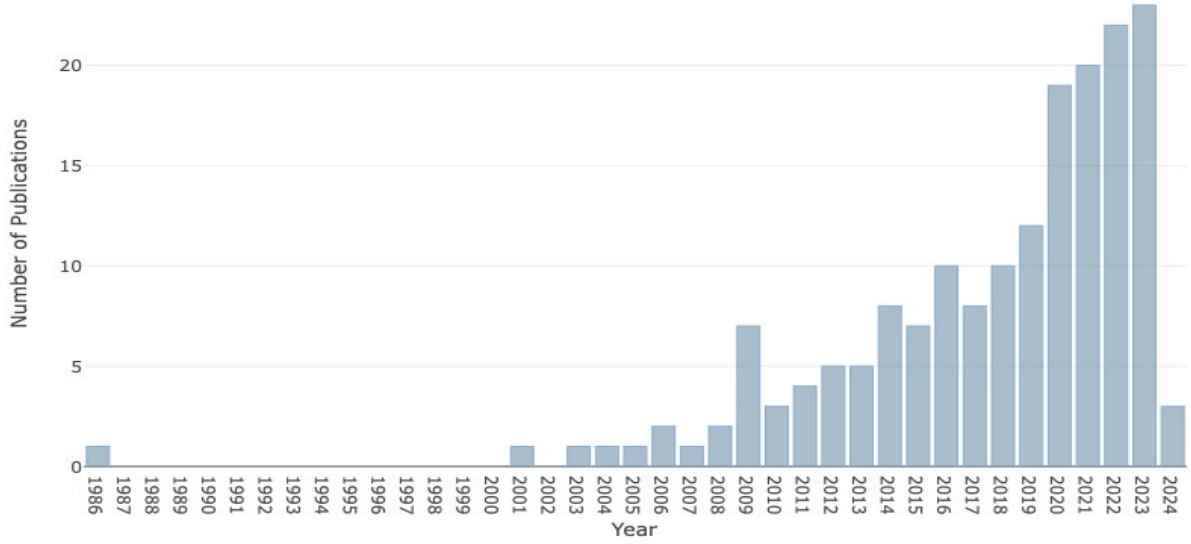
10.4 Results

The STM analysis produced two main types of results. *First*, those that refer the contents identified in the publications that were analysed. *Second*, those that correlate features of the publications (namely dates, impact factors and scientific areas) with aspects of their contents (namely whether they focus on LOs or simply make reference to them, and whether they are theoretical, empirical or literature reviews). In this chapter, we will be focusing on the contents identified through the STM analysis.

This being said, the striking evolution in the number of publications on LOs over the last 5 years—as depicted in Figure 10.2 below—cannot be overlooked. This exponential increase is a clear sign of the currently very high interest in this topic.

With regard to contents, the analysis conducted identified 16 topics. In the following table (see Table 10.1 below) we present their name (generated by a local Large Language Model based on the available topic information), their prevalence (i.e., their percentage in the overall corpus content), and the terms most frequently associated with each topic.

Figure 10.2 Publication years of the articles



Source: Author's own elaboration; the data were collected in April 2024.

Table 10.1 Topic content details

Nr.	Prevalence	Content	Top terms
1.	5.5 %	Dealing with Mistakes in the Classroom	percept, mathemat, complex, mistak, school
2.	4.5 %	Learning Outcomes in Medical Education	patient, intervent, adult, treatment, attent
3.	4.4 %	Personalized Scaffolding in Self-Regulated Learning	scaffold, srl, mobil, metacognit, regul
4.	7.3 %	Interpersonal Relationships and Academic Achievement	school, parent, children, peer, adolesc
5.	5.1 %	Nursing Education and Student Experience	countri, nurs, non, programm, graduat
6.	4.7 %	Inclusive Education for Students with Moderate, Severe, and Complex Disabilities	inclus, belief, post, pre, disabl
7.	6.8 %	Competence-Based Learning Outcomes in Higher Education	game, compet, busi, project, team
8.	3.8 %	Inquiry-Based Science Instruction and Learning Outcomes	style, scienc, inquiri, children, divers
9.	4.9 %	Personalized Feedback Strategies in Computer-Based Learning Environments	learner, feedback, condit, script, argument
10.	8.3 %	Motivation and Learning Outcomes in Education	orient, action, gender, theori, deep
11.	5.6 %	Emotions and Learning Outcomes in Online Learning Environments	prevalence - emot, perceiv, anxieti, onlin, adapt
12.	6.2 %	Second Language Learning Outcomes and Personality Traits	languag, domain, meta, size, learner
13.	13.6 %	Flipped Classroom and Online Learning	onlin, face, technolog, flip, collabor
14.	5 %	Virtual Reality in Education	virtual, condit, solut, prior, solv
15.	8.7 %	The Use of PISA Results in Finnish Education Policy	school, countri, pisa, pupil, nation
16.	5.7 %	Elaborate Feedback and Self-Regulated Learning	feedback, write, learner, journal, prompt

Source: Author's own elaboration.

An exploratory organization of these 16 topics into broader thematic categories that consider the more theoretical or empirical orientation of the topics could look like this:

- *Category 1 – Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Learning*

  This category has a more theoretical orientation and focuses on features such as motivation, emotion, and personality as internal processes that have an important role in learning (and LOs). It encompasses the following topics: Topic 10 – Motivation and Learning Outcomes in Education (Motivational theories, learning strategies); Topic 11 – Emotions and Learning Outcomes in Online Learning Environments (Anxiety, perception, emotional adaptation); Topic 12 – Second Language Learning Outcomes and Personality Traits (Personality, metacognitive traits in language learning); Topic 1 – Dealing with Mistakes in the Classroom (Error perception, complexity, teacher beliefs).

- *Category 2 – Instructional Designs, Educational Technologies and their Evaluation*

  This category is the largest and has a mostly applied or empirical orientation, focusing on the design and evaluation of innovative instructional models and educational technologies; it is mostly geared towards digital learning environments. It includes the following topics: Topic 9 – Personalized Feedback Strategies in Computer-Based Learning Environments (Scripted feedback, adaptive systems); Topic 16 – Elaborate Feedback and Self-Regulated Learning (Written feedback, reflection, learning prompts); Topic 3 – Personalized Scaffolding in Self-Regulated Learning (Scaffolding, metacognition, self-regulation); Topic 13 – Flipped Classroom and Online Learning (Blended models, online vs. face-to-face learning); Topic 14 – Virtual Reality in Education (Simulation, immersive learning, problem solving); Topic 8 – Inquiry-Based Science Instruction and Learning Outcomes (Instructional style, science education).

- *Category 3 – Learner Relationships and Social Contexts: Equity Concerns*

  This category, although small in size, blends empirical analysis with socio-educational theory, focusing on social and developmental factors. It includes two topics: Topic 4 – Interpersonal Relationships and Academic Achievement (Parents, peers, adolescent development); Topic 6 – Inclusive Education for Students with Moderate, Severe, and Complex Disabilities (Beliefs, attitudes, pre/post training).

- *Category 4 – Higher Education: Student Experiences and Competences*

  This category is mostly empirical and focused on the assessment of educational interventions in the higher education sector, regarding both LOs and workforce-oriented goals. It includes three topics: Topic 5 – Nursing Education and Student Experience (Cross-country comparison, graduate outcomes); Topic 7 – Competence-Based Learning Outcomes in Higher Education (Teamwork, business

games, projects); Topic 2 – Learning Outcomes in Medical Education (Patient outcomes, adult education interventions).

- *Category 5 – Education Policy and Large-Scale Assessment*

  This category is constituted by only one topic. Focused on the measurement of academic performance across educational systems, this category has an empirical nature but also policy-theoretical implications. Topic included: Topic 15 – The Use of PISA Results in Finnish Education Policy (National systems, international assessments).

The STM analysis reveals, then, a diversified research landscape, which can be structured around five thematically distinct clusters. It is important to note, however, that nearly two thirds of the literature (63 % of the combined topic prevalence) revolve around Category 2: Instructional Designs, Educational Technologies and their Evaluation (37.4 %) and Category 1: Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Learning (25.6 %). Interestingly, higher education (Category 4: Higher Education: Student Experiences and Competences) constitutes a significant field by itself, totalizing 16.4 % of the combined topic prevalence. Finally, it is also revealing that broader social and political concerns amount to little more than a fifth (20.7 %) of the combined topic prevalence on the issue of LOs (Category 3 – Learner Relationships and Social Contexts: Equity Concerns with 12.0 %, and Category 5 – Education Policy and Large-Scale Assessment with 8.7 %). These results are summarized in Table 10.2.

Table 10.2 Category per prevalence and content details

Category	Prevalence	Constituent Topics
2. Instructional Designs, Educational Technologies and their Evaluation	37.4 %	Topic 9 – *Personalized Feedback Strategies in Computer-Based Learning Environments;* Topic 16 – *Elaborate Feedback and Self-Regulated Learning;* Topic 3 – *Personalized Scaffolding in Self-Regulated Learning;* Topic 13 – *Flipped Classroom and Online Learning;* Topic 14 – *Virtual Reality in Education;* Topic 8 – *Inquiry-Based Science Instruction and Learning Outcomes*
1. Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Learning	25.6 %	Topic 10 – *Motivation and Learning Outcomes in Education;* Topic 11 – *Emotions and Learning Outcomes in Online Learning Environments;* Topic 12 – *Second Language Learning Outcomes and Personality Traits;* Topic 1 – *Dealing with Mistakes in the Classroom*
4. Higher Education: Student Experiences and Competences	16.4 %	Topic 5 – *Nursing Education and Student Experience;* Topic 7 – *Competence-Based Learning Outcomes in Higher Education;* Topic 2 – *Learning Outcomes in Medical Education*
3. Learner Relationships and Social Contexts: Equity Concerns	12.0 %	Topic 4 – *Interpersonal Relationships and Academic Achievement;* Topic 6 – *Inclusive Education for Students with Moderate, Severe, and Complex Disabilities*
5. Education Policy and Large-Scale Assessment	8.7 %	Topic 15 – *The Use of PISA Results in Finnish Education Policy*

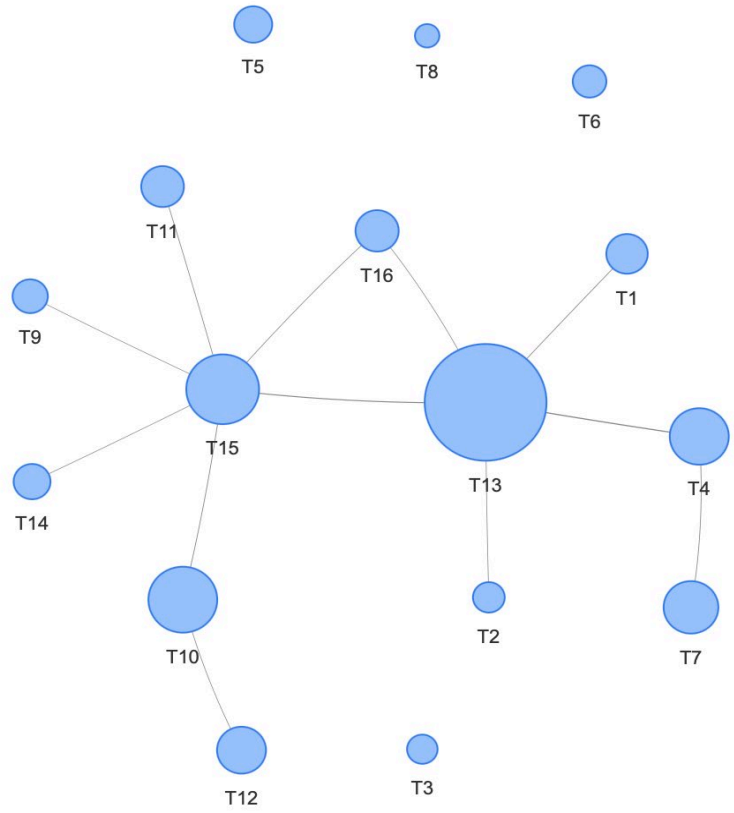
Source: Own elaboration based on the results of STM analysis

The figures reflect a clear predominance of applied research on instructional design and digital learning environments. In other words, there is a clear, strong interest in how specific instructional configurations may enhance learner engagement and performance, as visible in the increasing emphasis on technologically mediated personalized instruction. To put it short, the focus is on the effectiveness of digitally enriched instruction designs and the performance of individual learners, considering their specificities.

It must be noted that the organization of the 16 constituent topics into 5 thematic categories goes beyond – and sometimes differs from – the correlations between topics identified via the structural modelling analysis. The computed correlations are based on the co-occurrence of topics within the documents, i.e., topics are correlated if they appear in several documents together. Thus, correlated topics might be related, but not necessarily similar. Additionally, the topics are constituted based on the co-occurrence of terms in the documents, which does not take into consideration their contextual semantic meaning. Therefore, despite the identified correlations being able to offer interesting insights into thematic relationships, they must be interpreted and assessed based on the actual content and semantics of the topics. To make it clear: it is crucial to analyse what the statistical correlations mean in context. Or, to put it differently, it is crucial to understand that while numbers or figures (e.g., correlation values) may sometimes be the same, their meaning may vary.

Figure 10.3 below shows the topic correlations identified by the Structural Topic Modelling for correlations greater than 0.1. Although the correlations are weak (< 0.2), this analysis can shed light on the complementary relevance of a profound semantic analysis by experts. For example, the topics 3, 5, 6 and 8 have insignificant correlations with the others, i.e., the documents in each of those topics do not discuss or belong to other topics. Meanwhile, a qualitative, interpretative approach such as the one employed above can identify thematic, substantive semantic similarity between those topics and others, enabling their grouping into categories. Likewise, while the topics 13 and 15 have a weak correlation, a qualitative, interpretive approach identifies the specificity of Topic 15 and articulates Topic 13 with other topics instead. This suggests that although they simultaneously appear in documents, they are rather transversal or related themes, but they are not semantically similar. In addition, both Topic 13 (*Flipped Classroom and Online Learning*) and Topic 15 (*The Use of PISA Results in Finnish Education Policy*) show weak correlations with several other topics. In our view, this is explained by the fact that the multiple facets related to these topics have been frequently discussed in the context of the other correlated topics, suggesting an increased or a more central relevance of topics 13 and 15 to the other topics within the context of LOs, forging their own specificities. To conclude, it is important to look at the nature of correlations, questioning their validity and looking for their underlying meaning and semantics.

Figure 10.3 Topic correlations, per STM (corr. > 0.1)

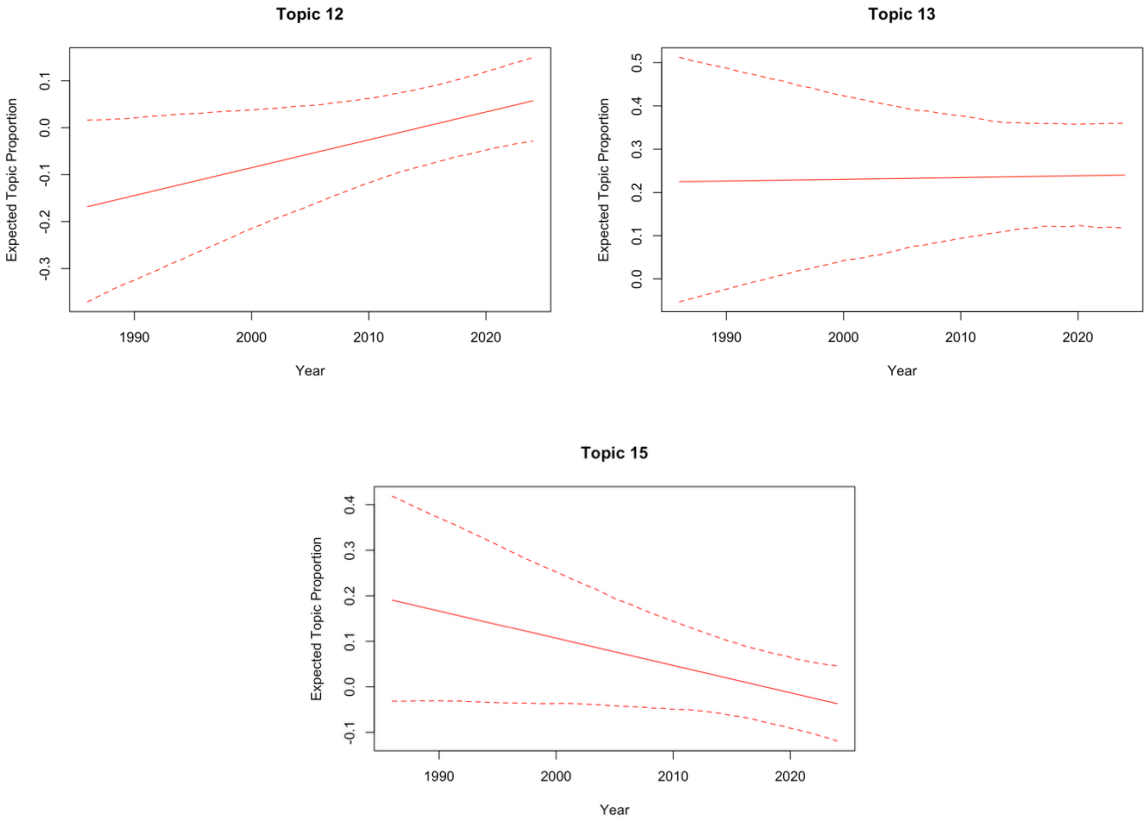


Source: Author's own elaboration

From a methodological perspective, this points to the importance of combining different approaches to make sense of the data, particularly – as in the case above – when the correlations found are not statistically significant. In this regard, the integration of STM with other topic modelling methodologies that take into account the semantic similarity of the topics (e.g., BERTopics) is a promising direction for future endeavours that can enhance the analysis and offer further insights and support.

We additionally investigated the effects of the metadata on the topic prevalence. Although the obtained results are not statistically significant, we were able to identify some interesting trends. For example, we have noted that some topics seem to be gaining traction over the recent years (e.g., Topic 12 – *Second Language Learning Outcomes and Personality Traits*), others seem to have diminished their relevance (e.g., Topic 15 – *The Use of PISA Results in Finnish Education Policy*), while others demonstrate a constant interest of the research community over the years (e.g., Topic 13 – *Flipped Classroom and Online Learning*). Figure 10.4 below depicts the respective effects of year on the expected topic proportion. Given the large confidence intervals, particularly for the earlier years, these results demonstrate a likely trend rather than the ground truth. The analysis of the effects of impact factor and publication categories on the topic prevalence did not identify any significant effect or pattern.

Figure 10.4 Effects of year on the topic prevalence



Source: Author's own elaboration

In the following section, we delve into the most prevalent topics in each of the five categories described above, so as to better illustrate how STM can shed light on the specificities of the factors that shape the quality and construction of LOs. The assumption underlying this exploratory exercise is that the topics identified both translate and constitute an existing state of affairs with regard to the understanding and implementation of LOs.

Delving into the topics

Topic 13, titled Flipped Classroom and Online Learning, is the most prevalent topic in Category 2 – Instructional Designs, Educational Technologies and their Evaluation, which is the most prevalent category: it has a 13.6 % prevalence within a category that accounts for 37.4 % of the topics. The fact that a single topic within such a diversified research landscape amounts to nearly 15 % of all cases is relevant in and of itself, and points to the tightness of the links between education, pedagogy and technology. Indeed, the fact that it is centred on flipped classrooms and online learning is paradigmatic of the weight that innovative, technologically mediated instruction strategies take on in the current landscape of learning opportunities. A flipped classroom, as is well known, reverses the conventional teaching structure. In a flipped classroom, students first get acquainted with new study contents through self-directed study using a range of materials, namely digital

ones, and then attend class to engage in interactive exercises, peer collaboration, and teacher-facilitated application of concepts.

Textual evidence retrieved from the documental corpus reveals an emphasis on the analysis of the capacity of this methodology to strengthen student participation and educational achievement, alongside the imperative for educators to embrace innovative instructional practices. The relevance of this topic has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which catalysed the widespread adoption of remote learning and reinforced the necessity for versatile, high-impact teaching approaches.

The retrieved excerpts typically highlight the pedagogical benefits (namely increased student engagement, motivation and satisfaction, and improved LOs) and the technical challenges (including the need for teacher adaptation and technical support) of implementing the flipped classroom approach. They also provide examples of its successful implementation in various subjects and contexts (particularly in higher education).

The most prevalent topic in the second most prevalent category (Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Learning) is Topic 10, titled Motivation and Learning Outcomes in Education, with a prevalence of 8.3 %. It is immediately visible that the core of this topic—the relationship between motivation and academic performance—was also touched upon in the previously mentioned topic (Flipped Classroom and Online Learning), although there it was mentioned specifically in the context of a particular instructional design. Here, the relationship between motivation and LOs is explored more broadly, including the role of achievement goals, self-determination, and interest in promoting academic achievement. Also, it is explored from the standpoint of multiple disciplines, including psychology, education, and sociology. The second easily noticeable aspect of this figure is that it is much lower than that of the most prevalent topic in the previously mentioned category (8.3 % versus 13.6 %).

The texts present an examination of multiple motivational frameworks, including expectancy-value theory, social cognitive theory, self-determination theory, and achievement goal theory, in their relationship with LOs. Additionally, they emphasize that deep learning approaches and intrinsic motivation are crucial factors in educational achievement, as they assess the impact of teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning on their LOs. Importantly, LOs are understood as meaning different things or having different dimensions, including theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and generic skills.

The excerpts retrieved in this topic provide a framework for understanding the complex relationships between motivation, LOs, and educational contexts, a most relevant theme given its significant implications for teaching practices, student engagement, and academic achievement.

The most prevalent topic in the third most prevalent category (Higher Education: Student Experiences and Competences) is Topic 7, titled Competence-Based Learning Outcomes in Higher Education, with a prevalence of 6.8 %. The documents present research on innovative educational strategies including business simulation games, portfolio methodologies, and game jam activities as tools for improving student achievement. The development of competences, the efficacy of non-traditional teaching strategies, and the obstacles encountered during implementation are transversal themes. The topic of competence-based LOs in higher education has an interdisciplinary nature, drawing on concepts and methods from the education sciences, psychology, sociology, and economics. While not often explicitly addressed in the texts, the combination of competences and higher education suggests a concern with the relationship between education and the labour market.

The textual data considered here encompass a range of theories, including social constructivist theory, experiential learning theory, and self-determination theory, which highlight the importance of active learning, social interaction, and self-directed learning in the development of competences and skills. Like the two previous topics, this one also touches upon the issue of motivation, namely by mobilising approaches such as self-efficacy theory and flow theory; this makes it increasingly clear that motivation is a rather transversal theme, on which other themes hinge. Multiple facets of LOs are identified in the documents, ranging from universal competencies to targeted managerial skills such as analytical problem-solving, effective communication, and team collaboration. Critical thinking, creativity, and innovation are emphasized as fundamental educational goals. Metacognitive skills, such as self-reflection and self-regulation, are deemed essential for effective learning and competence development.

The excerpts considered in this topic highlight the development of competences and skills as a key goal of higher education, a feature that needs to be placed within the broader context of economic and political contexts in which higher education operates, and needs to be considered in the development of educational policies, namely in the ways in which they seek to articulate the educational system and the labour market.

Last in prevalence come, as noted above, topics related to broader social and political concerns. The most prevalent topic in the fourth most prevalent category (Learner Relationships and Social Contexts: Equity Concerns) is Topic 4, titled Interpersonal Relationships and Academic Achievement, with a prevalence of 7.3 %. It is clear from the topic title that it revolves around a somewhat watered-down take on social issues, which are approached from a fairly individual-based stance focused on interpersonal relationships. In this context, the more political dimension, although not absent, is only slightly touched upon. Literature in this topic examines how social connections—including family, educator, and peer relationships—influence academic performance. Research indicates that nurturing bonds with parents, teachers, and classmates contribute

positively to educational success, whereas strained or antagonistic relationships tend to undermine achievement. It should be highlighted, however, that the research underscores the complexity of academic prediction, which is seen as requiring the analysis of interconnected social-emotional variables such as adult guidance relationships, peer belonging, and accessible support structures. In disciplinary terms, the literature in this topic draws on theories and methods from psychology, sociology, and education.

The texts present studies informed by several theories, including attachment theory, self-determination theory, and social support theory, which offer a framework for understanding the mechanisms by which interpersonal relationships influence academic achievement. In these studies, the evaluation of LOs spans academic performance, social connectivity, and mental-emotional health domains. Regarding measurement strategies, these combine objective testing, subjective reporting, and behavioural documentation approaches.

The excerpts retrieved in this topic cover, then, multiple social-affective factors that influence academic achievement, and which also need to be considered when developing effective interventions aimed at improving student outcomes. These include the role of teacher-child and parent-child relationships, peer acceptance, and social support.

Finally, the fifth category (Education Policy and Large-Scale Assessment) includes only one topic: Topic 15 – The Use of PISA Results in Finnish Education Policy, which has an 8.7 % prevalence. Interestingly, this is the topic with the second highest prevalence in the set of 16 topics, surpassed only by Topic 13, on Flipped Classroom and Online Learning (which, has seen above, has a prevalence of 13.6 %). Therefore, although this is the category with the lowest prevalence, its only topic is the second most prevalent across all topics. This seemingly paradoxical situation may be explained by the fact that, although the topic is quite specific and narrow, it nonetheless attracted a good deal of attention given what was regarded (at some point in history, at least), as the Finnish miracle in education, which refers to Finland's consistently high performance in international assessments like PISA, combined with a focus on equity and teacher autonomy. Although this view has meanwhile been complexified, it is undeniable that, in the search for effective ways of improving students' academic performance, the Finnish case appeared at one point has something that needed to be studied in order to be duly replicated elsewhere. The literature in the topic analyses how Finnish education authorities employ PISA assessment data in policy development, including the ways in which policymakers interpret these international results and incorporate them into rationales for educational reforms and strategic initiatives. This literature draws on concepts from education policy, sociology, and psychology to make sense of the use of PISA results in the Finnish education policy.

It should be noted that the topic draws upon different strands of theoretical constructs: on the one hand, governmentality theory is used for analysing power mechanisms in

education policy formation; on the other hand, assessment and evaluation theories, in particular the principle that systematic evaluation can enhance educational effectiveness. That is, a more political approach is combined with a more technical, educational one.

10.5 Discussion of the findings

The chapter has probed the usefulness of STM to mapping out the research landscape on LOs. As an innovative methodology, STM offers a powerful blend of quantitative rigor and qualitative insight. It also proves helpful through its ability to integrate metadata in the textual analyses, thus making it particularly suited for the Social Sciences. However, there are as always trade-offs and limitations to be considered. In particular, model sensitivity and subjectivity in the interpretation phase needs to be adequately addressed. Also, it is essential to cross-validate the insights with expert knowledge.

As seen above, Instructional design and educational technology (Category 2) dominate the research landscape, accounting for over one-third (37.4 %) of all topic content, with Topic 13 (Flipped Classroom and Online Learning) alone representing 13.6 %, the most prevalent topic in the corpus. Cognitive and affective dimensions of learning (Category 1) follow with 25.6 %, emphasizing theoretical insights into motivation, emotion, and learner psychology, notably via Topic 10 (Motivation and Learning Outcomes). Despite their smaller footprint, Categories 3–5 introduce critical social, experiential, and policy-level perspectives, offering a broader interpretive frame for understanding LOs.

With regard to intersections between contents, they are found across distinct topics and categories. For example, motivation emerges as a transversal axis, bridging cognitive psychology, instructional design, and competence development in higher education (Topics 10, 7, and 13). Further, self-regulated learning (SRL) can be found at the intersection of theoretical and applied perspectives (Topics 3, 9, and 16). Of particular importance to this chapter is the very notion of LOs, which emerges a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses cognitive, emotional, social, and practical domains (Topics 10, 7, and 12). This being said, their assessment is mostly of a quantitative nature.

Yet, there are also divergences to be found, both thematic and epistemological. For example, while Categories 2 and 4 are mostly empirical, Category 1 leans toward conceptual approaches. Another relevant divergence is between a focus on individuals or on systems: while the vast majority of topics focuses on individual learners (and issues like metacognition or motivation), Topic 15 offers a system-level policy perspective. Finally—and this may be of particular relevance in today's world, regarding not only strictly educational issues but also political questions—there is a divergence between what might be termed technological determinism (e.g., Topics 13 and 14) and a socio-political critique (Topics 4, 6, 15). This is highlighting differing assumptions about how LOs should be improved or explained. Yet, this divergence between technological determinism and a socio-political critique must be understood in the context of a clear dominance of applied pedagogy and digital innovation, as seen in the overwhelming emphasis on instructional

effectiveness, particularly via technology-mediated environments. These instrumental concerns with optimizing learner engagement and measuring outcomes relegate structural or equity-based analyses to a lower level of prevalence, and social justice, equity, and structural inequalities are far from being central themes. Technology appears to be widely regarded as a problem-solving tool. It is far from clear, however, that its use addresses all the problems that need solving; rather, by rendering longstanding social problems (even more) invisible, it may have unintended harmful consequences.

10.6 Conclusion

To conclude, two main ideas can be drawn from this application of STM to explore the research landscape on LOs. The first is that, although it needs to be refined and sophisticated, it has already managed to deliver a broad, plausible and original picture of such landscape. Second, it has pointed to a clear need for integrative studies that bridge instructional design and policy, and individual outcomes and structural determinants. These bridging efforts might provide an impetus for rebalancing the literature, namely by engaging more with equity and inclusion in outcome-focused studies, and emphasizing contextual and systemic conditions in learning assessments. Bridging efforts may require more interdisciplinary dialogue, namely between educationalists, cognitive scientists and education policymakers to build a more comprehensive theory of LOs.

KEY MESSAGES

We can formulate the following key messages based on the chapter's results:

The chapter shows that STM can be a valuable, innovative methodology for analysing the research landscape on LOs literature, although it is exploratory and mostly descriptive in nature.

The analysis reveals a clear prevalence, in the research literature, of the application of pedagogical methodologies and tools, often of a technological nature, meant to improve the effectiveness of individual learning over social and political concerns with systemic equity issues.

Motivation and self-regulation emerge as fundamental features for successful learning with regard to individual traits analysed in the literature; they are related to the background of students and therefore relate to the fewer mentioned aspects of equity.

11. A Quali-Quantitative Appraisal of Stakeholders' Room for Manoeuvre to Improve Educational Systems

Eduardo Barberis, Päivi Naumanen, Tiago Neves & Francisco Pérez Basso

11.1 Introduction

Since the seminal work by Lipsky (1980), policy research is aware of the key role street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) have, but also of the constraints they face in daily practice. Inadequate resources, difficulties in evaluating performance, and the struggle to balance personal motivation with client satisfaction are among the issues Lipsky highlights: "The typical teacher, policeman, welfare worker—indeed anyone who regularly meets the public—seems to have an image of himself or herself as working under great strain and with considerable sacrifice to provide clients protection or service no one else would be willing to provide" (Lipsky, 1980, pp. 82f.).

This classic problem, which has been explored in over forty years of implementation studies, is particularly significant in our field of interest: the definition, implementation, and practice of learning outcomes (LOs). Several factors make street-level bureaucracy in dealing with LOs worthy of attention—including:

- *The rise of managerialist approaches in education*. New Public Management (NPM) in public service, including education and training, is said to have reduced professional autonomy. Promoting approaches like the standardized quantification of SLBs' actions, for example, means "policy-makers require evidence of measurable and promotable success, which may discourage a more developmentalist approach to teaching" (Taylor, 2007, p. 561; see also Brodkin, 2007). At a more general institutional level, principles of accountability and data reporting influence the ranking and sorting of educational institutions, and consequently the functioning of teaching and learning activities themselves (Lasky, 2012).
- *The conflict over the construction of LOs*. The SLB approach shows that resistance emerges when top-down policy priorities do not align with professional identities and theories of 'good' education. Such resistance can also be motivated in pragmatic terms, e.g., when top-down requirements imply a workload that SLBs consider unbearable. While blatant dropping of policy requirements may be an option (Mutereko & Chitakunye, 2015), other strategies of deflection, adjustment and obstruction may be common.
- *The interplay between SLBs and mid-to-low level bureaucrats (MLBs)*. Much like front-line workers, MLBs who are just a step away from street-level work, such as school principals and instructional designers, face similar challenges. They often bridge grand reforms and the minute machinery of teaching and learning. Not rarely have they been SLBs themselves: thus, they are stuck in a middle, ambivalent position between top-down and bottom-up pressures. Instructional designers are a good

example, gaining prominence in light of continuing, debated challenges to the effectiveness of education (Akella, 2024), whether it is COVID-19 and the role of distance education, or the growth of workfarist trends in social assistance, requiring new skills for people with difficult transitions to employment.

In this respect, we argue that insights from our analysis can enhance the understanding of the workings of policy processes in implementing LOs. This could potentially contribute to governance structures that are more attentive to SLBs and MLBs as cornerstones of effective policy-making. Stemming from the main research aims of CLEAR, this chapter aims to shed light on the micro-level of practices, professional orientations, constraints, and enabling factors faced by staff working within key institutions implementing and utilizing LOs as a key tool in their work. It sheds light on how these factors affect their visions of youth's life courses, their representation of youth filtering into their professional agency, and their framing and discourses on target groups and LOs.

Thus, the specific lens through which we examine this general question within CLEAR is the room for manoeuvre as perceived by the participants. We maintain that their take on framing discourses on education and training, including the definition of LOs, is key because their boots-on-the-ground approach is what turns policies into outcomes. This is not to blame these key actors but to place their role within the opportunity structures in education and training policy (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015), focusing on the agency side of a complex agency-structure conundrum to understand how policy implementers contribute to the construction of LOs. In summary, we aim to address one of CLEAR's main research questions in the area of life course research: "What factors are involved in the construction of LOs and how does their interplay shape expectations on certain levels of LOs?". The answer provided in this chapter lies at the institutional and structural levels, as we address the focus key actors in public and private bodies have about individual development and how they (do not) cooperate in defining outcomes of good learners and (under)achievers. We will do this by emphasizing the role of policy implementers as contributors to the street-level co-construction of LOs and life courses, whether they are (not) willing and/or aware (Rambla & Kovacheva, 2023; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022).

The literature—and the everyday encounters in education and training settings—show that expressions of discouragement are not uncommon among SLBs and MLBs working in the education, youth, training, and labour market systems (Evans & Harris, 2004). Many of them feel trapped within a system that offers little room for manoeuvre and for expressing their voice, constrained by limited resources, top-down policy directives, and complex social challenges, compounded by resentment from students, families, and policymakers (Brodkin, 2012; Barberis & Buchowicz, 2015) and exacerbated by the adoption of neoliberal policy agendas and NPM measures, which affect their operational space (Taylor, 2007).

At the same time, these actors' personal and professional mandates and values drive a strong commitment to crucial societal goals, such as reducing inequalities, supporting young people in multi-disadvantaged situations, and fostering meaningful LOs. This often translates into a proactive orientation, with a desire to assert their priorities and influence the status quo in directions they consider appropriate (Brodkin, 2012; Pantić, 2015).

Drawing on CLEAR project data—including a quantitative survey with experts and stakeholders, qualitative interviews with local planners, managers, and implementers of educational and training programs, as well as insights from participatory innovation forums—this chapter analyses stakeholders' perspectives on current and future challenges in education and its outcomes, focusing on their perceived room for manoeuvre. It provides an overview of general findings across CLEAR countries while highlighting specific examples from Italy, Finland, Spain, and Portugal, since preliminary research outputs from CLEAR expert surveys indicate that stakeholders in these countries have divergent understandings of key transformations in education policy, particularly in relation to the targeting, definition, assessment, and monitoring of LOs (Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report).

Identifying areas where different stakeholders perceive room for manoeuvre is a crucial dimension in education, training, and youth policymaking, as it lays the foundation for agency and advocacy, with problem-setting serving as the initial step in the policy process. Again, as Lipsky (1980, p. 233) observed, public sector services rarely operate with unitary goals, and normative frameworks often simplify complex questions about what constitutes 'good education' and how to achieve it. Disentangling the nuanced—and at times conflicting—discourses circulating within policy arenas is therefore essential for understanding the practical and potential outcomes of relevant measures, particularly in terms of stakeholder support, compliance, and the improvement of policy reforms (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022): what room for manoeuvre and agency do key stakeholders maintain they have, and what are the potential consequences—in terms of priorities, as well as the personal and professional investments required to address future challenges? To answer these questions, the chapter develops as follows: first, we provide a context, framing our cases with data from the CLEAR expert survey (WP6). Then, we analyse three dimensions of SLBs' and MLBs' action, based on interviews with key policy actors (WP4):

- *Expressions of discouragement and powerlessness*: What professionally distresses our interviewees may hinder their perceived space of agency;
- *Expressions of empowerment*: How do they cope, and what makes them feel empowered may enable their agency to overcome perceived constraints;
- *Room for manoeuvre*: Strategies and practices actors use to achieve personally or professionally relevant goals despite constraining contexts.

Finally, a discussion part recaps main trends and discourses, and draws perspective challenges for the implementation of effective practice in education and training—e.g., in contrasting educational inequalities, in accompanying and guiding youth transitions, and in disentangling underachievement—with particular reference to a reflexive and aware use of LOs.

11.2 Context

The CLEAR expert survey (n=494) included about 50 % private or public actors active in planning or implementing relevant policies at the national or subnational level, with the remaining being academic, social and political parties' experts. As our survey did not include front-line education staff (teachers, trainers, school principals), respondents can be predominantly considered MLBs.

Focussing on the likely and desired future of LOs, our analysis shows cleavages between national public and private actors (see Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report). Generally, both national public and private actors tend to favour the expansion of standardized and quantitative LOs. However, significant national variations exist: Finnish respondents mostly challenge the desirability of neoliberal trends in education, such as the relevance of "merit" and "excellence", the primacy of credentialism, the effectiveness of statistical measurement of LOs. While Italian respondents show similar trends, Portuguese and Spanish ones view these issues less negatively.

What is more relevant here is that a cleavage exists between planners and implementers across the policy arena (national and subnational public; private). Hence, we aggregated their data to compare opinions on key education and LOs trends, showing structural gaps that may impact policy implementation (see Table 11.1)[18].

The general pattern is that social and political parties are sceptical about the trends of standardization and quantification of LOs; policy planners advocate for these trends, although not always as hardliners; policy implementers have more misgivings, aligning closer with social and political parties, while respondents both planning and implementing policies have in-between stances.

For example, planners are more likely to support standardized measures and are optimistic about improving LO measurement systems. Implementers, however, are less

[18] Classification based on self-declaration (multiple choice possible) in response to the question: "G6. Which of the following statements best describes your current position?". *Policy planners* (n=75): persons in charge of planning/programming policy measures with a public body at national or subnational level, or in a private agency; *policy implementers* (n=107): persons in charge of implementing policy measures with a public body at national or subnational level, or in a private agency; *Both planning and implementing* (n=70): persons in charge of planning/programming and implementing policy measures with a public body at national or subnational level, or in a private agency; *Social and political parties* (n=221): members of universities, think-tanks, political parties, youth organizations, civil society organizations.

Items on policy trends in LOs and education were selected based on their significance and theoretical relevance. The most relevant gaps between implementers and planners are highlighted in bold.

negative about opposition to standardized LOs, having a more nuanced representation of their functioning, and viewing them as potential stressors. This fear of stress may explain their preference for a system of descriptors and qualifications, probably seen as a relief in everyday work—especially considering that respondents are mostly MLBs that may think it positive to impose such measures on SLBs to simplify their job—potentially with conflicting views between MLBs and SLBs. This quantitative assessment highlights potential stressors for SLBs and MLBs, which we will explore further with qualitative data in the following sections.

Table 11.1 Opinions on future trends of LOs and education – selected items

Survey questions	Policy planners		Policy implementers		Both planning and implementing		Social and political parties		Total	
Look again forward to the next ten years. How likely/desirable the following statements on policy trends will be in that timeframe? Please, rate each statement from 1 (not likely at all) to 7 (very likely)	Likely	Desirable	Likely	Desirable	Likely	Desirable	Likely	Desirable	Likely	Desirable
A national system of standardized measurement of LOs will become part of the education system	**5.19**	**5.19**	**4.71**	**4.77**	4.63	5.03	4.81	4.37	4.82	4.69
More policy stakeholders will oppose statistical measurement of learning outcomes questioning its reliability	4.27	**3.2**	4.33	**4.06**	4.47	3.48	4.17	4.14	4.27	3.88
The reliability and validity of statistical measurement of LOs will considerably improve	**4.89**	**5.77**	**4.68**	**5.3**	4.83	5.72	4.37	5.36	4.59	5.47
The increased role of measures of learning outcomes will become more stressful for educators and learners	**4.81**	**2.82**	**5.44**	**3.42**	4.95	3.25	5.29	3	5.2	3.11
The statistical measurement of learning outcomes will reduce educational inequalities	**4.07**	**5.42**	**3.48**	**4.76**	3.65	5.21	3.4	5.05	3.56	5.07
A formalized structure of learning level descriptors and qualifications (i.e., a national qualification framework) will increasingly define learning outcomes	**5.19**	**4.89**	**4.71**	**5.2**	4.63	4.79	4.81	4.54	4.82	4.78

Source: Deliverable D6.1 Expert's Opinion Report (mean values, scale 1-7)

11.3 Analysis

Expressions of discouragement and powerlessness

This section addresses the respondents' voicing of powerlessness, discouragement and anxiety. It looks at the topics and issues that distress or raise concern among interviewees when discussing LOs and their governance. Four themes emerged in the interviewees' discourses.

Lack of organisation and ineffective cooperation

Our interviewees frequently work within the boundaries between policy-making and practical work, attempting to translate policy goals into concrete actions. As providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), they also work at the interface between education and the world of work, and can be seen as important intermediaries between schools and workplaces. Operating at these intersections often requires bridging the gaps and resolving conflicts. In order to work effectively, listening to the expectations and needs of policymakers, training users and different parties of the labour market is required. In such an environment, isolation and lack of cooperation create additional difficulties in their daily operations. The interviewees' expressions of frustration and anxiety often relate to the lack of systematic and coordinated communication as well as cooperation between the different parties, services and actors.

For instance, some Portuguese interviewees complain about the lack of shared visions and coordinated actions among companies, schools, and public bodies, reinforcing the mismatch between training provisions and social parties' needs.

> *I think for now there is no network setup because (...) companies, schools, and the State and Government, are all very focused on their own problems and not on how to solve them. (WP4_PT_N_T_LM_4)*

> *They only come to us when they need us to take in the young people for the internship, but when it comes to deciding what to teach, what will be worked on in the course, they don't remember that we exist. (WP4_PT_L_A_LM_3)*

Consistently, an Italian interviewee reports that even plain communications between different services and actors—such as Public Employment Services, training institutions and training users—can be severely hampered and remain ad hoc or dependent upon the activity of the person in charge. As a result, for example, a migrant who does not speak the language will only receive information about services in Italian.

A common concern shared by education and training providers in all research locations is to attract enough suitable and skilled students to join training programmes. This is where effective cooperation between the various parties involved is seen as an important tool for enhancing the attractiveness of training, and ultimately demand-offer matching. However, a Spanish representative of workers' organisations considers that there is insufficient cooperation and investment in training on the part of enterprises and

employers. The representative of the business organisation, on the other hand, criticises the vocational guidance of training institutions for not communicating current labour market needs to students.

> *Many companies lack qualified staff not only to replace retired employees but also to maintain their current activity without further changes. Young people do not apply for jobs in the industry because they don't know these sectors at all. They are the victims of flawed guidance. (WP4_ES_C_B_LM_3)*

In the ICT sector, keeping education and training up to the pace and level of technological developments in the world of work is seen as a critical factor in making education and training more attractive and raising students' skills levels. Finnish ICT actors call for more cooperation between different sectors and levels of education to better address the multidisciplinary and increasingly cross-cutting skills, needs of working life and enterprises. An Italian interviewee, however, believes it is impossible for education to meet market expectations because of the rapid speed of technological change and the diversity of skills needs in enterprises. A training representative in the sector therefore sees his job as follows:

> *Our work is essentially a flywheel that never stops, so what is done today might be questioned tomorrow, or even need to be redone differently because the dynamics of the web change, search engine dynamics change, and so it's an endless cycle of updates. Therefore, the enormous demand for time is a critical issue; time and, in some cases, finding the correct information, because unfortunately, it's a topic often dominated by self-proclaimed experts. So, being able to discern and choose the right training paths is crucial. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_1)*

Students' poor learning skills, low motivation and divergent levels of competence

Irrespective of the country and study location, a recurrent concern expressed by interviewees is students' low motivation and lack of skills. The number of students enrolling in some programs has fallen significantly, and many interviewees consider that the basic competences of those entering training have also declined. According to a Portuguese interviewee, courses have had to be lightened in order for students to pass them. A Spanish training provider suspects that the admission criteria for some training programs have been loosened to the extent that the overall level of competence of graduates has declined. Some respondents see the problem mainly in the misguided attitudes of trainees, low motivation, lack of work ethic and erosion of social skills. An Italian ICT trainer considers that the biggest challenge is to motivate a group of students with divergent level of readiness and skills to the point where the students not only complete the training but also learn something. A Finnish expert in social and health care describes some students as grown up sheltered. It is maintained that they are not able to work hard and independently and perceive feedback as negative and withdraw from the course or change their field of study.

> *Part of the student population is such that we can't keep them in the sector because they have to work at this job. It is no longer group work full-time and among some of them there is pretty much the fact that they are supported to a very large extent. [--] And then when you enter working life, you should be able to perform independently. And some young people find it really difficult to accept feedback. All feedback is perceived as negative, even if it would improve the activity. And then they feel bad and then they stop training or start to do something else. (WP4_FI_E_S_LM_4)*

While a sort of "victim-blaming" seems to prevail among responses, some interviewees reflect on social and structural factors for students' low motivation. The underlying causes of weak motivation and poor learning are related to the poor labour market prospects, temporary, fixed term and part-time jobs, unsatisfactory and, according to some, undignified working conditions and low pay. Increasingly fewer young people are attracted to work in the hospitality sector in particular, but also in the social health sector. When comparing working conditions in different sectors, the Spanish representative provocatively describes the hospitality sector as a "hell" and the health sector as a "purgatory", while jobs in ICT are comparable to those in Silicon Valley.

> *[In the ICT] these [jobs] are the desired ones, the ones that have great working conditions, well paid, they have talent scouts constantly they have Las Vegas in Silicon Valley as a target. The one in purgatory is [health service]: after a great academic effort, economically they are not as well paid as they should be and they have to make a great effort which encourages them to burn out—that's why I put them in purgatory. And hell is hospitality: lousy working conditions, low wages, split shifts, you work in the weekends, and low social esteem. This is hell. (WP4_ES_C_B_LM_1)*

Lack of resources, inadequate methods or equipment, overworking

Some interviewees feel powerless when facing the fact that they are unable to help young people who have major problems in learning or finding their own way. Lack of resources, outdated teaching content and methods, poor quality of teaching or insufficiently qualified and trained staff and, above all, lack of time are often highlighted as key issues affecting poor LOs. For some respondents these factors also have a critical impact on control over one's work and well-being, often causing anxiety and stress. An Italian guidance expert from local youth service speaks about young people who come to ask for help almost daily, but her "lonely" youth service is unable to provide these young adults with the kind of support they would need. However, these young people receive neither training nor any help from anywhere and are left completely alone, which, according to the interviewee, weighs heavily on her heart.

> *Well, this is something I give up on. Almost every day, some young person comes to me and I wonder, 'How do I help this one?' There's nothing, we're just a lonely service, and there's nothing for them. It would be enough to activate more practical internships, almost like social inclusion programs, or perhaps increase the number*

of social inclusion internships. That would already be beneficial. Instead, even those are scarce. I realize there is nothing for these young people, and then they grow up and become troubled... and goodbye (WP4_IT_M_P_E_5)

Many interviewees lament that inadequate resources and time pressure reduce their opportunities to work at their best, and the experience of success in achieving goals is limited, which in the longer term can lead to professional frustration. A Finnish interviewee, for instance, feels that he is gradually becoming somehow an "office rat" who, due to the current multitude of mixed tasks and overwork, is no longer able to perform his job in a way that is both meaningful to him and necessary to improve students' LOs and develop employment pathways suitable for them.

Well, if I could do the job, how I feel that this job should be done. So, my job would basically be to spend about 30 percent of my working time at the workplaces. In other words, I would be familiarising myself with these entrepreneurs' working processes, how work is done there, what kind of products are made, how the company works. And in that way to be able to determine what kind of labour and skills are needed and within what timeframe. I know some of the companies in this area, but in order to do this work better, I should know it better. [...] But in this house, we have become a bit like office rats. We don't really get out into the field much anymore. It's a personal problem that I'm struggling with. (WP4_FI_P_K_E_3)

Conflicting policy objectives, rigid governance framework, top-down policy

In addition to resource and operational limitations, the control and autonomy of educational actors over their work is often limited by legislative constraints, rigid curricula, a top-down model of education policy, or conflicting objectives of policy reforms.

For example, in Finland, some interviewees in the social and health care sector describe reforms in the field whose objectives are often incompatible with each other, which has increased the workload and stress of training providers. The sector has been undergoing nationwide reorganisation for a few years with the key objective of improving access to social and health services for citizens. However, in recent years, it has also been subject to major austerity measures. Furthermore, the qualification criteria for training in the sector have been revised lately. Respondents in the sector are trying to implement the goals of the restructuring, provide training in line with the newly reformed qualification criteria, while at the same time pursuing austerity programs.

Many Italian interviewees see their ability to influence the education policy process as non-existent or inadequate, as the policy regulatory framework is perceived as very rigid, slow and bureaucratic. Few local or regional influencers, decision-makers or players take initiatives or seek to influence the process. One respondent calls for the process of education and training policy to speed up, so that it can respond more flexibly to the needs of a changing and complex world and working life. Furthermore, this SLB insists on the policy process being opened up and allowing for a fairer involvement of education practitioners in the decision-making process. In her view, frontline actors such as herself,

who work with companies and employees on a daily basis, are well placed to agilely identify changing needs in the world of work and should therefore be given a greater say in education policy.

> *Between the ideation, defining the needs, and implementation, we should be able to speed up the process and have more say. I insist on this because we are truly on the front lines. I have an interest in advancing my organization, and I have an interest in talking to companies. We dedicate perhaps a third of our work to speaking with companies, professionals, and workers. It's a daily effort. For example, if I'm at a gas station filling up and I find out they need someone, I'll talk to them because it's my field. This speed and sensitivity we have on the ground is not recognized because we don't have a say. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_4)*

Some education policy implementors in Portugal describe their role as "puppets," with ministry representatives and employers pulling the strings. On the one hand, they should adhere to the legislation set by the Ministry of Education and comply with national program structures. On the other hand, they are constrained to negotiate with employers on student internships, which are mandatory and the only part of the curriculum structure that they can adjust.

> *[about legislation] Everything is suspended, and we look like puppets there, and no one knows how to follow the instructions. Because it's like this, and I said when we were at ANQEP [National Agency for Qualifications and Vocational Training] now taking the training, we don't have ICT in school, and she was astonished, 'Oh teacher, you don't have ICT, then how do you teach digital skills?' (WP4_PT_N_T_E_5)*

Expressions of empowerment

This section focuses on stakeholders' sense and expressions of empowerment, namely those that may enable them to overcome perceived constraints at micro, meso and macro levels. It presents three comparative dimensions, ranging from the broader institutional dimensions to individual perceptions: institutional approaches and adaptation strategies; professional integration strategies; motivational frameworks.

Institutional approaches and adaptation strategies

Respondents from our case countries usually share a holistic view of education going beyond traditional classroom boundaries, as well as a commitment to student success beyond academic metrics. Further, empowerment is also driven by the acknowledgement of students' personal and professional contexts. Thus, there is a common thread of promoting empowerment through comprehensive, context-sensitive institutional support. This being said, it is possible to identify variations in a continuum that ranges from more systemic and institutionally driven approaches to those that are more reliant on social embeddedness. These differences can also be embedded in country-specific institutional structures, that can be enabling or obstructing. For example, many Spanish interviewees refer to the relevance of systemic coordination, as expressed in formal agreements between educational institutions to align vocational education with public

employment services and in establishing transitions between educational pathways, while Finnish respondents seem to consider more systemic, organic collaborative monitoring and coordination. The following quote from a Finnish education and training manager at a vocational college is a case in point:

> *I have one meeting every month in each sector. And that means that each teacher brings information about each student to the meeting, sort of how the learning has been going. And it shows that each student is told about through problems and through non-problems. And in that we get such a sensitive pulse of what the teacher has experienced over the course of the month with the students. And then, if there is another teacher who is experiencing a similar situation, we can gather a shared understanding of the situation. And make a plan that's ok, this is maybe something that needs to be addressed by our concern group, which then decides on interventions. (WP4_FI_P_K_E_3)*

On their side, Portuguese and Italian respondents present more socially and emotionally embedded approaches, although with different nuances as per the quotes below: while the Portuguese interviewee (human resources coordinator in private social and healthcare services) refers to community and familial networks, the Italian one (a teacher in an upper secondary school) has a more personalized and emotional overtone.

> *We have families working here, we have the father, the mother, the daughter, and therefore I think the social role of Misericórdia [a lay charity] in this county, in this parish, our specific one, is very important precisely for this reason. And not only that, because every day we try to improve our activity, we continue to grow, we embrace new projects, and we are starting to be an entity talked about at the national level. (WP4_PT_N_T_LM_2)*

> *We welcome them and try to be friendly to make them feel comfortable. Usually, in these cases, we turn into a community centre where we encourage them to come regularly to get out of the house and chat with us. We look at job offers and teach them how to search for jobs, helping them find a long-term job and a point of reference. What do we actually manage to do? We certainly help them relax by providing a welcoming space where someone pays attention to them. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_5)*

Professional Integration Strategies

Interviewees often point out the relevance of professional integration strategies on features such as industry-education collaboration, experiential learning mechanisms, labour market responsiveness and knowledge transfer dynamics. There is a relevant degree of congruity between the institutional approaches and adaptation strategies mentioned above and the professional integration strategies pursued in each country. Thus, Spanish informants focus on creating bridges between educational pathways and between education and employment, in what amounts mostly to a structural approach to professional (and educational) integration. In turn, Portuguese interviewees seem to rely more on personal and community perceptions, relationships and attitudes. Here,

professional integration strategies hinge on a strong sense of community, institutional reputation, and professional demand. Internships emerge as critical empowerment mechanisms that serve as an opportunity for both students and companies to learn from each other. This explicit recognition of bidirectional learning ultimately means that practical experience is regarded as transformative learning, and personal and institutional attitudes and reputations are built collaboratively, impacting the integration of students and trainees in the job market. Not rarely, Italian and Finnish respondents present a sort of middle-ground between the two cases above: the relationships between educational institutions and the job market (that is, the companies) arises as the main axis of professional integration. As stated by the manager of an Italian private training provider in the hospitality sector:

> *At some point, companies start asking us questions as if we were an employment agency: 'Do you have anyone to send us?' 'You who have conducted the courses...' even recently. Thanks to the various contacts we have, we often manage to match job demands with offers. This is a great satisfaction when we succeed. Therefore, companies are extremely important to us. We listen to them, go to them, and let them talk, which they do willingly. This is because we don't have a vested interest; we are neither competitors nor consultants. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_4)*

The use of a skill gap analysis is another instance of this kind of strategy aimed at professional integration being put forth by some Italian trainers, one which may develop into (public-private) communities of practice. Additionally, some Finnish participants express a marked concern with regional ecosystems, as visible in the defence of systematic competence development and strategic regional skills alignment. Like in some Italian interviews, there is a clear drive to implementing permanent educational-industry partnerships, developing and deepening cooperation with the world of work and business to raise the skills level in the region. The head of training at a VET institute in Southern Finland even suggests expanding and systematising the marketing task of educational institutions and companies.

Motivational frameworks

Finally, and given that empowerment refers to a personal sense of agency and ability to exert influence on one's life circumstances, it is inextricable from motivation and the frameworks in which it operates. This is acknowledged in respondents from all countries, albeit in somewhat different ways. In some cases, motivation is seen as the main factor explaining academic success or failure. This is particularly noteworthy considering that a significant portion of the students reportedly have motivation problems, a matter further complexified by what is stated by a teacher in an ICT VET programme:

> *The motivation that students bring and the interest they show in the subjects are more decisive than the reasons for which they have come to the school. This is especially evident among those students who arrive with a low academic background. (WP4_ES_V_C_E_4)*

At the same time, there are also expressions of appreciation that vocational education and training give leeway for adaptation and cultural diversity: that is, the specific educational framework may act to counterbalance the more general, inauspicious sociocultural framework.

Many interviewees across the CLEAR countries also acknowledge the role played by personal inspiration and passion, even if there is often the need for young people to overcome initial anxieties and a certain sense of being lost; the quality and social recognition of the education being offered plays an important role in this respect. Specifically, personal motivation is tightly connected with the expectation of future integration in the labour market. This can be seen in the words of a Finnish education and training manager in public services:

> *I have to raise this point again that when the young people get over their initial anxiety and have some experience, they are really enthusiastic. (...) So, when you get into it, you'll have that experience and then you'll be really excited about it. (...) Just a short while ago, the local newspaper had some excellent interviews with our students, which really showed that they are proud of their field. (...) the possibilities are endless. Everyone knows that you will be employed. You can choose for yourself where you wish to be employed. (WP4_FI_E_S_E_1)*

And also, in those of a Portuguese head of training in a public VET secondary school:

> *We have a course here that is very popular with students, which is the pastry/bakery technician course. It is a good course because it has many professional opportunities. They can work in hospitality, restaurants, or bakeries. It has been well received by young people. (WP4_PT_L_A_E_6)*

Room for manoeuvre

This section addresses opportunities and methods identified and developed by the interviewees (and the network of stakeholders surrounding them) in order to fulfil education goals and succeed in overcoming obstacles. Three dimensions are considered—echoing some issues already mentioned in the sections above: relations established between actors to cooperate; adaptability of training to labour market demands; and innovative practices.

Relations and networking between actors

Across the case countries, the connection and collaboration between key actors is expressed as a vital element to attract students and firms, as it strengthens their links to facilitate employment insertion, and constructs a proper education environment that responds to actual needs from both aforementioned parts. This cooperation enables enhancing the local training and job market, by matching students' graduate expectations and employment needs, with firms' lack of qualified employees and promotion facilities. For example, a Finnish respondent praises the alliance formed by a local vocational college, a university of applied sciences, and a regional welfare service organization to

develop joint projects in social and health care, serving as a placement platform for training and employment recruitment. The following representation is given by the Head of nursing from the Wellbeing services county:

> *Since 2014 we have had this strategic cooperation agreement [...] We work with these institutions to develop education leading to a degree, as well as other education aimed at developing skills. [...] Over the years, we have had a number of joint projects. [...] One example relates to the development of traineeships and the recruitment of future employees, and is called the Joint Recruitment Market. It introduces social and health care workplaces and different units to students as potential traineeships and future jobs. Just this morning we went through this marketing cooperation, and agreed in a tripartite meeting that if, for example, a university (UAS) applies for students, it will at the same time promote our units as an employer, and similarly, when we apply for employees, we will promote the UAS as a provider of further education or training. (WP4_FI_P_K_LM_4)*

Similarly, a Spanish informant focusses on a triangular approach in place, with a public organism setting the normative and basis of procedures, and vocational training institutions and companies acting as direct intermediaries between students and professional sector. A training manager from a job promotion and search portal says:

> *We have been moving towards a model that is also interesting, of cooperation, on the one hand, with what would be the Education Consortium and what I was saying about the existing classrooms and the existing public facilities, and on the other hand, of working a great deal on a tailor-made basis with specialised training entities in each of these sectors. (WP4_ES_C_B_LM_4)*

An Italian interviewee focusses more on a direct relation between the education institution and the firm, as a teacher with a guidance role from a technical school states:

> *Companies come to school because they want to collaborate with us on projects. Companies looking for personnel ask us for motivated people to work with. I've created a team here with members from each specialization. I represent the school, but the school consists of four specializations. Each specialization has a person in charge, and each class has a person who oversees the class. Obviously, the aptitudes, needs, and companies are different for each. I am the one who coordinates all the meetings. The school is becoming more international, and we are working on job-sharing projects, collaborating with other schools across Europe. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_5)*

Adaptation of curriculum to actual, local needs

Curricula are often seen as a modulable element that VET institutions adapt to the variety and concrete needs of their local professional markets. Teachers must update some teaching materials or adapt programs so LOs can meet what firms and local labour market demand. Italian, Portuguese and Spanish professionals we interviewed maintain that teachers and trainers can have a certain degree of flexibility in curriculum implementation, introducing desired changes in different ways, as per the quotes below.

> *Detailing the topic, the subjects, the structuring of the lessons—but this applies to all courses—it is at the discretion of the instructor. Very often, there is a small outline to follow, and if the instructor thinks it's necessary to make additions or perhaps replace something with something more effective in relation to the actual activities the class is doing, they can do so. For example, if a class of students all work in an office, it might be more useful to focus on certain dynamics. But if the students work in various places—from McDonald's to a garage or a medical office—it's really diverse. The range is very broad, and it's difficult to identify a path that suits everyone. (WP4_IT_M_P_LM_1)*

> *There are some gaps, yes [between what is taught in the course and the market needs]. As the guidelines or programs issued by ANQEP are often outdated, we make these unofficial updates ourselves, but we do make them. (WP4_PT_L_A_E_1)*

> *The curriculum for us is a frame of reference, but obviously we adapt the curriculum to today's technology, we personalise it, also taking into account a little bit the needs of the companies. Obviously, for example, at the level of programming languages, we focus on programming languages that are in high demand, such as Java or Python. The curriculum is given to us, the distribution of study hours, we have another opinion that maybe those who design the curriculum don't quite see it. (WP4_ES_C_B_E_2)*

This flexibility is maintained to boost the quality and practicality of the teaching activity, allowing students to better understand and respond to real-life challenges within the local labour context, education institutions to produce useful information and resourceful labour force, and companies to acquire prepared employees and to develop effectively their tasks. Consequently, the local labour environment is strengthened. On the other hand, some experts think that even more flexibility is needed. A training and education manager exemplifies the case of a Finnish second language teacher, who had to move from migrant integration programs to assist migrant people in the workplace:

> *I think we just have to accept at the moment that the language is learned in working life. I mean, sometimes employers still have a little bit high expectation of that. And the criteria are pretty tough. We should rather find ways to provide the support as an educational institution. [For example] The teacher of Finnish as a second language could come to the workplace. (WP4_FI_E_S_E_1)*

This is also related with the need to reduce the rigidity of some qualification criteria that may affect the possibilities of young peoples' employment. The same applies to the skills that should be prioritized in assessment activities, where those related to labour market participation should be prioritized.

Innovative practices

Tailor-made training has emerged as a useful alternative within students' training. It arises as a direct response to labour market and company demands, with the advantage of providing applicable expertise to students that increases their employability, while it

facilitates to companies the acquisition of prepared employees. As said by a technician from a Spanish Chamber of Commerce:

> *There are courses that we have tailor-made to meet the needs of specific companies. In fact, there is not so much volume of this type of course, but we have tried to respond to these needs and a little, it is true, depending on the young people we are seeing. And we have been adapting, and we have been removing parts so that they value others more. [...] We are trying every time, looking for training that will help them when they are looking for a job. (WP4_ES_V_C_LM_1)*

Teachers and educational institutions are reportedly compelled to search for alternatives to respond to fast-changing environments, so the room for manoeuvre they have to adapt and redesign training programs are important to fill the gap between standard training activities and new challenges. Also, different scenarios can come up to integrate new perspectives on how to proceed with training and its suitability with the students and contexts. For example, some Italian trainers show that their search goes beyond the professional scope, willing to address the student's competences and attitudes:

> *It's a brief conversation that I've always conducted, asking questions in a very informal way... [...] questions are about understanding the empathetic capacity of the person I'm dealing with; [...] the willingness to collaborate, how sensitive they might be, if they have... So, I delve a bit into their sensitivity, regarding reprimands, perhaps behaviours with others, how many friends they have, what they like to do, what they don't like to do, their tolerance. So, I go a bit into the personal realm: trying to understand from all these responses, trying to find a common thread that helps me gauge how emotionally suited they are to the context I know, in order to integrate them. (WP4_IT_M_P_E_1)*

11.4 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has explored the perceived room for manoeuvre among stakeholders involved in the implementation and utilization of LOs within educational and training systems in Europe. Despite relevant national and subnational specificities, thoroughly addressed in other chapters of this report, we can identify some common challenges that are crucial for developing more effective policy arenas. First, the expressions of discouragement often reflect the well-known literature on work-related stress (Benevene et al., 2020) and SLBs: inconsistency in organizational resources (or simply difficulty in accessing them from SLBs' positions—with the feeling of being a "puppet" as mentioned by one interviewee), ineffective cooperation, unclear, conflicting or disfavoured policy objectives; and sometimes "victim-blaming", focussing on users' individual characteristics as "inadequate" to deal with institutions. Despite these challenges, educational stakeholders also experience empowerment when they feel supported by their institutions, where they can rely on solid professional skills, motivations, and support networks. Thus, SLBs can utilize various strategies to navigate the constraints they face, including building relations and networks, adapting curricula to local labour market demands and students' profiles, and implementing innovative practices.

KEY MESSAGES

Based on our extensive analyses, we can formulate the following key messages:

The importance of collaboration and networking. While this may sound like a cliché mantra in policy and research, the bottom-up evidence of inadequate intra- and inter-institutional collaboration calls for a further investment in this field. In particular, finding the balance between open collaboration that allows flexible and innovative links, and institutional collaborations that solidly support key players without "plastering up" their room for manoeuvre remains an issue. This requires investments in a "technology" of networking—a set of skills and widespread expertise in an institutional system that provides room for this kind of manoeuvre.

Adaptability and innovation in curriculum design. There are endless debates on defining curricula and related LOs, especially in a time perceived as a hotbed of social acceleration and rapid change. As Emile Durkheim noted in 1902, this often involves a clash between prejudiced neophilia and neophobia (Durkheim, 2006). The perspective we can draw from our survey and interviews require a more practical adaptation, whose main aims should be to empower key actors in the implementation of education and training—students and teachers, trainees and trainers. The margins of flexibility needed call for a participatory approach, which is not easy per se.

The attention needed (and not rarely practiced by the stakeholders involved in our research) for empowering education and training actors—particular students and trainees—via institutional support and professional integration. The (new?) challenges SLBs mention require comprehensive, holistic approaches that do not match with standardized, performance-based LOs, as they call for integrated attention towards vulnerabilizing factors and individual well-being. It is not only about bridging the gap (larger or smaller, according to local contexts, policy areas, economic sectors) between education and the labour market, a concern (quite) consolidated in policy-making arenas, but also about fostering spaces that nurture personal and collective growth, giving voice from the grassroots to the people that cannot be seen only as recipients of top-down demands (and learning objectives).

12. Contested Futures and Spaces: Comparing Temporal and Spatial Perspectives of Key Educational Stakeholders

Hélder Ferraz, Jozef Zelinka, Federico Rossi, Darena Hristozova & Sara Gil

12.1 Introduction – Regional disparities and youth learning pathways

The educational policies promoted by the European Union have been designed with the intention of fostering the inclusion and active citizenship of young people (European Parliament, 2021). However, these policies have reflected structural asymmetries both in their formulation and in their implementation, particularly with regard to spatial and temporal inequalities (Lingard, 2022). Against this background, the following chapter focuses on the integration of project's empirical findings with theoretical and policy insights to inform future educational scenarios across Europe.

The chapter addresses the central research questions of the CLEAR project, namely: (1) What factors shape the construction and governance of learning outcomes (LOs) in different contexts? (2) How do these factors intersect with young people's life trajectories and opportunity structures across European regions? (3) To what extent are spatial and social inequalities embedded in the formulation, implementation, and experience of LOs? These questions are approached through the theoretical lenses of *Life Course Research*, *Intersectionality*, and *Spatial Justice*, and examined empirically via multi-level and multi-actor data from WPs 4, 5, and 6.

The uneven distribution of educational opportunities and labour market integration across European regions reveals that space is a crucial dimension in understanding youth trajectories (Soja, 2010; Beech et al., 2024). At the same time, time—understood not only in its chronological sense but also as a subjective, individual, collective, and generational experience—has implications for how young people perceive and construct their futures.

For instance, the 2008 economic recession exacerbated the polarisation between countries regarding early school leaving and the number of NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training), with more consistent progress observed in Central European countries compared to those in Southern and Southwestern Europe (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Rambla & Scandurra, 2021). These differences are closely linked to how education systems and the distribution of training and labour market opportunities are organised at national, regional, and local levels (Scandurra et al., 2021b; Roberts, 2022).

While socio-economic conditions play a central role in individuals' access to and success within education and the labour market, local structures—particularly the interaction between local actors such as policymakers, educators, employers, and social workers—can be crucial in creating inclusive frameworks for young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations. Even in contexts marked by high levels of social exclusion, young people continue to place hope in educational and training systems, expecting them to provide learning opportunities that allow them to affirm their identity and envision a

sustainable future (Hallqvist et al., 2012). This dynamic highlight young people's agency and the importance of educational approaches that recognise their autonomy in shaping their own futures.

In this regard, effective collaboration among local actors can lead to more context-aware responses, sensitive to both territorial opportunities and young people's needs. This, in turn, fosters more coherent and multidimensional responses to the challenges faced by youth (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Rambla & Kovacheva, 2023). For example, Finland has developed a network of well-structured services that go beyond mere labour market integration, offering support and follow-up. In contrast, other regions—particularly in the Anglo-Saxon, Central, and Southern European spheres—tend to adopt a more functional and less integrated view of youth support during transitions between education and the labour market (Chevalier, 2016).

Young people's relationship with time is also a critical element in the analysis of education, training, and labour market integration policies. Leccardi (2012) argues that, for many young people, the future is no longer a structured promise but rather a source of uncertainty. This has been reinforced by public policies that have favoured short-term, present-oriented responses, often shaped by stereotypes and normative expectations that fail to engage with the real horizons of youth (Bonvin et al., 2018). As a result, learning is reduced to its instrumental role in employability, neglecting its formative and civic dimensions (Rambla et al., 2019). Finally, time is also strictly connected with the meanings that are attached to spaces and how these are used. This is especially true for young people, who are called to navigate and shape in their turn the different physical and learning spaces constructed by policymakers and professionals. As noted by Cuzzocrea (2018), the ultimate consequence of this intersection is expressed in how young people use (im)mobility to try to reconcile belongings, expectations and actual opportunities in an increasingly unequal and complex social world.

Educational policy-making in a globalized and uncertain world

The framework described above also affects the work of professionals—such as educators and career counsellors—who face challenges when trying to implement more holistic and coordinated approaches. Consequently, some adopt critical and inclusive perspectives, while others fall back on discourses of individual responsibility that blame young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations, reflecting the tension between theory and practice (Walther, 2017).

In order to best understand the drivers behind these spatial and temporal inequalities, it is essential to consider how educational policies are being formulated in a context marked by globalisation, governance shifts and future-oriented imaginaries.

To ground this analysis, the chapter draws upon the CLEAR project's theoretical framework, which integrates three interrelated perspectives: *Life Course Research*,

Intersectionality, and *Spatial Justice*. These perspectives are operationalised across multiple levels of analysis—individual, institutional, structural, spatial and relational—as detailed in Table 1 of the project framework. Life Course Research informs our understanding of how young people construct their trajectories across education and work; Intersectionality allows us to explore how social positions (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity) mediate access to learning opportunities; and Spatial Justice highlights how geographic, symbolic and institutional spaces reproduce or contest inequalities. These perspectives shape both our conceptual lens and the methodological design of the chapter.

The formulation and analysis of educational policies require the consideration of spatial (institutional, territorial, and market-driven) and temporal (immediate and long-term) dimensions, as the interdependence of these dimensions shapes how policymakers and other stakeholders design and implement educational policies (Elfert & Ydesen, 2024). Following Bob Jessop's framework of the entrepreneurial city (Jewson & MacGregor, 2005), education has increasingly become a competitive and market-oriented domain, where institutions, cities, and nations compete for students, funding, and global recognition. The effects of globalisation have intensified this dynamic, reshaping the governance of education through multi-level interactions between local, national, and supranational actors (Ball, 1998; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Edwards, 2021).

Imagining the future of education: scenarios, crisis and learning outcomes

In this regard, recognising the intersection between space and time in educational policies, along with the tensions it generates, allows for a more robust understanding of the dynamics of contemporary educational policies and their implications for the future of education (Jewson & MacGregor, 2005; Soja, 2010). As argued by Elfert & Ydesen (2024), education is a key battleground for the definition of the future of society and for to the wide impact on its reproduction. In this context, education policymakers at various levels and policy experts—including academics and civil society or private actors specialised in this field—play a crucial role in delineating the future development of education and training—and therefore of societies as a whole—by directing the public debate and driving potential innovation or reforms (Ioannidou & Erduran, 2022).

This is one of the reasons why such actors have been frequently involved in future scenario panels aimed at foreseeing possible futures of education. The most famous example in this sense is probably the original OECD Schooling for Tomorrow programme and more recent publications based on that framework (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001; 2020). CLEAR itself follows a similar strategy, involving stakeholders from the eight countries of the project in a survey to design future scenario concerning LOs (Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report).

Beyond differences in methodology and scope, what these studies have in common is the emphasis on the multifaceted nature and uncertainty of the future of education as delineated by experts and policymakers. For instance, the 2020 OECD report on the future

of schooling shows four very different future scenarios, ranging from a future in which traditional schooling practices and schools as institutions are completely transformed to another based on the extension and strengthening of current trends (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Similarly, four competing scenarios also emerge in the EU report about the future of school education, distinguishing them along two axes: standardisation against flexibility and collaboration against competition (European Commission, 2024). Albeit on a more specific topic, the CLEAR WP6 survey shows similar results, identifying various cleavages with regards to the definition, implementation and governance of LOs (Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report). These reports further align with the academic literature focusing on policymakers' future visions of education, which highlight growing degree of uncertainty in the education field (Hansen & Jóhannesson, 2024; Linderoth et al., 2024; Campbell, 2025).

However, some overarching narratives also emerge as the central battlegrounds on which conflicts over future assets of education and training will take place according to education experts and policymakers. Based on the reviewed academic and grey literature, at least four main topics can be found: 1) the proliferation of non-traditional actors, including both supra-local and international organisations as well as private and local actors (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Elfert & Ydesen, 2024; European Commission, 2024); 2) the impact of technological and technical advancements simultaneously depicted as a disruptive force and a generator of opportunities (Fındıkoğlu & İlhan, 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Çelik & Baturay, 2024; Elfert & Ydesen, 2024; Linderoth et al., 2024); 3) the sharpening of socio-economic inequalities and their effect on educational attainment and achievement (Cairney & Kippin, 2022; European Commission, 2024; Hansen & Jóhannesson, 2024; Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report); 4) the changing role of teachers and schools, concerning their social role, the methods they are using and the skills that they are meant to provide to learners (Redecker & Punie, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Ioannidou & Erduran, 2022; European Commission, 2024; Hansen & Jóhannesson, 2024; Campbell, 2025).

Underlying these discourses, there is a general idea of being at a critical historical junction, which is reinforced by the frequent reference to multiple and intersecting crises as a narrative tool to frame the urgency of the situation and to legitimise specific interventions or approaches (Elfert & Ydesen, 2024). This clearly emerges also in CLEAR WP6 results, in which framing possible scenarios of crisis was an explicit question to involved policymakers (Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report). Here, experts and policymakers refer to many societal crises critically impacting education—i.e., economic, pandemic, political, technological, etc.—and delineate different ways through which education stakeholders should address them (Ibid.). Effects and solutions strictly relate to the four aforementioned strands, but they also provide an entry point to look at how these are declined and conceived through space and time.

In this sense, two critical spatial-temporal tensions can be identified. First, a clash emerges between the increasing role of supra-national actors and the push towards greater autonomy of local ones, both unrolling within the context of the persistence of nation states and methodological nationalism as the main lenses to look at education trends and assets. Second, futures of education foreseen by policymakers and experts constantly walk the razor's edge between the pessimistic account of sharpening crises and the optimistic promissory visions of inclusion and effectiveness. Both these tensions assume different configurations and fragment through time and space, diverging in contested future interpretations and in relation to territorial inequalities and specificities. Similar patterns can also be found in the conception and development of LOs, which show different definitions and approaches of stakeholders across countries and conflicting visions of desirable and probable futures (Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report).

To explore the way in which tensions surrounding space, time and LOs are articulated across different institutional and individual understandings, this chapter takes a qualitative and interpretative approach. Based on empirical material from the CLEAR project, it re-analyses data collected across three key working packages with stakeholders and young adults. The chapter draws on multi-scalar narratives employing spatial and temporal imaginaries to explore the ways futures of education are imagined, governed and experienced. Already, this opens the stage for three steps of analysis—mapping, interpreting and comparing stakeholder perspectives—that inform the results presented later on, and the critical discussion that follows.

12.2 Methodological approach

A qualitative and interpretative methodological approach is adopted in this chapter to achieve an in-depth understanding of how space and time are reproduced in discourses and imaginaries of actors in education, training and the labour market in different countries across European countries involved in the CLEAR project. However, despite a multi-sited approach and an attention to local specificities still being present, the present chapter differs from other comparative accounts presented in this report since it mainly compares levels of analysis expressed by diverse research subjects rather than national or regional contexts, i.e., the biographical level (young people), the implementation level (professionals) and the policy level (experts and decision makers). Following the conceptual agenda sketched previously in this chapter (see Introduction), which foregrounds the relationships between structural inequalities and territorial configurations and also temporal uncertainties, we analyse how these dynamics are articulated in the narratives of policymakers, education professionals, employers and young adults. An empirical perspective of this chapter uses qualitative data from three Working Packages (WPs) of the CLEAR project: WP4, WP5, and WP6. The data includes a survey directed to policy decision-makers, educational experts and labour market actors (WP6), and semi-structured interviews with education professionals and employers (WP4)

and young adults (WP5). This compilation provides a multi-faceted lens into how people and organizations construct, perceive, and experience LOs in various contexts. We organized the analytic process into three phases that complemented and informed one another:

Phase 1 – Identification of temporal and spatial dimensions

The first phase involved the identification of references to temporal and spatial dimensions in the questionnaires and interviews. At the temporal level, the analysis focused on explicit references to temporal frames (past, present, future) in the narratives, verb tenses used in the narratives, as well as societal shifts identified by experts and professionals or life events mentioned by young people with a special focus on transitions concerning education, training, and occupational pathways. Consideration was also given to both the presence (or absence) of certain life stages in the narratives, as well as the means by which the future was represented in relation to the present—that is, if it was seen as attainable, avoidable, or something to be avoided. Concurrently, the spatial perspective consisted of mapping the frequency and types of physical spaces (e.g., neighbourhoods, schools, or centres of employment) as well as institutional, symbolic, and educational spaces. The analysis was concerned with how these spaces were understood and described (if they were felt to be close or far away, protective or exclusive) and the limitations or opportunities participants linked to their area or mobility. This phase aimed to depict how participants locate themselves in socio-spatial structures and what meanings and emotions they associate with its space and their symbolic significance.

Phase 2 – Meaning-making of spatial-temporal constructs

The second phase was a reading of interpretation to the spatial-temporal constructions discovered in the first stage. The purpose was to explore what supported the way the interviewees represented time and space, in order to identify intersections of these two dimensions and institutional, economic, social, or biographical logics involved in their accounts. It focused on the emotional and symbolic aspects of the narratives, analysing whether the spaces were at the same time perceived as inclusive or exclusive and whether the temporal references were dynamic and productive or rigid and oppressive. This phase also aimed to understand the type of agency that various space-time arrangements made possible or constrained, and how individuals project possible—or impossible—modifications of their social contexts across spaces and temporal frames. In this sense, it is possible to see potential clashes between desired and likely futures of different actors and how these relate with the diverse spaces they live or work in.

Phase 3 – Comparative analysis between stakeholders

The third and final phase presents a comparative analysis of the perspectives held by the various groups of participants—namely the young adults from WP5 and institutional representatives, education experts, and policymakers, from WP4 and WP6. The objective

was to find mismatches and asymmetries in how LOs are understood, governed, and marketed across time-space arrangements of different actors. Such comparison allowed to highlight the divergences in the imaginations of possible futures, in the expectations on education systems and in the way (im-)balances are negotiated between structural constraints and individual possibilities. Focussing on the contested nature of spatial and temporal imaginaries, this phase helped us think through how such imaginaries define—or constrain—educational and life trajectories of young people in different regions and levels of governance in Europe.

Following this tripartite method of mapping, interpreting, and comparing, the chapter exposes LOs narratives to a thorough reading that reveals the socio-political tensions and ambitions that intertwine them. Keyed into how different actors conceptualise space and time, this analysis contributes to a more situated understanding of policy development and educational experience in a rapidly transforming and uncertainty-driven European context.

The coding and interpretation process was guided by the five analytical levels outlined in the CLEAR framework (individual, institutional, structural, spatial, and relational), allowing us to identify multi-level dynamics in the articulation of LOs.

12.3 Results of the analysis

The scales and actors bringing together data from WP6 (experts), WP4 (education professionals and employers) and WP5 (young people) allows for a comprehensive and multi-scalar reading of how LOs are imagined, governed and experienced across Europe. All three of these empirical layers—policy, practice, and lived experience—demonstrate and expose not only convergences in the identification of systemic constraints but also tensions and mismatches in how time, space, and learning are framed and inhabited. This results in a heavily contested educational field, in which the fates of individuals and institutions alike are alternately determined, resisted and secured by structural inequalities, political inertia, and discordant conceptions of value, agency, and possibility.

Temporality: fragmented futures and the weight of the present

A key dimension of tension emerges across the three work packages in reference to temporality, showing mismatches between policy ambitions and lived experience, future imaginaries and short-term survival. WP6 experts characterise a political and policy environment that is organically short-sighted and reactive, driven by immediate pressures and heuristics. The idea of the future as a shared horizon of promise is corroded, replaced by a splintered and unstable time, marked by the accelerating collapse of crises and decision-making stagnation:

> *As a matter of fact, it seems to me that we are already experiencing a new systemic crisis that is currently holding back the horizons of many young people and consists of the real threat of climate change, housing shortages, low wages, and armed*

> *conflicts that have created an even sharper divide between so-called "Western culture" and the rest. As I see it, it seems to me that there will be an ever-increasing political trend towards a less plural teaching and learning model, one that is more permeable to the exclusion of divisive topics and increasingly shaped to prepare young people for a precarious labour market. (WP6_PT_A7_M_id29)*

That perception is confirmed in WP5, where young people discuss the breakdown of long-term planning in favour of 'survival modes' that prioritise short-term strategies—often employment over education, or financial security above personal development. Many describe an inability to make future-oriented choices because of material constraints, mental health issues, system volatility.

> *I don't imagine [the future]. I can't think. There's so much that goes on, and no matter how much I imagine, things don't happen. So, I can't imagine anymore, I simply go with the flow, and every day that passes, I seek and let myself go down that path. (WP5_PT_L_A_9)*

> *At the moment, my dreams, choosing this field [computer science], would be to work in the area. I know perfectly well that it's not possible because you need to have a Bachelor's or Master's degree. So, at the moment, I am available to work in any field. (WP5_PT_N_T_2)*

Time is not a neutral continuum; it is a resource that is differentiated along class, gender and geographical lines. This diagnosis is confirmed by professionals and employers in WP4, from an institutional perspective. They talk about misalignments between timelines in education and the labour market, an education system whose curricula are slow to keep up with technological and societal change, and policy cycles that are out of kilter with both local need and the developmental rhythms of young people.

> *The absence of a system is directly linked to the non-existence, for decades, of an integrated strategy for the development of human resources in the tourism sector, the latter being a clear condition for the achievement of the former. The inability to establish an effective and stable framework for cooperation and coordination of the many co-competent bodies planning and implementing policies for human resources in tourism has contributed decisively to this (WP4_EL_K_T_E_2)*

The failure to plan in the long-term functions as a temporal dissonance that challenges the system ability to respond meaningfully.

> *Anxiety about the state of the world and the environment can affect young people's learning outcomes, especially if they lack confidence in the future and that their efforts will make a difference. (WP6_FI_A7_F_id365)*

This shift from future as a possibility to future as a burden reveals not only a political failure but also a psychological and existential rupture. It invites us to rethink temporality as a space of inequality, deeply intertwined with governance, institutional responsibility, and personal agency.

Spatiality: place-based inequalities and uneven educational geographies

Whether institutional, physical, or symbolic, space emerges as equally salient across the three research blocks. The three blocks point to a compounding of geographic inequalities that dictate access to education, resources, and esteem. Professionals interviewed in the course of WP4 explain the ways educational provision and opportunity structures are impacted by geographical location. Rural schools, while sometimes more integrated into their own communities, lag in access to innovation, employer networks, and digital infrastructure. Until now, urban contexts provide more diversity but are also associated with segregated, resource-based competition, and stigmatisation—particularly in schools attended by high proportions of racialised or migrant youth.

> *The IEFP, also, in terms of the geographical area, whenever it has any of these programmes, looks to us because we are probably the closest entity geographically capable of responding, so my opinion may not correspond to other realities. Specifically, we do not feel [difficulties in training and recruitment] precisely because of this, perhaps due to our size and the place where we are located, which facilitates this area for us (WP4_PT_N_T_LM_2).*

The results of WP5 reflect this dynamic. There is something profound about young people expressing a real awareness of how space structures their trajectories, and not just in terms of material access, but in terms of symbolic belonging, safety, and cultural visibility. Some say they feel "out of place" even within their own neighbourhoods or schools, illustrating how educational space is a theatre of identity negotiation and social sorting.

> *Seeing the bullshit in people who are at my level, at my age—this influenced more or less... how limited the individuals around me are. But the main reason is that I couldn't stand staying at home and in Gabrovo, I couldn't stand staying in Bulgaria anymore—somehow I was experiencing too many bad things to be able to look at my life in Bulgaria in a positive way. I had to leave because I didn't fit in my skin while I was in Bulgaria, especially in Gabrovo. (WP5_BG_N_G_9)*

> *One of the worst moments in school was when my math teacher agreed to let me take an exam at the end but told me, 'You have to know that you are the worst person, and you are not going be successful in your life'. (WP5_AT_V_F_4)*

This scalar complexity is pointed out by experts in WP6. Both a Portuguese and a Bulgarian expert, for example, highlight the fragility of systemic equity in spatiality:

> *A systemic crisis would negatively affect the quality of learning outcomes since there are still many economic, social, and cultural inequalities, which would be even more pronounced. [...] Measuring learning results statistically without taking into account the cultural, social, and economic contexts in which schools are located will always have a negative and ineffective impact on improving anything because classifying schools on the basis that they all have the same conditions will certainly not lead to an improvement in anything. (WP6_PT_A7_F_id304)*

> *Ten years do not seem to be enough to change the [territorial] splits, and no policies in this direction are visible. It is good to reduce territorial differences. If existing trends are followed, they will increase. (WP6_BG_B9_F_id105)*

Experts also warn of a trend towards standardisation, with homogenisation occurring more through a cultural and political rather than administrative forms of control, which reduces educational pluralism and responsiveness to local realities:

> *I expect policies to accentuate the dimension of control, as has already happened, and the reduction of opportunities. The education system is healthy when diverse, welcomes different pedagogies, allows a good interface with students and families, and thinks about work without making it a closed discourse. A crisis weakens all these characteristics, so it would take a proactive political will to counter the degradation in real-time. In my region or on a national level, I don't see the possibility of this will. (WP6_IT_A7_F_id466)*

What emerges in the three WPs is that space is not a vacuum—it is produced, contested, and felt differently depending on structural position and institutional capacity (Soja, 2010). Whereas geographies of education tend to be fragmented, unequal, and increasingly polarised, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and, ultimately, reproducing spatial injustice.

Learning outcomes: recognition, reduction and resistance

The idea of LOs—the chapter's main concern—appears, across the three strands, as both necessary and troubling. There is a common critique of their reductive application, but there is also recognition of potential value if they can be reconceptualised through more inclusive, situated and multi-dimensional lenses. In WP6, experts interrogate the use of LOs as political instruments that privilege visibility and accountability over authentic learning.

> *Politicians are increasingly reacting to crises by lowering the general level of education to achieve politically desired statistical values for educational qualifications that have little to do with learners' actual knowledge and skills. (WP6_DE_A7_M_id372)*

> *What would a crisis have to do with measuring learning outcomes? Learning outcomes have been and are being exploited (e.g., ÖIF [Austrian Fund for Integration, providing language tests]) to argue that 'undesirable' migrants are illiterate, unwilling to learn, etc... in this respect, a refugee flow that enters the public discourse as a crisis could change the learning outcomes. (WP6_AT_A7_M_id20)*

WP5 brings a lived perspective to this critique. Young people feel their informal, emotional, and relational learnings are often dismissed as no learnings at all in formal, institutional settings. Many feel they have gained resilience, empathy or organisational skills in non-formal ways (through work, volunteering, caring for family members), but these are passed over in silence in dominant notions of 'success'.

> *I am a member of the local women's swim team.... Ha ha... It's not something big but it is good for me and helps me to stay in shape but I am also very active in social*

media on Instagram and tik-tok. I make some videos on how to overcome parents' divorce… I had this experience it was crucial to me… This is important for me because I communicate with people and gives me some… perspective…? Is it the right word…? And also is connected to psychology which is what I want to study now. (WP5_EL_D_A_1)

Volunteering is the little bit of freshness that formal education needs… this constant drive that I had in formal education (to go outside the box)… informal education itself provides me with that opportunity. And I realized then that the balance between the two is the way to cope with our schoolwork, our student responsibilities, even in life. So that's something that I really think has influenced me the most and shaped me as a person. (WP5_BG_S_P_3)

This tension is articulated acutely by WP4 respondents working at the frontline of policy implementation.

The main challenges, in my view, are mainly related to the lack of well-trained personnel, because there are a lot of graduates coming out, but they are clearly not trained according to the current situation. That is, they do not meet the current demand for the tourist product and from there they do not have the necessary knowledge, skills, competences, and hence provide a deteriorated quality of services (WP4_BG_S_P_E_3).

The lived experience of Eleni (from Greece) and Amira (from Germany) are good examples for this. Amira, a young refugee, attended a language course in a refugee camp and managed to learn the local language:

I wanted to learn since learning keeps my life going. I didn't want to end up as a woman with children and stuff. I didn't want that. I wanted to become a woman who has something, who works, who is doing her formation and things like that. The worst thing for me here [in Germany] is that I am not allowed to attend a school. (WP5_DE_H_H_2)

It was difficult and even more so when I was going to school. The children did not want to accept the difference, they saw my colour and understood that I am tsiggana. I had problems with the other children, but my sister [refers to her friend], who was also tsiggana and disabled, had bigger problems. She dropped out of school, but I continued because I understood that I shouldn't be stopped by obstacles. (WP5_EL_K_T_9)

However, crises also open up new perspectives for rethinking education and accelerating necessary transformations that might otherwise take longer to be addressed and implemented—such as responding to technological needs, as highlighted by this expert:

If we think about how the previous crisis during the Covid pandemic affected education, it led to an expansion of the volume of factors affecting the quality of education. For example, it has been seen that there is no inability to digitise textbooks, no drama in "distance learning," especially for upper-class students, and no drama in developing e-courses, presentations, etc., etc. I think the impact of technology will increase and expand in the coming years. Resistance to students

> *working and learning simultaneously will disappear and the influence of informally acquired knowledge and skills will grow. In Bulgaria, there is resistance from the highest political level down to the level of parents and teachers (mainly due to misunderstanding) to all three of the above but change in these directions will be inevitable. (WP6_BG_A7_F_id9)*

This suggests that the debate is not about abandoning LOs, but about redefining their scope, orientation, and epistemological foundations.

Imagining the future: between constraints and transformation

Finally, the future—as imagined, desired, or feared—remains a deeply ambivalent aspect. Across the three WPs, we find evidence of hope, fatigue, and structural blockage.

In WP6, experts describe the future as a battleground of competing visions, split between technocratic optimisation and democratic transformation:

> *Facing this scenario [the consequences of systemic crises of the last decade, ed], which would require a change of paradigm [...] to come back to imagine a desirable future, the political system and a large part of the cultural and education environment are alarmingly drifting away, tending towards dangerous simplifications and the detachment from any analysis of factors. Either we will introduce elements of discontinuity [...] or virtuous paths as the analysis of learning outcomes will be more and more marginal in public decisions. (WP6_IT_A7_M_id396)*

Interviewees in WP4 express this ambivalence in terms of their institutional practices. They write of increasing demand for training in the "jobs of the future," but scant advice or support in how to contend with the moral, social and pedagogical elements of those futures. They lament that some sectors (e.g., care, tourism) are undervalued, despite being essential, yet others are idealised without addressing access and equity.

> *It is not particularly attractive for trainees to go into the health sector, because the working hours are not particularly beneficial for families, in the sense of the work-life balance, which is so important to young people, and the pay does not outweigh this (WP4_DE_S_H_E_1).*

WP5 reveals a narrative of young people yearning for dignity and purpose, but often feeling trapped between ambitions and their limitations. Their imagined tomorrows are often interrupted by precarity, systemic discrimination, or institutional neglect. But some articulate counter-narratives that grew from community connection, creativity and resilience, arguing that, despite institutional constraints, agency folk inverts and flourishes—if unevenly. Collectively, the insights provided by WP4, WP5, and WP6 construct a complex portrait of educational systems under threat—not just from crisis externally, but from contradictions internal to the ways that space, time, learning, and futures are conceived and realised.

First, experts from WP6 propose a *macro-level perspective*, being mostly concerned with the disconnection between broad political trends and socio-economic dynamics. Time is crucial in this frame both as a threat—manifested in the approaching challenges of the future in the face of the inadequacy of present tools—and as a political necessity—expressed in the call for a paradigm shift and developing an anticipatory policymaking. At the same time, space intersects in crucial ways with this temporal frame, taking the form of both physical-institutional spaces of states and regions in which aforementioned processes are declined and multiplied socio-economic spaces constantly transformed by crises and societal junctures.

Second, professionals involved in WP4 bring an *institutional and practice-based view*, revealing operational tensions and implementation dilemmas. Space-time arrangements assume a very specific understanding in their views, referring to relatively short-term future projection in their local or regional context. Yet, there is still a variety of alternative conceptions of space and time implied in this, which are mostly expressed in their mediation role between spatial and temporal expectations of young people they work with and different labour and educational spaces.

Finally, young people in WP5 centres *lived experience and affect*, illuminating how structures are internalised, resisted, or navigated. Their space-time arrangements are tied to their biographical paths and desires, but also to the more or less explicit and precise acknowledgement of opportunities they can seize in different contexts and period of their life. It is at the intersection of these elements—expectations and actual, often very precarious, opportunities—that young people develop diverse and potentially conflicting conceptions of time and space. This is exemplified among other things by (im)mobilisation patterns that may stuck people in one place and position or push them to move away and re-negotiate their belongings in an attempt to delocalise their life aspirations.

This triangle reveals the misalignments between governance, practice, and experience, but also suggests possible points for interventions. Indeed, LOs are deeply challenged by these mismatches, risking to take diverse shapes not just for the actors involved in their design, implementation and as end users but also across different space-time frames experienced by them. Such imbalances raise serious questions of equality and justice, calling for a redesign of LOs as communicative and context-specific; resynchronizing policy timelines to lived rhythms; and understanding space as a site of exclusion and potential. By locating LOs in relation to these temporal and spatial imaginaries, we go beyond technical fixes to ask for what kind of futures and for whom is education designed?

12.4 Discussion

Our findings reveal how Life Course trajectories are shaped by the interplay between local opportunity structures and personal agency, how Intersectional disadvantages are embedded in formal recognition systems, and how Spatial (in)justices underpin

fragmented educational landscapes. We have demonstrated how educational futures and learning in Europe are increasingly contesting temporal and spatial imaginaries. Instead of relying on aggregate policy indicators, the multi-scalar analysis of empirical material gathered from WP4, WP5 and WP6 has allowed us to explore how youth transitions, professional practices and policy discourses are always situated within profoundly unequal geographies and unstable temporalities. Rather than treating them as neutral or technical instruments to achieve LOs, this chapter has illustrated how they are steeped in power-laden social structures, and how they work not only as markers but as mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, aspiration and constraint. The findings show that, time and space, are not just background variables; they are felt, managed and negotiated in ways that create differentiated meanings and access to education, training and pathways to dignified lives (Lingard, 2022; Beech et al., 2024).

For young people, time is frequently disjointed, fractured, and unreachable, particularly against the backdrop of intersecting crises (financial, ecological, political, social). As we noted in WP5, the future is also more often envisioned, not as a field of vast opportunity, but as a site of anxiety, beset by precarious labour markets, political instability and institutional rigidity. As WP6 experts warn, this is expressed in a move towards reactionary, short-term policy agendas that prioritise statistical optimisation over long-term visions. Simultaneously, WP4 professionals are required to match pedagogies to the changing needs of learners and labour markets but deal with the squeeze of administrative expectations and ethical compromises.

The results reveal spatial inequalities within and between the countries. Space is relevant not just in terms of access to educational and employment infrastructures but with regard to young people's sense of belonging, visibility, and dignity. In racialised or economically deprived urban areas schools and training centres are frequently seen as sites of control rather than compassion. In rural and peripheral areas, absence of systemic presence makes long-term planning and professional independence demanding. What emerges is a terrain of spatial injustice within which the geography of LOs is highly stratified—not only through forms of delivery, but also through how value and success are defined, recognised, and legitimised.

The most remarkable of the insights relates to the very definition of LOs. Across the three WPs, there is a shared ambivalence: LOs are at once tools of recognition and tools of reduction, they can do that but when these models of accountability are linked with ever-expanding institutional growth they tend to be employed as the means by which education is depoliticised, informal and emotional knowledge is marginalised, and dominant ideologies of merit, productivity and employability are entrenched. As evidenced by the responses for WP6, this reductionist logic can go so far as to be used to stigmatise entire groups of people, including migrants or learners in socio-economically disadvantaged situations. Similarly, WP4 and WP5 excerpts highlight how these logics are

internalised by those actors implementing LOs or experiencing them on their skin. Yet, cracks of resistance and innovation also emerge—in particular in the recognition of informal learning, the consequences of digital transformation, but also in the ethical position of education professionals to struggle for more inclusive and situated definitions of what counts as learning (or does not count as such) and in the different strategies deployed by young people to cope with the negative outcomes of dominant narratives and approaches.

Importantly, this analysis shows that tensions over LOs are not mere technical or pedagogical concerns—they are fundamentally political. They mirror conflicting visions of what education is for, who it should serve and what kinds of futures it should make possible. As some experts and practitioners articulate the need for a paradigm shift towards inclusive, human-centred, and context sensitive models of learning, others highlight the rise of technocratic governance and economic instrumentalization.

Taken together, the three WPs of CLEAR point to how contemporary education systems are being limited not only by external crises, but also by internal contradictions—between standardisation and pluralism, between long-term emancipation and short-term efficiency, between the promise of learning and the reality of limited choice. So, re-imagining LOs is more than a matter of curricular reform, or policy alignment. It requires a radical reconceptualization of time, space and learning in the service of justice. At its best, this means temporally acknowledging that young people's life journeys will follow more irregular rhythms, allowing for stumbles, experiments, failures and redefinitions. Spatially, this means taking political action on place, investing in local ecologies of support and dismantling hierarchies that equate value with mobility, centrality or normativity. Pedagogically, this means broadening the horizons of what is counted and countable—not only skills and qualifications, but relationships, emotions, care and critical consciousness.

Finally, this chapter calls for a recommitment to democratic and transformative educational futures. At a time of climate breakdown, of advancing authoritarianism and intensified social fragmentation, LOs cannot be reduced to just being benchmarks of adaptation. Instead, they should—and indeed must—become instruments for imagining and implementing more just, plural and sustainable societies. This will only be the case within a reoriented set of educational policies, practices and imaginaries that are collectively grounded in principles of temporal and spatial justice, and which sees young people not only as subjects of LOs, but as active agents in the process of shaping their meaning and direction.

KEY MESSAGES

The results of our analyses allow us to provide the following key messages:

Spatial factors are confirmed to be crucial in shaping LOs, but their role must be understood in light of two important addenda: first, the space in which LOs are shaped may also be symbolic, being simultaneously affected by how these tools are perceived and implemented; second, these symbolic aspects are tied to implicit or explicit temporal frames inherent to LOs, that are attached to them through policy design, policy implementation and policy users' expectations.

Young people's expectations and opportunity structures are deeply impacted by mismatches between the temporal and spatial fragmentation of their personal experiences and the expected life course crystalised in LOs, as well as in more general educational policies and implementation. This is especially true when higher levels of governance or professionals implementing corresponding measures do not take properly into account systemic shifts, as in the case of major crises.

Socio-spatial inequalities seem very much embedded at all stages of LOs uses and express them in conflicting temporal and spatial frames. This ultimately reveals how political conflicts lie at the very base of LOs design, implementation and experience, leaving space for either societal and democratic openness as well as closure and social control.

13. Opportunities and Constraints in Introducing a Transversal Participatory Approach in the Research on Learning Outcomes

Sebastiano Benasso, Siyka Kovacheva, Luca Raffini & Darena Hristozova

13.1 Introduction

The Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) has been implemented as a key dimension of the CLEAR research project, integrating participatory methods at different stages of the project, thus aiming at different specific objectives, although pursuing the overall goals of widening the plethora of voices engaged and "heard" by the project and strengthening the impact of CLEAR in terms of dissemination. Nevertheless, CLEAR is not a fully participatory project, as its core in terms of empirical research rests on more traditional forms of social research. Furthermore, most of the project partners were not familiar with the application of participatory methods and were consequently challenged by their management.

Therefore, the final design of the TPA has resulted in a mediation between the aim of promoting meaningful participatory activities and the efforts reasonably applicable by the project partners in experimenting with unconventional methods. A balance between the human, time and financial resources available for the national research teams for participatory actions and their commitment to the empirical research coordinated under the empirical work packages (see WP4 to WP6) has been sought. It ensued a flexible and open process of adaptation that enabled the project partners to implement actions in terms of participation, while maintaining a strong focus on empirical research.

As the TPA was not meant to coordinate empirical research, in this chapter we are not discussing proper research outcomes, rather we consider the impact of the integration of participatory activities within the overall schedule and research plan of the project. However, among the research questions orienting the fieldwork in CLEAR, the one that is more closely addressed this reflection is: "What factors are involved in the construction of learning outcomes (LOs) and how does their interplay shape the expectations on certain levels of LOs? To what extent are young people involved in their construction as active agents"? In addition, the overall aim of involving different profiles of stakeholders related to the educational systems at a local level made the activities promoted by the TPA an opportunity to enhance the "embeddedness" of the project's tackle on the spatial dimension. It increased the awareness of the research teams concerning peculiar dynamics at a local level, and contributed to further explore the interplay between spatial contexts and individual social backgrounds in the educational environments.

The chapter reports on the experiences of application of the TPA and introduces the theoretical framework considered in designing participatory activities, presenting the Participatory Actions (PAs) integrated into the empirical WPs and discussing them in terms of achievements and criticalities. Secondly, it presents the Innovation Forums (IFs), the

final events organised in each partner's country, with the aim of setting deliberative spaces where preliminary results deriving from CLEAR's empirical research were discussed with different stakeholders in the field of education.

13.2 Theoretical framework

Participatory Research methods encompass a wide range of methodology and tools which aim at co-constructing research through the direct involvement of the people who are "object of the research" (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). People turn from being seen as mere "information bearer" to being considered competent contributors to knowledge (Touraine, 2000). In Social Sciences, the use of participatory approaches started increasing in coincidence with the debate about the limits characterising quantitative approaches to knowledge production modelled consistently with the positivist paradigm. The ontological idea that a supposed "objective reality" can be understood only through the analysis of verifiable facts applying quantitative methods has been challenged by the interpretivism (there are multiple realities, which can be interpreted exploring the subjective meanings of actions provided by social actors) and constructivism (reality is a product of human interaction with the real world and knowledge is socially built-up).

The commitment to objectivity is substituted by a commitment to reflexivity (Ellis, 1997). The standardized procedures, which aim to guarantee objectivity and minimize errors deriving from subjectivity, are replaced by the adoption of methodologies that actively include subjectivities and foster intersubjective dialogue and cooperation between researchers and participants (Ranci, 1995; Williams & Vogt, 2011). Participatory Research improves standard research by providing lived expertise (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Conventional approaches to research raise concerns about the risk of reproducing epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Kidd et al., 2017), on the contrary, Participatory Research attempts to reduce—instead of confirming—the power gap between the actors involved.

Participatory Research is made with the subjects of research, rather than on them (Reason & Torbert, 2001), and usually involves marginalized individuals, who are typically excluded or silenced in public debates, with the goal to empower them to seek solutions to the societal exclusion they experience (Rowland et al., 2024, p. 12). In addition, Participatory Research diversifies languages and approaches to the fieldwork, opening the way to a variety of solutions, drawing for instance from art and performance-based methods to creative forms of elicitation approaches, narrative storytelling, and body-mapping (Giorgi et al., 2021). According to Melucci (1998), Participatory Research is characterized by the centrality of language, as it creates conditions for the involved people to express themselves in their "natural" languages. It thus redefines the relation between scholar and research object: from the observer-field dichotomy to the observer-in-the-field connection; it does not claim to produce "absolute" knowledge, but to build a "situated" knowledge.

Within the field of education, questioning positivist and objective approaches is particularly important. In the wake of the processes of individualization and de-standardization of young people's life courses and biographies (e.g., Levy & Bühlmann, 2016; Zimmermann, 2019), the subjective perspectives become increasingly relevant. Young people's de-standardized biographies require the integration of innovative and creative methods to gain a meaningful understanding of the complex interconnection between contextual and individual variables and between structure and agency. Capturing the complex and multifaceted lives of youths would require experimenting with non-standard, more interactive and reflexive approaches, to enable participants to articulate their own meanings and experiences (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999), in order to promote youth empowerment and social justice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), alongside improved outcomes (Valdez et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in Social Sciences, young people's voices are rarely heard. Schelbe et al. (2015, p. 504) argue that they are often considered immature, incompetent, highly vulnerable, and in need of protection and care. However, a growing body of literature values the perspectives of young people and recognises that even those in disadvantaged situations are active agents capable of constructing and communicating their experiences (Walther & Pohl, 2004; Kirk, 2007; Pilkington et al., 2017). Involving young people in participatory processes can help them to develop reflexivity and critical thinking skills, learning to communicate with educational authorities and adults, and acquiring the capacity to analyse and more actively steer their own lives, thereby contributing to the democratisation of their societies. Sharing this latter aim, participation in CLEAR has also sought to promote reflexivity and raise awareness at institutional and organisational levels. It involved young people as critical and meaningful contributors, rather than merely as an audience to be targeted (or worse, as social problems to be addressed). It questioned dominant (and often uncritically assumed) understandings of social phenomena, such as educational underachievement, by incorporating and comparing different perspectives and meanings. It shaped different research outputs, drawing on the various skills, sensibilities and standpoints of participants to design outcomes that can reach different audiences and engage with different communication styles.

13.3 Integration of Participatory Activities into the empirical research lines

Description of the Participatory Activities

Each Core Team leading the empirical research in WPs 4 to 6 has discussed the ideal "moment" for the integration of the PAs, considering the specific methodologies applied in the research line, and the consequent aims to be targeted by integrating PAs. As already introduced in the WP8 Strategy Paper, by the application of an online tool, the Participation Design Board, each Core Team has come to different solutions. Specifically:

- PA1: the Core Team leading the WP3 (Quantitative Analyses of Learning Outcomes), designed and implemented a PA consisting in a discussion of the

preliminary results of the quantitative analysis with a group of "critical friends" (see experts and professionals in disciplines not represented within the project's Consortium) to gain deeper insights and test the accessibility of its content for diverse audiences;

- PA2: the WP4 (Institutional Analysis, Policy Review, and Assessment) Core Team, managed a PA by sharing their preliminary results with a group of institutional representatives engaged during the research activities;
- PA3: the PA integrated into WP5 (Qualitative Research with Young People) has been realised by organising focus groups with local-street experts with the aim of discussing the main themes to be included in the qualitive interview guidelines, fine-tuning the profile of young people to be targeted by research and defining solutions to reach and engage them;
- PA4 and PA5: the Core Team of WP6 (Expert Survey on Policy Coordination), integrated two PAs. The first, PA4, involved three national groups of experts and stakeholders with the two-fold aim of discussing the relevance of policy issues and priorities, to be addressed in the survey and better define experts' profile to be targeted by the survey itself. The second, PA5, implemented a discussion of the survey's data with a transnational group of stakeholders and experts.

In addition, the PAs focusing on preliminary results (see the PA integrated into WP3, WP4 and one of the PA into WP6) contributed to feed the materials discussed in the Innovation Forums implemented at the latest stage of the project.

The following table (see Table 13.1) resumes the main features of the implemented PAs. As it shows, some PAs were implemented at a local level by all the research teams composing the Core Team of a WP, while others were run only by a Team and/or jointly online.

in this paragraph, all the information and quotations concerning the PAs are drawn from the online Travelogues for Reporting of the PA Experience compiled by the project's partners. The full transcription of the Travelogues will be part of the forthcoming reports (see Deliverable D8.3 National Participatory Report).

Table 13.1 Participatory Actions integrated into the empirical WPs

PA	Stage of integration and purpose of PA	Partners	Methods	Participants	Input for the Innovation Forums
PA1 (WP3)	Discussion of preliminary results in order to reflect on and refine earlier research findings	UNIVIE	Co-learning workshop	5 experts (4M, 1F); one of the participants was the director of a professional HTL school, one held a leading position at the Chamber of Labour, one led project with young people of the AMS (the local PES), one was a social	Pre-processing of results that address non-academic audience

PA	Stage of integration and purpose of PA	Partners	Methods	Participants	Input for the Innovation Forums
				scientist working at Statistics Austria, and one was a professor of Education at the University of Vienna	
PA2 (WP4)	Discussion of preliminary results in order to validate them with those directly affected by policies	UAB	Online Participatory workshop	4 educational stakeholders (2M, 2F); a union representative; a business association representative; a director of a third-sector foundation; an academic specialised in rural studies	Pre-processing of results that address non-academic audience
		UNIURB	Prompt-based Participatory Workshop	4 educators/trainers (3M, 1F)	
		AUTH	World Café + Workshop	12 experts (7M, 5F) from education, NGOs, government	
PA3 (WP5)	Finetuning research tools and sharing interviewees' engagement strategies in order to design qualitative interview schedule and define strategic approaches to young people in vulnerable situations	UTU	Focus group	7 experts (3M, 4F), from education and guidance sectors	N/A
		PU	Two focus groups in different cities	18 professionals (9 per group), from schools, NGOs, administration	
		ULISBOA[19]	Focus group	7 local experts (5F, 2M)	
PA4 (WP6)	Finetuning of the research tools and profiles to be targeted by the survey in order to validate and enrich survey framework	UNIURB	Tandem and individual interviews	3 experts (1F, 2M)	N/A
		UTU	Focus group	8 (5F, 3M) experts in education/employment	
		UPORTO	Focus group	4 experts (2M, 2F)	
PA5 (WP6)	Discussion of the survey data in order to validate the survey findings	UNIURB, UPORTO, UTU[20]	Online workshop	12 experts (6M, 6F) from Italy, Finland and Portugal	Pre-processing of results that address non-academic audience

Source: Deliverable D8.3 National Participatory Report

Achievements and constraints of the Participatory Activities

In this section, we discuss the experiences of the Core Teams of the empirical WPs in implementing the PAs. By engaging stakeholders ranging from local practitioners to

[19] PA3 was also implemented by an extra-Core Team group, the Porto Team. It consisted in a focus group with 7 experts (6 F).

[20] PA5 was also joined by an extra-Core Team group, the Lisbon Team.

policymakers, educators and young people in and out of formal education, the integration of PAs aimed at bridging the gap between academia and practice, improves data collection, and enhanced the accessibility of the research results. We now highlight key advantages, such as increased contextual awareness, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge co-production, while also acknowledging limitations related to time constraints, participant recruitment, and the balance of power in knowledge production.

A first relevant impact of the PA implementation on the research process can be found in the deepening of the capacity to widen the involved research teams' perspective and capacity to understand the social environment crossed in the empirical fieldwork. By prompting the teams in questioning their initial frames of interpretation and adapt them to the lived realities of stakeholders in the educational domain, the PAs have contributed to opening new analytical perspectives. In addition, the integration of non-standard participatory methods implied a necessary "methodological openness" that further pushed the Core Teams to consider their choices in terms of tools and related ability to gain contextual-sensitive findings. These reflexive benefits were particularly evident in cases where the participants introduced issues that had not been previously identified through standard empirical research. For example, the Vienna team (PA1) discovered critical blind spots regarding newly arrived migrants in the Austrian context and mental health challenges, dimensions that proved useful in the further interpretation of the analysed secondary data. On the level of result interpretation, the experience in Barcelona (PA2) confirmed that the experts' feedback can overcome the simple validation of results and deepened their analytical clarity, thus contributing to knowledge production itself: "We gathered new data, perspectives, and ideas that enrich the project's analytical outlook" (PA2, Barcelona). In Plovdiv (PA3), participants emphasized the invisibility of young people in policy discourse, a structural condition that participatory methods cannot obviously resolve yet, at least, highlight: "they viewed all youths as an underprivileged group" (PA3, Plovdiv). In addition, the focus group identified the lack of professional expertise dealing with young people's psychological disorders while in school and quickly labelling them as "low achievers" (PA3, Plovdiv).

The feedback gathered from participants in the PAs yields a generally positive picture. For the involved stakeholders, Participatory Activities provided an opportunity to engage as equal contributors in a research process. Their feedback indicates that they felt acknowledged and empowered. In Barcelona (PA2), the engagement was partly strong due to participants' perception that their input had real value and impacts on the project. In Lisbon (PA3), the participatory moment also served to "humanise" the perception of researchers and research goals, as participating in the PA helped the stakeholders "to deconstruct some preconceived ideas about researchers and the way research is conducted in academia" (PA3, Lisbon). In Plovdiv (PA3) the open-discussion format allowed for a dynamic exchange, facilitating trust among participants "We were surprised that participants were eager to share their views and it became clear to us that they

needed a forum for discussion" (PA3, Plovdiv), which created the conditions for a productive discussion of the topics at the core of the research, enabling to put into relation different views: "We found out that there was a great diversity in the understanding of learning outcomes among the practitioners" (PA3, Plovdiv) . The interactive structure of the *world café* method applied in Thessaloniki (PA2) prompted participants to think creatively and feel safe in expressing even unconventional ideas:

> *As participants moved key ideas or subjects to other tables, they shared perspectives, considerably increasing the likelihood of unexpected new insights. Participants came to feel connected to the greater scope of the project and their vital role in supporting young adults' life choices as they practiced shared listening and paid attention to themes, patterns, and insights (PA2, Thessaloniki).*

Concerning the dimension of inclusivity and equal space for participants to express themselves, it is worth noting that the online participatory format applied for the PA5 showed that digital tools like *Padlet* can effectively give the floor to a diversity of voices and standpoints, even under time constraints: "all of them [participants] left at least one thought per issue, ensuring that the voices of all involved stakeholders are heard in some way" (PA5, Urbino, Porto, Turku).

In terms of impacts on the research tools applied in WP5 (qualitative interviews with young people) and WP6 (survey targeted to experts in the field of education), the related PAs proved effective in improving their focus, language and accessibility, while also allowing the research teams to better engage stakeholders at the local level. In Lisbon and Turku (PA3), participants suggested ways to fine-tune the structure and content of interview schedule for young adults. Their input ensured that the language, framing, and tropics resonated with the actual experiences of young people in their local environments. In Plovdiv (PA3), participants helped identifying target groups and advised on culturally appropriate engagement strategies (e.g., in relation to Roma), thus also affecting the ethical quality of the fieldwork. In the PA4 (in Urbino, Porto and Turku) participants contributed to finetune the survey design, better faming key topics and trends of future scenarios in education to be discussed by the questionnaires.

Finally, the goal of improving the accessibility and usability of the projects results for a non-academic audience can be considered as accomplished, as different PAs significatively contributed to shape dissemination materials to be discussed in the Innovation Forums. In Vienna (PA1), the stakeholders' contribution helped to "prepare a more inclusive plan for the Innovation Forum" (PA1, Vienna). In Thessaloniki (PA2), participants provided useful suggestions such as the use of visual representations able to grasp and yield the connections between education and life-course construction for young people. The teams managing PA5 also emphasized the importance of disseminating findings in ways that resonate with both policy and practice. They noted that the focus group "enabled a brief glimpse into the challenges ahead" (PA5, Urbino, Porto, Turku).

Concerning the difficulties faced in implementing the PAs, a first quite recurrent issue regards logistical and organisational dimensions, as the partners identified the time constraints as particularly relevant. The Urbino team (PA4) reflected on this aspect, noting that while the participatory approach was highly valuable, "the implementation... takes time and this should be considered in the overall research time schedule" (PA4, Urbino). The experience in Turku (PA4) echoed this reflection, as they found it difficult to "allow enough time for all participants' views to be heard" (PA4, Turku) during a single session. The Porto team (PA4) mentioned that even within focused sessions, "the debate remains wide open" (PA4, Porto), which can complicate the process of synthesis and interpretation of the gathered insights. This somehow affected the transposition of the PA on the digital dimension too, as in the format applied for PA5 tools like *Padlet* ensured everyone could contribute to writing, but the general discussion remained constrained by time and platform limits, affecting the quality of interactions.

Some problems also emerged regarding the engagement of participants, as although the overall participation was high, the research teams often struggled to reach a diverse or specific stakeholders' groups. This was due to scheduling issues, for example Urbino (PA4) reported difficulties in recruiting participants due to "experts' very busy agendas" (PA4, Urbino), or in Plovdiv (PA3), where school and public service professionals needed official letters of invitation to obtain the permission to participate in the PA, showing the relevance of formal aspects in the management of the engagement process.

The accessibility of the materials used to prompt the discussions in the PAs was generally evaluated positively; however, in Turku (PA3) some problems have been faced in relation to the conversation starters: "the number of themes and the complexity of some of the questions... was a bit of a concern" (PA3, Turku). In addition, in the case of PA5, the heterogeneity of the participants has impacted the balance in terms of room for expressing each participant's voice, as the higher familiarity of the invited researcher with this kind of situation produced some biases: "participants from the research field tended to occupy more time than others" (PA5, Urbino, Porto, Turku). This online international event has also to some extent limited participants with lower English fluency, this seemed to affect especially teachers and street-level practitioners, for whom "the requirement of being able to express themselves in English also emerged as a barrier" (PA5, Urbino, Porto, Turku).

Finally, an interesting issue related to the integration of PA in more traditional lines of research has been discussed by some Core Teams. It also depends on the limited acquaintance of the research teams with participatory methods, and in several cases, teams expressed uncertainty about how to process and incorporate the information gathered through the PAs. For instance, Barcelona team (PA2) explicitly stated: "We should decide what to do with the new information generated in these conversations" (PA2, Barcelona). Indeed, despite the richness of the discussion, they envisaged the risk

that the insights could remain peripheral to the core analysis unless properly systematized. Similarly, the Porto team (PA4) recognized that although valuable input emerged, "the two hours of the Focus Group did not exhaust the subject nor the issues that could be explored" (PA4, Porto). This shows the challenge of mediating between the depth and scale of participatory discussions with the requirements of formal reporting.

13.4 Innovation Forums

The concept of the Innovation Forum

The Innovation Forum (IF) was meant to be the peak of the participatory actions and planned towards the end of the project. It aimed to bring together results from the theoretical discussions and analysis of empirical data collected from official statistics and fieldwork in the selected regions, and apply them as stimuli to be discussed with heterogenous groups of stakeholders in the field of education. The concept was based on the ancient understanding of a forum as a public gathering place, a meeting ground for citizen's actions. In CLEAR it had to include activities that were participative and innovative in relation to the main characteristics that each local IF had to meet:

- Engagement of three different profiles of stakeholders: national and local policy-makers; youth professionals working (teachers, social workers, non-profit activists); and young people. Each local project team was supposed to attempt to invite representatives of all the three groups that had already been involved in the field work of WP4, WP5 and WP6 but also encouraged to expand the list of participants with less covered groups. The number was not fixed but ranged between 20 and 40 depending on local possibilities, contacts, and networks.
- Discussion of project results that would inspire an exchange of views based on participants' diverse personal experiences and expertise. The debate was not aiming to validate the research outcomes but to use the findings as conversation starter tools to allow free participatory interchange. We aspired to achieve innovation in terms of better understanding of our findings, identifying research gaps and formulating proposals for changes in educational policies and practices.
- Designed as a discovery journey, the IF in each country was open to diverse actors in the educational arena interested in gaining new insights while also exploring the challenges and opportunities of cross-sectoral collaboration in their own local/national contexts. It further emphasised the opportunities offered by the EU Programmes to integrate active participation and democratic values into youth research.

Methodology

The overall methodology had a flexible design allowing to take into consideration the specificity of each local cultural and economic context in the countries involved, as well as to adapt the concept to available human resources of the country teams and their logistical possibilities. The core was the application of participative methods of dialogue:

using and experimenting with diverse visual outputs from the empirical WPs (4-6) and techniques (world café, discussion of interview excerpts and envisaged scenarios). Relevant findings were selected in the analysis stage from the empirical WPs and were elaborated into a set of graphic outputs with the help of a graphic designer. Some of the outputs were designed to be used with participants from all profiles, others were more tailored for specific groups, aiming at innovative elements to spring up from the discussion. The concrete methods for ensuring lively discussions and equal involvement of the different groups of participants were elaborated as 'participatory toolkits' by the civic organisation—partner in CLEAR—and flexible strategies for their application were developed in discussion among the project teams. It was envisaged that the event would include both plenary and group sessions, in order to allow full participation of all.

Given the context-sensitive nature of the participatory process in the IF, the methodology had to address a number of ethical issues requiring a specific "methodological sensitivity" (Greenaway et al., 2021) by the research teams. As in the other phases of CLEAR, anonymity, privacy and confidentiality were dealt with appropriate attention. Before the start of the event, participants were informed about the aims, methods and outcomes of the discussion and were asked to sign an informed consent form in which they had to express their agreement to take part, as well as to indicate whether they accept the event to be audio recorded and that photos should be taken. Second and more challenging was the ethical concern of mixing groups with different age, gender, vulnerabilities, styles of expression and/or power resources. The IF methodology relied on this diversity to bring up innovation but could very easily fall into domination of a certain group of participants over the others. Since researchers and most (or at least some) of the IF participants had already been involved in previous participatory project activities, it was expected that trusting relationships had been formed to some extent. The agendas included minimal exposure of research results in the traditional forms of media and oral presentations and focus on visual and interactive forms. Concerning the unequal distributions of power between policy-makers, experts and young people, the mediators had to establish and consciously follow the norms of equality of expression and regulate the power sharing in the process. All participants had to be encouraged to express their views and ask questions during the plenary sessions. The bulk of the discussions was to be carried out during group sessions which involved splitting the participants into smaller groups—two to four groups, again with mixed representation. Before the start of the group sessions, the participants were informed that all points of view were important, all participants had equal rights to express an opinion, all of which would remain strictly confidential.

Process of implementation

In this paragraph, all the information and quotations concerning the IFs are drawn from reports compiled by the project partners following the IFs implementation.

A pilot IF was conducted in Genova in February led by CODICI, an NGO and a member of the CLEAR team. Its detailed report was sent to all partners who positively evaluated its methodology. By the end of May 2025, eight more IFs have been organised, six in the 31st month of the project and two in the 32nd month. Two further IFs are planned in Barcelona which have been postponed due to unpredictable circumstances.[21] The timing was appropriate for discussing results when the initial analysis of the fieldwork was finished and the project teams were working on the deeper elaboration of the main findings reinforcing the comparative perspective. The premises of the IFs varied from region to region equally divided between academic and non-academic institutions with social policy profile. While the preferred location was a youth centre where the young participants would feel more comfortable, it was not always possible for logistic reasons as the IF design required a larger room with movable chairs and/or additional smaller rooms for group work. However, the university locations were not the regular lecture and seminar rooms but meeting halls used for public events and presentations which proved suitable for creating an open space for a dialogue. The duration of the event ranged from two to four hours with the exception of the IF in Thessaloniki which was almost a whole working day (6 hours) including one hour for lunch. All other forums had additional time for coffee and refreshment breaks in the beginning or during the event and two IFs offered aperitifs after the end of the discussions.

While the planned event aimed at larger participation relevant for the classic understanding of a forum, the number of attendees in the IFs ranged from 11 in Lisbon to 38 in Thessaloniki. The encountered difficulties were linked to a limited resource allocation in some regions and pressing political events in the countries such as parliamentary elections as well as a large-scale power outage in Spain and Portugal. The national teams used diverse strategies for ensuring the planned participation—from inviting participants in the project fieldwork such as interviewed young people and experts, contacting members of different networks with whom the researchers had previous contacts, and representatives of local authorities, educational and training centres, social support institutions and third sector agencies. All teams managed to obtain a diverse involvement in terms of gender, age, and representation. In most countries women were better represented, while in Vienna and Hamburg men slightly outnumbered women. In terms of the participation of the identified three groups, it was policy-makers whose participation was more difficult to ensure in most countries. Their low representation did not go unnoticed. As a young man from a local school in Plovdiv said in the concluding plenary: "next time bring politicians here to learn to listen and respond to people like us, people whom they are supposed to serve with their policies" (IF, Plovdiv).

[21] The two Spanish IFs were postponed due to the blackout in Spain on 28th of April 2025.

The process of discussions during the IFs which were publicised under local language variations of the title "What if..." largely followed a similar design: a short plenary session with a presentation of the project and selected findings, then an open discussion phase where participants were divided into smaller groups, and a concluding plenary where the groups reported the issues discussed and the participants provided feedback of their IF experiences. In all countries the groups deliberately had mixed composition except in Turku, where the researchers' team chose to have two groups consisting only of young people and their facilitators so that young people feel free to share their thoughts within a group with familiar facilitators. All teams used ice-breaking tips suggested by CODICI and a wide variety of methods matched with visual materials for stimulating open discussions. For example, participants were invited to explain the chances for a successful school-to-work transition in a declining and a prospering region to a foreigner as a prompt to debate about the results of WP3; a comparison between the diverging life trajectories of two young people or contrasting quotes from interviewed teachers and employers were offered to discuss findings of WP4, quotes from interviews with young people in multi-disadvantaged situations were provided from WP5 and the likelihood and desirability of scenarios identified in the WP6 expert survey were deliberated in other groups. The number of groups varied from two to six, the latter in Thessaloniki where the world café designed was applied. All teams reported a smooth running of the process, lively debates and active involvement of participants. Among the difficulties encountered in the process of implementation in some of the IFs were the complexity of taking notes and photos during the discussions by the CLEAR team members who also acted as mediators due to limited personal resources (where the teams decided not to make audio recordings and not to invite outside photographers) or the emotional intensity of shared personal experiences which a participant in the Lisbon IF described as "a punch in the stomach" (IF, Lisbon), underlining the depth of identification with the testimonies shared and the urgency of the issues raised. More often, however—and in surprise to the researchers—, the participants were eager to provide their views and readily argue for them, including the young people, and rarely had the facilitators to encourage the more silent participants to join the debate.

Ethical issues of the forums were given due consideration before the event. All participants were fully informed about the purpose and objectives of the IFs in advance and signed both the attendance list and the informed consent forms which in some countries included permission for audio recording and taking photos. All teams had photos taken of the IF discussions with Turku and Hamburg allowing images only of the materials but not of participants. In Vienna videos about "the schools of the future" were made with some of the participants who specifically agreed. All data generated from the event were anonymised and securely stored at safe university locations. No specific ethical issues were raised by the participants during the group discussions and the facilitators allowed for short breaks when the emotional intensity built up. The mediation

was focused on establishing trust and ensuring the free and voluntary involvement of all participants, particularly the young, making efforts to minimize the power imbalance. Many described the experience as emotionally powerful, especially when engaging with the narratives of young people in vulnerable situations from the CLEAR project.

During the roundup of the event participants welcomed the specific participatory format of the forum allowing free expression of views on the educational challenges facing present-day European societies. Highly appreciated was also the diversity of the groups engaging people with different social backgrounds in a common discussion. Many noted that such informal and collaborative deliberation opportunities were usually rare but very valuable. As pointed by the Vienna team, professionals and policymakers were interested to hear the opinions of young people on topics they deal with daily while the young were excited to speak about their personal experiences and the difficulties that they meet in the school to work transition and wider life. For all groups the event created a space for more nuanced and deeper understandings of educational inequalities. The atmosphere of trust, empathy, and a sense of shared responsibility was frequently mentioned as a key element that made the IF impactful. The group sessions were considered most relevant in providing not only criticism but also practical insights. Among the methodological recommendations for future participatory actions were the ideas of replicating the event in school settings throughout the city (as in Lisbon); making the innovation forum a lasting event with ongoing meetings (as in Plovdiv); or creating thematic networks working on feasible solutions to identified problems. Overall, the feedback underscored the importance of creating inclusive, reflective, and action-oriented spaces where different actors can converge to imagine better educational futures together. While no further events have been reported a month after the CLEAR IFs, all teams organised various follow-up actions such as posting reflections from the event in social media, university and project websites, sending certificates of attendance, power point presentations and photos, as well as summary reports to participants via mail or phone and publishing newspaper articles.

IF elaboration of the findings from the empirical WPs

The Innovation Forums in the eight CLEAR countries discussed the main outcomes of the empirical WPs, with each country being free to choose on which specific packages and outcomes it would focus on in the discussions.

WP3 was the basis for the group work of the Innovation Forums in: Vienna, Hamburg, Genova and Lisbon. In Austria and Germany, the strong impact of family background and resources on the educational trajectories of young people stands out: those from more privileged families are freer in their educational choices and can exercise more subjective agency in their life strategies, which corresponds to little or no experience of institutional support. A key conclusion is the need for an education system that balances core competencies with more flexible modules oriented towards the individual interests of

young people. Mechanisms for early follow-up of LOs, which are perceived as prematurely decisive and socially stratifying, have been negatively assessed. The promotion of lifelong learning should be taken as a priority. Genova IF stressed the need for schools to act as mediators in relations between young people and their social and economic environment. Teachers should facilitate, not stigmatise and hinder the activation of young people in different domains, from the educational one to the broader dimensions of their life courses. The main problems facing contextualised and meaningful education in Portugal are the lack of autonomy for teachers and the rigorous planning of national curricula, which could be overcome if: schools are recognised as autonomous educational communities, coherence of both education policies and between education policies and the labour market is achieved, the bureaucratic burden of teachers is reduced, youth participation is encouraged as a way to be more involved in their education, educational flexibility is achieved through personalised approaches to learners.

WP4 findings were discussed in the Innovation Forums in: Vienna, Hamburg, Thessaloniki, Plovdiv, Genova and Urbino. Discussions in Austria and Italy concluded that the role of the social environment and social networks in shaping perceptions and life choices in terms of education and employment is essential. In Austria and Greece, the idea of recognising alternative forms of assessment and non-formal learning spaces as a new way of rethinking and experiencing the educational environment is widely supported. It is believed that this would help promote a fairer education system, future-oriented and learner-centred. Better synchronised formal and non-formal education systems could create mobility frameworks to allow for a smoother transition between non-formal learning environments and formal learning systems. One of the key findings in Urbino IF relates to the importance of mentoring programmes in promoting learners' motivation and exploiting their potential. Another finding in Genoa IF emphasized the importance of horizontal exchanges between students, teachers and technical and administrative staff as a means to increase the confidence of students in the educational institution, to encourage mediation and to stimulate civic participation of the young generation. The discussion in Bulgaria linked the weak motivation of the trainees to the poor training of the teachers themselves, and it became clear that some of them are probably not competent enough to teach. This lack of motivators in educational institutions that could spark a burning interest in sciences demotivates learners to work hard and achieve high outcomes.

WP5 was the basis for group discussion in all eight countries: Vienna, Hamburg, Thessaloniki, Plovdiv, Turku, Lisbon, Castelo, Genova and Urbino. In Germany and Austria, the participants shared a perception that the educational process should be seen as an experience, a process that enabled growth, rather than a competition. Such an understanding was also associated with a necessary reform of the education system, which should go beyond strict quantitative frameworks and structures and take a proactive approach to the educational process. One of the conclusions drawn from the

Urbino discussion, namely the promotion of a learning environment that enables peer-to-peer communication between teachers and learners, can also be applied to this finding. The trust built on this basis between the two sides makes education more inclusive, supportive of experimentation and fostering the emotional well-being of learners. As the discussions in Austria have noted, the school must become a place of reflection, pause or reorientation without punishment. However, this requires increasing resources for schools in two main areas (Urbino and Thessaloniki)—on the one hand, providing spaces for pupils to express themselves and actively participate in the organisation of their learning environment and, on the other hand, opportunities for further teacher training aimed at empathizing with and listening to learners. Hearing the voices and concerns of young people is a central topic discussed at the IF in Finland. As a result of the inability of teachers to see and understand the anxiety of young people, young people themselves do not dare to ask for and seek help, because they feel stigmatized. Teachers' lack of time and skills to engage with young people's anxiety can lead to substantial changes in their well-being and mental health, significantly affecting their educational trajectories and professional development. Discussions in Bulgaria and Genoa highlighted the need for a fundamental change in the education system in terms of training opportunities for young people depending on their specific skills and interests. This enables students to explore and develop their talents rather than feel constrained in their pursuit of certain educational and professional careers. Spanish discussions focus on improving access to information on educational opportunities and the need for good career guidance and counselling, especially for young people from migrant background who need adequate initial education opportunities to reduce the level of precariousness in the labour market. Among the significant conclusions from the IFs in the eight countries, two more findings were highlighted (in Bulgaria and Portugal) that were related to non-formal education and the involvement of parents in the educational process. Firstly, promoting the participation of young people in extracurricular activities is a must, but it is equally important to have more information about their benefits, which will enable young people to experiment more in the search for the right future employment. Secondly, strengthening communication between parents and teachers, as well as between parents and their children, is fundamental to the adequate intervention of parents in the educational choices of their children. Promoting joint activities between children and parents and providing more information to parents about the skills of their children will help parents themselves to provide support tailored to the needs of their children in their choice of education and future career orientation.

WP6 was the basis for IFs in: Genoa, Urbino, Plovdiv and Castello. The Italian discussions found two key conclusions. The Urbino discussion confirms the already expressed need to form an education system that would rather recognize that all people have talents and help identify and develop them. The Genoa discussion stresses the need to ensure greater autonomy of students, for example, in terms of the possibility of engaging in the choice

of certain classes and activities that are considered interesting. This would allow them to somewhat personalise their educational path and increase their sense of participation in learning processes and belonging to the educational institution. Additionally, the size of classes should be reduced to allow teachers to focus more on the specific needs and wishes of each student, an idea also supported by discussions in Bulgaria. Another important finding for Bulgaria is related to the desire to reduce categorization in learning in the future, as labelling limits not only LOs, but also the development of students as learners and as individuals. It also supports the view that the education system should provide more opportunities for excellent students, while giving more support and encouragement to those with less academic achievement. This conclusion can also be correlated to some extent with the issue of validation of previous training in Spain. The Spanish discussions conclude that policy is insufficient, with many young people (especially migrants) facing significant barriers in their educational and employment careers.

Regarding WP7, the National Discussion Papers were used as supporting background materials to feed the discussions in the IFs in Italy and Greece.

Suggestions for future research

At the Innovation Forums several proposals for future research topics emerged, the following table (see Table 13.2) resumes them by organising in potential topics for future studies.

Table 13.2 Suggestions for future research collected in the Innovation Forums

Topic	Suggestion for future research
Research on evaluation systems in educational environments	Alternative assessment models as an opportunity for learners to feel valued (especially those from marginalised or non-linear educational backgrounds)
	Alternative assessment methods as a means of reducing anxiety in students and improving the learning process; the role of teachers
	Experiments applied in the national school system with regard to alternative models of school assessment and their results
Research on educational systems and structures	Effective career guidance models
	Adequacy of the training system and career orientation to the needs and desires of diverse groups of learners
	Role of mediators (primarily teachers) in including and addressing vulnerabilities and the effects of inequality
	Ratio between the availability of support programmes for young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations and institutional constraints (e.g., age limits in education)
	Influence of institutional labelling on shaping the educational self-concept and long-term trajectories of learners
	Consistency of the education system with the expectations of young people

Topic	Suggestion for future research
	Institutional structures as impersonal and even invalidating young people's LOs
	Discrepancy between what is available and what is accessible in education
	Pupil-parent-school relationship
	Good practices for working with talented students
Research on youth wellbeing within educational environment	Competence and sensitivity of teachers and counsellors in the process of working with young people struggling with mental health issues
	Research on the mental and physical health of students
Research on non-formal education and match between educational and professional systems	Impact of non-formal or migration-acquired competences on motivation and participation in formal learning practices
	Importance of informal networks as invisible safety nets
	Impact of external recognition of the qualities and competences of young people by youth counsellors or mentors
Research on youth participation within educational systems	Promote a sense of togetherness and belonging among the different groups in school
	Study of student communities, their internal dynamics and satisfaction with the learning process
	Prevention of bullying and poor condition in school with regard to the social atmosphere
	Opportunity to expand youth-oriented working methods to make the school system a safe arena where students can rely on more support from their peers and get help with various problems
Research on youth participation in society at large	Politicians' and practitioners' perceptions of young people's positions on the future of their education and the sector as a whole
	Conditions enabling genuine participation of young people in education governance
	Young people's perspectives on the desired school, the assessment systems they envisage, and the values that modern education systems must embody
Research on educational policies	Perception, interpretation and experience of educational and professional transitions by young people in a context marked by multiple disadvantages; the role of current public policies in shaping this life-long experience
	The most effective formal and informal local support mechanisms to promote successful educational transition in vulnerable territories; strengthening through public policies

Source: Deliverable D8.2 Innovation Forums

IF recommendations for changes in the education policy

In many ways, the eight countries' recommendations on education policy overlap. There are also some specific suggestions that are systematized below.

The recommendations of the participants in the *Vienna IF* on education policy point to the need to rethink the way "transitional systems" work. This translates into improved institutional access and changing the way institutions recognise, respond to and support the complex lives and needs of young people.

The *Plovdiv IF* emphasises the importance of non-formal education for the acquisition of soft skills and strongly recommends its validation. Another important recommendation is to improve the professional training of teachers and to apply the selection criteria when taking up employment as a teacher. Equally important is providing more freedom for teachers to choose the methods and pace of teaching, as well as more professionals in schools who could help young people cope with emotional problems, as well as more targeted teacher training for early recognition of psychological problems.

Turku IF's recommendations call for youth-oriented and partnership-based methods that promote safety and belonging among pupils to be integrated into the school system. It supports improving access to mental health services by calling for training for teachers and counsellors aimed at improving sensitivity and responsiveness to specific situations. Increased opportunities for experimentation in training are strongly advocated, requiring the provision of more specific and realistic information on training in different fields and professions.

The results of the *Hamburg IF* show that there is a need for more cooperation and more mutual hearing between education and labour market stakeholders at the local level. Young people should also be able to form a more realistic picture of the expectations they have for themselves and the city in which they develop their educational and employment careers. This is a task for both family and career counsellors, who need to change their expectations regarding young people's experiences, setting more realistic goals for them.

For the participants in the *Thessaloniki IF*, it is very important to create school and municipal youth councils that have the power to make decisions related to the curriculum, assessment and planning of students' daily lives. Another key recommendation is to integrate multiple success stories into textbooks and public campaigns, highlighting their nonlinear and community-based life path.

Urbino IF is pushing for the promotion of more innovative and participatory learning approaches that empower young people rather than simply seeing them as passive subjects. It is necessary to emphasize on the "talent" and the unique qualities of each individual.

Genova IF recommends more opportunities for meetings and exchange ideas between students, teachers and policymakers. Schools should be seen as a system that fosters relations between young people and their social and economic environment, and teaching staff should be trained to support young people in vulnerable settings.

For *Lisbon IF*, it is essential to adapt support mechanisms tailored to local realities and the diverse trajectories of young people. It is also understood that strengthening coordination mechanisms between schools, social services, health sectors, local authorities and community-based organisations can lead to integrated educational pathways. It is particularly important to create opportunities for young people to actively participate in shaping measures that affect their private lives. Continuous professional development of teachers and social workers supports their effective work in a context marked by multiple vulnerabilities.

From *Castelo IF* three main topics emerged: the need to improve the access to clear and user-friendly information on available training courses and educational opportunities; the necessity of overcoming bureaucratic barriers and improve processes for the recognition of qualifications obtained abroad; the goal of bridging the gap between educational institutions and companies and ensuring that traineeships provide meaningful and practical learning experiences.

13.5 Conclusion

This chapter shows how the implementation of the TPA has expanded the project's ability to capture the complexities of local contexts. It has also challenged established analytical categories and methodological practices used by the research teams involved. The integration of participation in the CLEAR project has facilitated the understanding of situated knowledge that might not be as visible through standard research methods. Moreover, it has enhanced the inclusivity of the research process by actively engaging local stakeholders. Their contributions have not only refined and contextualised the research tools and language but have also helped identify target groups and appropriate dissemination channels. This approach promoted a broader and more accessible sharing of results, aiming to address the epistemic injustice discussed in the literature (e.g., Fricker, 2007).

At the same time, critical issues that emerged during implementation—such as organizational challenges, the heterogeneity of the participants, and researchers' unfamiliarity with participatory methods—confirm that participation is not a neutral tool. It requires resources, specific methodological skills, and ethical commitment to creating inclusive spaces. The challenge of integrating feedback gathered during participatory activities into empirical analyses, which are often guided by the rationale of standard research methods, remains—to some extent—open. Some partners have acknowledged this issue, highlighting the tension between embracing complexity and meeting the structural and formal requirements of the project's research agenda.

KEY MESSAGES

From the experience of participatory methods, we can provide three key messages:

Designing participation as a reflexive and flexible process: Research teams should understand participation as an integrated and ongoing process that begins in the initial stages of methodological design. This approach allows for adaptation to local contexts and incorporates feedback from participants. Rigid planning can turn participatory activities into formal events, which limits their potential to contribute to meaningful advancements in research and negatively impact the research outcomes of the events.

Foster the relational dimension and mediate power dynamics among the involved stakeholders: Creating environments characterized by trust and inclusivity needs for the adoption of methodologies and tools (such as world cafés, visual toolkits) that encourage the expression of diverse perspectives, particularly in contexts where there are intergenerational or power asymmetries (e.g., between youths and policymakers). The research team's role as a mediator in the interactions is key to ensure that participation does not reinforce existing epistemic inequalities.

Design clear procedures for integrating the insights deriving from participatory activities into the overall research scheme of a project: As systematising the inputs generated from participatory activities and consistently integrating them into the analysis is challenging, to prevent these contributions from being marginalized, it is recommendable to establish methodological strategies for processing these materials from the beginning. This approach not only strengthens the scientific legitimacy of participation but also enhances experiential knowledge as a valuable epistemic resource.

CONCLUSION

14. Conclusion: Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe

Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Johannes Ludwig Löffler & Jozef Zelinka

Introduction

The comparative analyses in this Report have scrutinized the construction of learning outcomes (LOs) from various thematic perspectives and using diverse combinations of data collected. In the concluding chapter, we aim to synthetise the preliminary findings to address CLEAR's overall research questions and embed the results in the current debates on educational quality in Europe. We proceed in three steps: *first*, we utilize the results of the Report's three central parts to address CLEAR's overall research questions; *second*, we focus on factors, actors, and spaces involved in the construction of LOs; *third*, we conclude with a discussion on the wider ramifications of the project's findings with regard to educational (under-)achievement.

14.1 Addressing the overall research questions

In this section, we focus on addressing the project's overall research questions (see Deliverable D2.2 State-of-the-Art Report, p. X). The 12 analytical chapters of this Report were clustered in three parts. The chapters in PART I have addressed the project's first overall research question: *What factors are involved in the construction of learning outcomes and how does their interplay shape the expectations on certain levels of learning outcomes? To what extent are young people involved in their construction as active agents?*

The results of the comparative analyses evidence that young people's agency depends on external limitations and subjective sense of power. From a *Life Course Research* perspective, the agency of young people enters the interplay of institutionalised life courses and local and regional opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022). It is within this interplay that young people set their goals, make their educational and labour market choices, and act according to their possibilities, needs, and desires. The agency of young people with multiple intersecting disadvantages is limited by the systemic barriers across and within the countries, but also by the possibility to reflect on their current situation and future prospects (see Tikkanen et al., Chapter 2 in this Report). Against this background, the expectations on young people's LOs need to consider their possibilities and capabilities to act on their own and follow their educational and labour market paths, for their agency is bounded by local and regional environments that enable or disable their actions and promote a sense of (spatial and cultural) belonging (Clancy & Holford, 2023). However, it is important to note that the subjective sense of agentic power also impacts young people's attitude towards education and meaningful occupation. While some young people, even with multiple (observable) disadvantages, express the desire to thrive and move upwards, others, with seemingly fewer compounding conditions, feel abandoned by the system and fall into a circle of blame. As diverse as the factors affecting the construction of LOs are, the results of the

analyses emphasize the necessity to carefully approach the agency of young people, acknowledging the wide array of external constraints they experience, but providing them with sufficient institutional support to spark their creativity and mobility (see Löffler et al., Chapter 5 in this Report).

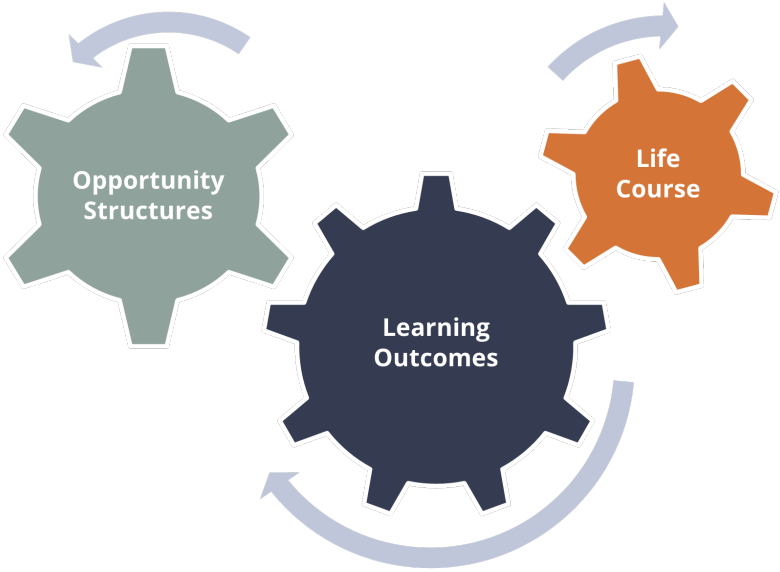
The results of the analyses further emphasize the necessity to de-essentialise vulnerability and (under-)achievement ascribed to young adults as individual attributes. Instead of attempting to identify individual or group characteristics responsible and/or (stereo)typical for low achievers (see Fong et al., 2023), the authors of the chapters have repeatedly stressed the underlying connections between socially and culturally ascribed individual attributes (e.g., being of migrant origin, living in remote regions, experiencing mental health and learning disorders) and the overarching educational narratives favouring accountable outcomes and a culture of profit (see Filippi et al., Chapter 3 in this Report). (Under-)achievement is relational to the (individual and societal) expectations on success and performance. In this regard, the logic of measurement automatically translates educational outcomes into variable categories, inevitably labelling (and potentially stigmatizing) some groups as low achievers or underperformers. For some young people, this leads to disillusionment and self-blaming, which in turn complicates their institutional trust. Many early leavers from education and training, for example, see no purpose in continuing their low performances that further materialize in low social status and poor job prospects. In its turn, young migrants with fragmented educational trajectories increasingly rely on supportive and trustful educational environments which promote a culture of responsiveness (see Scandone et al., Chapter 4 in this Report), instead of individualising their current vulnerable situations (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2021).

The analyses conclude that a lived culture of participation empowers young people to take active roles in educating themselves and leading societal change. The mechanism of constructing LOs revolves around the individual and combined movements of different factors. From this perspective, addressing LOs means to facilitate smooth interactions between various moving parts, whilst avoiding friction between the tangential points where life course and opportunity structures meet. On the one hand, policies aimed to increase location attractiveness, i.e., through well maintained infrastructure, diverse leisure activities or affordable housing, do not automatically result in young adults strategically relocating to that specific sub-region (see Löffler et al., Chapter 5 in this Report). On the other hand, providing institutional support, i.e., second-chance schools, social projects or charities, does not automatically transform young people into active agents of their life courses, unless they are enabled to reflect on their own educational choices (see Tikkanen et al., Chapter 2 in this Report). Young Europeans often do not actively participate in the construction of LOs; they are rather spectators of their own fates and objects of pre-designed measurements. The results of participatory actions show a

growing need for a new culture of participation that empowers young people to become key drivers of the societal change (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report).

As stated at the outset of this section, young people's LOs are constructed in the interplay of their existing and experienced opportunity structures and institutionalised life courses. Figure 14.1 below illustrates the intricacies of this interplay in form of a gear mechanism. The gears move into different directions, which demonstrates the situation of many young people, who wish to make more sense of their life courses, derive more potential from their LOs, and find more suitable educational and job opportunities. Yet, the *wheels of success* sometimes move contrary to their wishes. Setting them in the right position and correct direction is what the institutional support and a culture of recognition can provide.

Figure 14.1 Wheels of success



Source: WP7 leader

Chapters in PART II have addressed the project's second overall research question: *What do the local/regional opportunity structures of young people look like and how do they affect academic (under-)achievement of youth in vulnerable positions? To what extent are social and spatial inequalities embedded in and possibly reproduced by the assessment of LOs?*

The comparative analyses point at a systemic misalignment of young people's educational outcomes, their working and living spaces. The perspective of *Intersectionality* emphasizes the relational nature of inequalities, the sources of which cannot be dissociated and treated solely, but in relation to each other (Bixby, 2024). Similarly, the unequal educational outcomes can be tracked back to various sources of disadvantage, which include not only racial, class, or gender aspects, but increasingly point at the role of (living and working) spaces in (re-)producing individual and group inequalities. On the one hand, the institutional rigidity, the persistence of stratifying cultural or social norms, and the rapid fluctuations in local labour markets limit young people in accessing quality occupations and reduce their social and spatial mobility (see

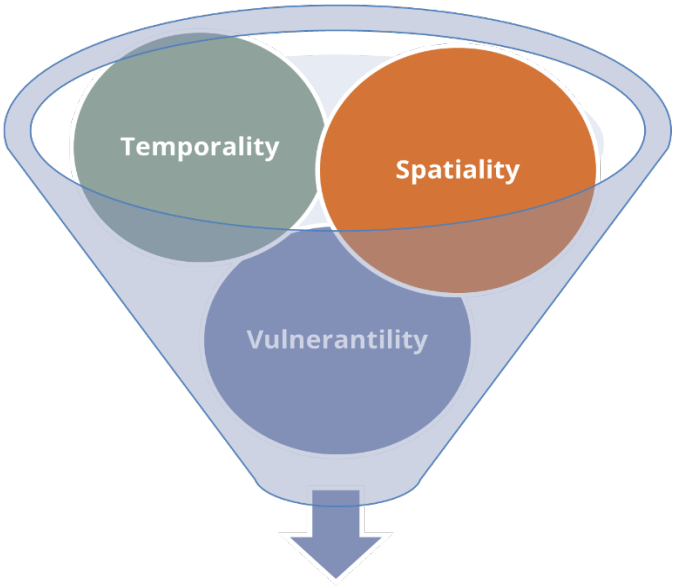
Edler et al., Chapter 6 in this Report). On the other hand, the combination or intersection of multiple disadvantages has a relative impact on the actual quality of LOs. In the attractive metropolitan regions, for example, both the risks and the opportunities for young people are amplified, but not automatically worse than in more remote and scarcely populated regions (see Zelinka et al., Chapter 9 and Löffler, Chapter 5 in this Report). Crucial for the spatially-based educational inequalities to persist are two things: young people's spatial embeddedness and social/educational recognition. Living in deprived neighbourhoods does not mean that young learners are institutionally detached and therefore perform poorer than their peers from wealthier residential areas (Levy, 2022). Instead, the spatial detachment of certain neighbourhoods and/or districts from the main working areas impinges on young people's sense of belonging and embeddedness. In terms of social/educational recognition, this applies especially to young people with migrant background as well as to young women, as these groups either lack the socio-economic resources, practical skills and formal qualifications to find academic/career opportunities, or strong social networks and community support.

The analyses further stress the need to create spaces for a free articulation of contradictions and frictions between various educational stakeholders. Institutional contexts shape educational and career opportunities, but different governance levels often entail different agendas and perspectives. Most teachers, trainers, employers and employment service officers are primarily interested in enhancing young people's employability, perceiving LOs as the acquisition of certificates and qualifications needed on the labour market. Their own success rates are assessed based on quantifiable data, i.e., the number of students that complete training programmes, gain certain qualifications, or transition into the labour market within a given period of time. While local educational stakeholders are imperative providers of support in the school-to-work transitions, the findings show that they often lack the tools and knowledge to appropriately deal with the challenges young people have to face (see Rambla et al., Chapter 7 in this Report). At the higher governance levels, employability is reached through a cooperation with local businesses. The findings indicate that the integration of local companies into educational programmes improves young people's chances to enter the workforce, as it enables employers to directly communicate their demand of certain skills, which in turn limits the risk of young people not finding employment. However, socio-economically declining regions often lack the institutional capacities to put policy-measures into practice as they struggle to fulfil bureaucratic demands, which in turn leads to the creation of fragmented educational landscapes even within centralised governmental systems (see Cefalo et al., Chapter 8 in this Report). In the result, various educational and labour market stakeholders contradict each other, seeking to enhance young people's employability by different means. Finally, young people themselves pursue diverse job strategies and develop new skills, which often remain unrecognised by both local and regional/national stakeholders (see Zelinka et al., Chapter 9 in this Report).

Thus, creating spaces that would allow to articulate the different demands and visions can provide valuable evidence for the decision-making processes.

There is need to recognise and bridge various institutional logics aiming at the inclusion of groups in vulnerable positions. The comparative analyses show that systemic mismatches between educational stakeholders threatens the design fitting policies for young people. At the local level, practitioners and professionals working first-hand with young people experience directly their hardships, ambivalent life situations, but also their, at times naïve and unrealistic, expectations (see Rambla et al., Chapter 7 in this Report). At the regional level, the policymakers have to cope with the complex combinations of jurisdictions, policies, politics, and social contexts (see Cefalo et al., Chapter 8 in this Report). At the national level, key political decisions and comparative educational metrics decide about the financial and policy priorities, but tend to oversee regional complexities (see Edler et al., Chapter 6 in this Report). Against this background, the various levels of policymaking create a web of interests and logics that seek to improve the inclusion of young people in multi-disadvantaged positions. Informed by various experiences, limitations, and power mechanisms, the institutional logics make sense on their own. Yet, the different logics targeting the same issue often operate past each other, creating redundancies and often leading to misunderstandings. One solution to overcome the blind spots in the interaction is to derive the information for policy design from the same sources (Kovacheva et al., 2020, p. 251), considering young people's experiences as relevant as their targeted LOs. Similarly, the results of the Innovation Forums show the urgency to connect the stakeholders, not just to share and exchange the views and experiences, but to re-scale one's own institutional logics (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). We illustrate the implications of our findings in Figure 14.2.

Figure 14.2 Construction of learners in vulnerable positions



Source: WP7 leader

The figure highlights how spatiality (the perception and impact of spaces), temporality (different quality and intensity of temporal frames), and vulnerantility (the potential of spaces to produce potentially vulnerable conditions) translate into the complex process of constructing learners in vulnerable positions. Instead of reducing them to statistically traceable categories, such as school dropouts or youth at-risk, the goal is to de-construct the intertwined mechanisms that at a certain time and in a given administrative territory make it possible to separate and categorise well-performing and under-performing learners, with long-lasting personal and institutional implications.

The chapters in PART III have addressed the project's third overall research question: *What is the impact of spatial distribution of educational sites on the quality of learning outcomes? How are spaces affecting (under-)achievement and to what extent are they reflected in the educational policymaking?*

The analyses indicate a stark contrast between technocratic/technological and socio-politically motivated approaches to spatial justice. The perspective of *Spatial Justice* emphasizes the connection between educational processes and their results on the one hand, and the actual spatial environments in which learning unfolds on the other hand. As our analyses indicate, LOs are more often than not detached from the spaces that enable them. In the research discourse, enhancing poor LOs is progressively related to digital and pedagogical innovations that are based on instructional effectiveness and technology-driven environments (see Neves et al., Chapter 10 in this Report). The focus is placed on optimizing learning experience and motivating learners through concepts that personalise and remodel the spatial experience of learning (e.g., flipped classrooms or immersive virtual reality). While such approaches have a huge potential to motivate individual learners, they fall short to account for the underlying social and spatial inequalities. Similarly, local and regional policymaking is often stuck in its administrative boundaries, lacking room for both intra- and inter-institutional manoeuvres and operating within its technocratic logic of reaching the required numbers (see Barberis et al., Chapter 11 in this Report). This technological and technocratic paradigm contrasts with the more grassroot political critique of the educational injustice. The critique stems from local practitioners, young people, but also from national policy experts and targets the inappropriate systemic response to transitional regimes, teacher and professional training, as well as rigid curriculums and a general objectification of learners (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). Bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice means to acknowledge the pitfalls of purely technocratic and technological approaches to the enhancement of LOs and create a shared understanding of the educational processes to indicate potential tensions and conflicts, since "that what is effective in relation to one [educational] domain may be ineffective in relation to another or may at least limit or hinder or obstruct the effectiveness of another domain" (Biesta, 2020, p. 35).

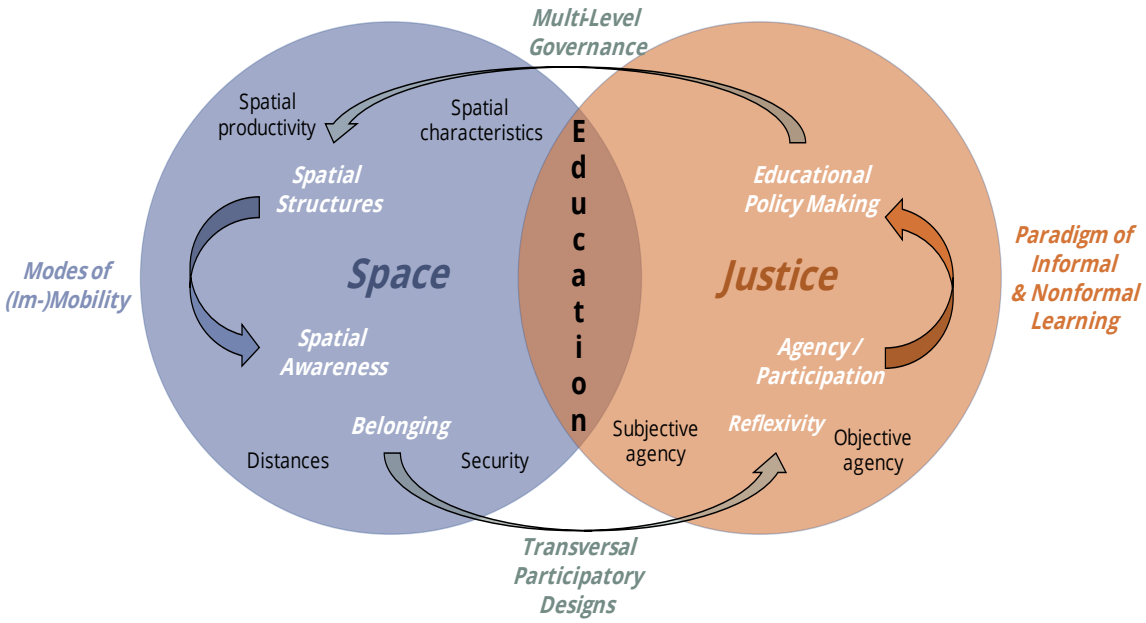
The comparative analyses have revealed a lack of power and authority of the local and regional stakeholders to decide on the quality of educational achievements. Especially the complaints of teachers, counsellors, professionals in training and career guidance regarding the lack of support mechanisms and rooms for manoeuvre signal a growing need for more empowerment of local and regional authorities (see Barberis et al., Chapter 11 and Ferraz et al., Chapter 12 in this Report). The results reveal that street level bureaucrats perceive their educational agency through their possibilities of network-building, their chances to adapt the curricula to local labour market demands or to incorporate young adults' informal and non-formal skills into educational and training programmes. In this regard, the performance-based models of LOs complicate and enforce their actions. The participatory actions with local educational stakeholders have corroborated this trend (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). The findings portray a contrasting picture, one that reveals the actual difficulties that local authorities experience, such as the lack of sensitivity for young people's situations and emotional states, insufficient cooperation and information exchange between the vertical and horizontal governance structures, or the inflexible teaching practices that focus on fulfilling prescribed targets instead of holistically approaching learners. Thus, while local and regional stakeholders can indicate their sources of empowerment, their commitment is limited by a dominant understanding of educational achievements, to which they have to adapt their working practices and expectations on young people's performances.

The chapters make the case for a systematic dialogue between research, policy, and practice to bridge different meanings and understandings of LOs. As the life courses of young people have become increasingly irregular and (spatially and temporarily) fragmented (see Ferraz et al., Chapter 12 in this Report), the attention has shifted to the root causes of their learning performances. Statistically, LOs are collected and measured at the level of territorial units (e.g., country results, regional results, school results etc.). In practice, however, young people perceive their living and working spaces rather functionally then administratively, seeking to adapt to their ever-changing life circumstances. Thus, on the one hand, LOs have become increasingly individualised and tendentially decontextualised. On the other hand, different stakeholder groups seeking to improve the quality of LOs operate in different territorial units, which are not only separated by administrative borders or institutional logics, but also attach different meanings and uses to LOs (see Neves et al., Chapter 10 in this Report). This spatially- and group-based divergence creates both opportunities and risks. It can potentially lead to inaction of local and regional authorities, as the applied practices to enhance LOs may prove to be ineffective or inaccurate, which can further exacerbate spatial injustice and lead to more social and spatial segregation (Moroni & De Franco, 2024). Yet it also entails a series of opportunities for the local communities. The results indicate a potential of community-based actions to support learners and navigate institutional policies (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). The nearer the learning and living experiences,

the more appropriate solutions could be devised. Instead of attempting to create a statistical conformity and presumed educational quality, the active engagement of learners, teachers, professionals, policymakers, and researchers in joint activities, such as participatory actions, strengthens cohesion and supports reflection of one's own positioning, spatial sensitivity, and social responsibility. We demonstrate the intrinsic connections between space and justice in the following figure (see Figure 14.3 below).

The figure illustrates education at the intersection of space and justice. When focusing on spaces, aspects of spatial structures and spatial awareness need to be considered. While spaces appear to be static and objectively "just" to everyone, in reality, they create unequal conditions for various groups. In terms of justice, the educational policymaking needs to ensure that everyone is given the same rights (e.g., proximity of schools or training centres). But it also points at the ability to act and participate in educational processes despite the limitations imposed by the spatial disparities. Thus, the dynamic relations between space and justice impact the construction of LOs, creating unique living and learning ecologies that need to be considered in their limitations and potentials.

Figure 14.3 Education at the intersection of space and justice



Source: WP7 leader

14.2 Constructing Learning Outcomes: The interplay of factors, actors, and spaces

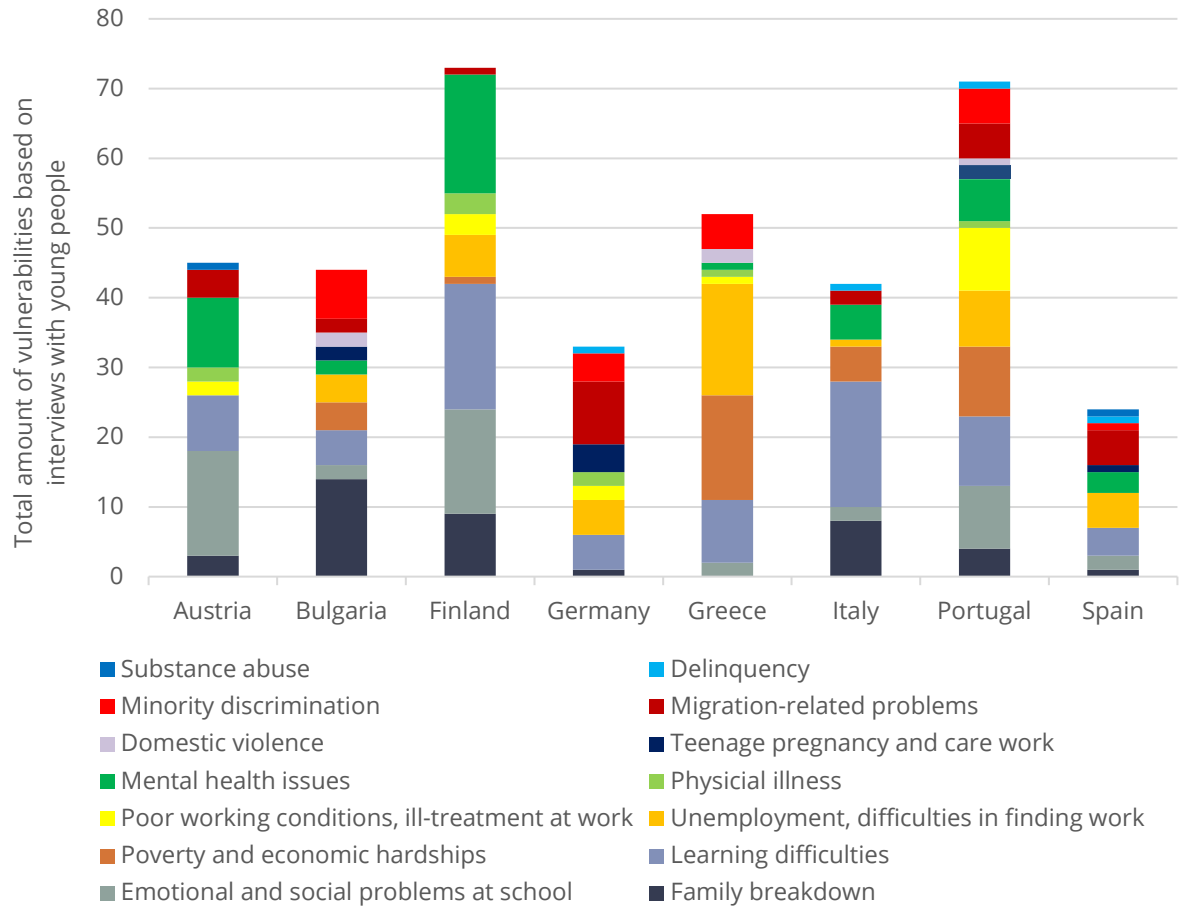
The chapters of the Report have tackled diverse educational issues, utilizing a selected combination of data, units and levels of analysis. In this section, we leave the single logic of each chapter to allow a cross-reading of all project's findings. In short, the comparisons have revealed the significance of three aspects involved in the construction of LOs: factors, actors, and spaces.

Factors

We have revealed a series of factors that affect the quality of LOs. While the single chapter contributions name multiple factors and discuss their impact from specific thematic foci, the goal of this sub-section is to compare them across the findings. An ideal entry point for the comparisons is the recurring topic of ***vulnerability***.

The project has focused on young people as active learners who are constantly challenged to navigate their life courses in diverging educational, economic, and socio-cultural demands. To better address poor educational quality, the project has particularly focused young people in vulnerable positions. As the Report shows, vulnerability has many faces. While nearly half of our interviewees report experiencing learning difficulties at school, countless other factors affect their ability to learn and develop meaningful life courses (see Figure 14.4 below).

Figure 14.4 Sources of vulnerability according to young people



Source: own elaboration based on data reported in Deliverable D5.3 International Qualitative Analysis Report (pp. 11-13)

The figure displays the occurrence of different types of vulnerabilities that young people have experienced or continue to experience and which have been reported to us during the interviews. The figure illustrates the frequency of experienced vulnerabilities, which

range from issues related to family breakdown in the early childhood up to problems associated with school dropout, unemployment, and precarious living conditions. Obviously, the root causes of vulnerability differ among the countries. In the Finnish sample, for example, problems related to mental health and social relationships at school prevail and are contrastingly higher than in other countries. In Greece, socio-economic hardships and unemployment play a crucial role, while in Germany, migrant background is seen as the main source of educational and labour market disadvantage. As a policy response, the designed educational and career-guidance programmes inspired by the vulnerability discourse (see Rambla et al., Chapter 7 and Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report) create a series of undesirable developments.

First, vulnerability discourses aim at identifying individual traits that limit young people's ability to acquire necessary skills and qualifications. This essentialises vulnerability as an individual condition, rather than as a relational and temporary situation (see Tikkanen et al., Chapter 2 and Filippi et al., Chapter 3 in this Report). In doing so, young people in vulnerable positions are increasingly governed by deploying what Heath-Kelly and Gruber have termed "pre-emptive interventions" (2023, p. 3). Here, two types of interventions can be distinguished: pedagogical and policy interventions. The *pedagogical* interventions operate with behavioural incentives, seeking to motivate learners with novel concepts, such as the concept of relative performance feedback (Hermes et al., 2020; Brade et al., 2022). The *policy* interventions, in turn, are fed by data collected through assessments of young people's performances and seek to raise the levels of their LOs either through the development of new scaling models (Chen et al., 2023) or through the re-application of process data collected during the testing (Maddox, 2023).

In both cases young people are targeted as objects of interventions and as sources of information and data. Notably, the participation in the famous *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) requires no signed informed consent, be it by the parents or legal guardians, or by the students themselves. While the security of the data stored in privately owned global enterprises like Amazon Web Services or Google Cloud Platform (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025) is highly questionable, and while private research and consulting companies can farm on and capitalise the data (Zuboff, 2019) without ever asking permission by and account to the data owners—the young people themselves—, the more acute problems are the distortion of education (Emler et al., 2019) and the misuse of assessment (Hopfenbeck, 2019). Large-scale assessments (LSAs), like PISA, were successful in creating an image of accurately reflecting the quality of education. Once some countries were recognised as best-performing, the policymakers from other countries sought to borrow their practices and re-install them at home. Yet, what appears to lead to success in one context does not necessarily work in contexts. As Emler and colleagues rightly point out, the global LSAs stifle innovation in education through homogenizing educational policies and practices (2019, p. 290). The latter is particularly visible in our results.

The results of comparative analyses confirm that the perceptions of policy experts on LOs vary in part significantly between countries, indicating an imbalance within the academic debate and coinciding with perspectives of young people and local policy practitioners (see Table 14.1 below).

Table 14.1 Expert's opinions on relational factors affecting learning outcomes

		AT	BG	DE	EL	ES	FI	IT	PT
Gender	*Marginal means*	**3.41**	**2.86**	**3.53**	**4.03**	**4.04**	**3.95**	**3.64**	**3.14**
	Significant pairwise comparisons	<EL <ES <FI	<DE <EL <ES <FI <IT	>BG	>AT >BG >PT	>AT >BG >PT	>AT >BG >PT	>BG >PT	<EL <ES <FI <IT
Class	*Marginal means*	**5.54**	**4.88**	**5.54**	**5.89**	**5.46**	**5.04**	**5.38**	**5.23**
	Significant pairwise comparisons	>BG	<AT <DE <EL <ES <IT	>BG	>BG >FI >IT >PT	>BG	>BG <EL	>BG <EL	<EL
Minority/ Migration	*Marginal means*	**4.80**	**4.49**	**4.30**	**5.26**	**4.86**	**5.46**	**4.63**	**4.44**
	Significant pairwise comparisons	<FI	<EL <FI	<EL <FI	>BG >DE >IT >PT	<FI	>AT >BG >DE >ES >IT >PT	<EL <FI	<EL <FI
Disabilities	*Marginal means*	**4.50**	**4.52**	**3.81**	**5.38**	**4.75**	**5.60**	**4.89**	**4.78**
	Significant pairwise comparisons	>DE <EL <FI	>DE <EL <FI	<AT <BG <EL <ES <FI <IT <PT	>AT >BG >DE >ES >IT >PT	>DE <EL <FI	>AT >BG >DE >ES >IT >PT	>DE <EL <FI	>DE <EL <FI
Self-efficacy	*Marginal means*	**5.51**	**6.03**	**5.43**	**6.12**	**5.98**	**5.79**	**5.61**	**5.82**
	Significant pairwise comparisons	<BG <EL <ES	>AT >DE >IT	<BG <EL <ES <FI <PT	>AT >DE >IT	>AT >DE >IT	>DE	<BG <EL <ES	>DE

> significantly higher than < significantly lower than

Source: Deliverable D6.1 Experts' Opinion Report (pp. 35f)

The table entails factors influencing LOs at the micro-level (first column) based on responses (N=423) from national and regional policy experts from the project's countries. In the following columns, the responses are compared among the countries, showing either the positive (green colour) or negative (red colour) prevalence of a given factors. Among the different individual dimensions included in the survey, social class and self-efficacy have the highest mean in the present and in the future. Other factors range between 4 and 5 on average, indicating that respondents identify them as having a

moderate impact on LOs. An exception is represented by gender, which has the lowest mean ranks indicating that survey respondents consider it less influential than other dimensions. When embedded in our analyses on young people's vulnerable positions, several implications emerge. In Bulgaria, for example, the precarious situation of young women from Sinti and Roma background, whose in-laws prevent them from completing their education, coincides with statements of educational stakeholders regarding societal prejudices towards ethnic groups or women (see Löffler et al., Chapter 5 and Edler et al., Chapter 6 in this Report). In Germany, Portugal and Italy, the comparatively low influence attached to migration or minority status on poor LOs by experts corroborates with findings that educational stakeholders either lack awareness or flexibility necessary to adequately support migrants to enter and traverse the educational landscape (see Scandone et al., Chapter 4 and Barberis et al., Chapter 11 in this Report).

In short, the interplay of institutional, socio-cultural, discursive, individual, spatial but also increasingly technological and data-driven factors install a permanently changing environment, which is exacerbated by attempts to homogenize educational systems and leverage outcomes of young people. Contrary to such attempts, our results indicate the need to recognise and effectively response to the different "layers of vulnerability" (Luna, 2019) that traverse young people's life courses and temporarily destabilize their efforts, instead of constantly (re)creating new statistical and/or socio-economic categories of low achievers. Vulnerability must be seen more as a symptom of a negative interplay of the factors (i.e., negatively affecting some groups of young people more than others), the analysis of which can reveal parameters for future change. One example of a positive re-enactment of a failed interplay is the improvement of young people's life courses through significant others (career guidance workers, counsellors, social workers), who oversee and (re)connect a multiplicity of factors to navigate young adults.

Actors

The CLEAR project is designed to consider the multiplicity of actors and actor constellations involved in the process of constructing LOs. The single analyses suggest a fluid cleavage between various educational stakeholders and their ***agency***.

Teachers, trainers, and labour professionals at the local and regional level often meet young people during their turning life events or crucial transition points (e.g., school-to-work transition, new beginning after migration, re-entering education or labour market at a later stage etc.). As implementers of the policy programmes, their function requires a high degree of flexibility towards young people and their structural needs (see Cefalo et al., Chapter 8 in this Report), but also towards their own institutional and administrative requirements (see Barberis et al., Chapter 11 in this Report). Our findings show that local stakeholders are aware of individual, also informal or non-formal skill sets of their students or clients (e.g., reflexivity, resilience, patience, adaptability etc.) Yet, at the same time, they recognise the pitfalls and shortcomings of their desires and aspirations, which

are either poorly realisable with their own credentials, or not properly adjusted to the local labour market structure (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). Their crucial role as facilitators can have a positive impact on young people's agency, but it can also spur systemic changes in supporting communities and schools with structural needs. One crucial element to be considered is the promotion of spatial, educational, and professional ownership.

Spatial ownership concentrates on the ability of learners and teachers to envisage the physical and symbolic design of educational spaces, as much as their functional and social implications. To own and use the spaces for learning (Imms et al., 2016) strengthens the agency of young people and stimulates their creativity and responsibility, also towards their own living spaces (see Löffler et al., Chapter 5 in this Report). In this regard, scholarly studies demonstrate that

> *[E]xploration with learning space design does not have to take place in new, high-tech spaces, or involve large amounts of funding. It can be as simple as giving learners of all ages and stages a voice in the make-up of their classroom (Hancock et al., 2023, p. 774).*

Educational ownership, in turn, focuses on the learner's sense of reflectively engaging in their learning processes and owing their outcomes. Our results imply that the rigid school curricula, bureaucratic obstacles, or legal requirements prevent many young people from attending formal education (see Scandone et al., Chapter 4 in this Report) and, thus, developing a sense of autonomy. In that respect, research suggests that more time and (self-)exploration is needed for teachers and young people alike to overcome their sedimented understandings and "implicit and explicit constraints" (Hendrickx et al., 2022, p. 353). Finally, professional ownership applies to the role of local and regional stakeholders in stimulating their own growth and empowering their target groups through the transfer of relevant skills and competencies. During the participatory actions, it became evident that local and regional professionals have limited overlap with other policy sectors, thus relying only on their own experience and expertise (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). In this case, participants in the Innovation Forums reported that their involvement was vital to stimulate their own reflexivity and contributed to identifying their improvement capacities (Nehez & Håkansson Lindqvist, 2024).

Young people are another decisive actor group. In the course of the project, it became evident that not only do their perceptions differ from those of their teachers, trainers and employers, but that they have a different perception of space and time. While young people wish to have a safe and secure occupation that aligns with their skills, majority of them operates only with short-term plans (e.g., next bureaucratic step, next necessary certificate, or next occupation to serve only as a source of income), the policies are devised for longer duration to consider various possible scenarios and economic/political periods (see Ferraz et al., Chapter 12 in this Report). Another recurring issue was the emergence

of fixed self-contained categories of young people, mostly related to assumed attitudes, social behaviour or socio-cultural background (see Rambla et al., Chapter 7 in this Report). We have continuously stressed that young people cannot be treated as a homogeneous group, but as a multitude of different individuals with distinct skill sets, life histories, and personalities, whose prospects largely correspond with the readiness of local and regional stakeholders to acknowledge their current situations. Moreover, perceiving them through monolithic lenses risks overseeing that the processes of "re-subjectivation, personal empowerment, and political (in a broad sense) interpretations of their context are actually vastly diverse." (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2022, p. 239). In that regard, one acute issue is the situation of young migrants in Europe.

We have targeted populations in vulnerable situations, most of whom have been young refugees and migrants (from Latin America in Spain, from African countries in Portugal, from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine in Germany and Austria). Their background as migrants negatively impacts their life and educational achievements (see Scandone et al., Chapter 4 in this Report). Young migrants have scattered educational experiences, fragmented qualifications, conflict-related traumas, and little to no support mechanisms. Women are in particularly disadvantaged positions, often intensified through care work and/or pregnancy (see Edler et al., Chapter 6 in this Report). Compared to their peer residents, the majority of them faces a higher risk of unemployment, ill-treatment, especially with regard to their housing situation, and a long-term insecurity due to lengthy administrative procedures. Least but not last, their poor language competencies further complicate their integration, with local stakeholders, especially teachers, often lacking financial resources (and sometimes personal capacities) to support them. On the other side, however, they have reported strong willingness to continue their efforts even against the odds, settle and find a fitting occupation, and develop a new sense of life. As it turns out, their capabilities obtained during migration still remain unrecognised (see Zelinka et al., Chapter 9 in this Report). Skills such as the ability to adapt constantly to new conditions, manoeuvre and navigate their lives in critical circumstances, developing institutional trust, and value every educational opportunity need to be acknowledged and recognised in their educational and/or training pathways in order for them to move past their spatial-temporal uncertainties (Griffiths, 2014) and develop a shared sense of responsibility and belonging (see Ferraz et al., Chapter 12 in this Report).

Finally, our analyses reveal further *divergencies between various stakeholder groups*. For example, while young people seek to find occupations that fit their interests and desires (see Tikkanen et al., Chapter 2 in this Report), education and employment professionals consider skills shortages and existing institutional capacities in their service (see Rambla et al., Chapter 7 in this Report). For them, school curricula and qualification frameworks are necessary to define overall goals, while soft skills should be increasingly integrated into the policy design. On the other side, national and regional policy experts implement either market-oriented or multi-dimensional approaches to the design of policy tools (see

Ferraz et al., Chapter 12 in this Report). As a result, economic rationales and structural capacities take over individual life courses and voices of young people. And although there is a limited understanding for local and/or regional economic challenges, especially in the more remote regions, these are not taken into account. Policy actors only speak of spatiality indirectly when recognising regional economic problems, but do not connect it with teaching, training and/or learning processes. Thus, the collaboration between the various actors hampers partially due to the lacking recognition of problems that affect all actor groups, not just one, partially due to absence of joint intersections that enable equal participation for all (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report), and partially due to regional policy differences: in Austria, Finland and Germany, dense networks of coordination exist even despite geographical disparities; in Southern Europe, some spurs of rather weak coordination are noticeable in Barcelona (Spain), Liguria (Italy), Marche (Italy) and Plovdiv (Bulgaria); in the South, the rule is that schools, training programmes and labour market services are isolated from one another.

Thus, the mismatches in communication and collaboration between various actors show the prevalence of a uniform social construal over regional socio-structural dynamics in most European countries. Against this background, we are reminded that

> *[T]he regional and local policy actors and institutions are not only influenced by context but influence each other through their relational networks. This is not to ignore or negate the structural impact of economic forces on systems but rather to understand how systems respond to such contexts. To do so, we must take into account the complex social relationships and agency of actors involved at all levels. (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2020, p. 36)*

The agency of different actors involved in our research is relational, yet allows for crossing the institutional and spatial boundaries, for which thinking and acting outside the mere professional frameworks is of utter importance.

Spaces

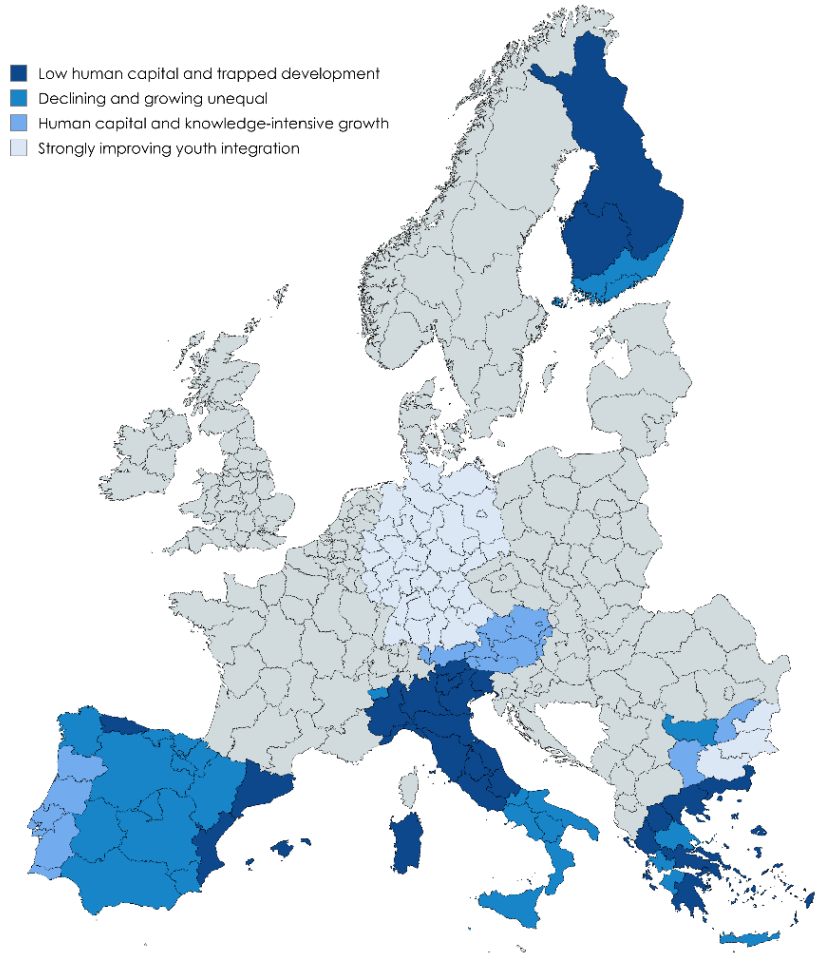
The CLEAR project includes the spatial perspective to account for persisting inequalities and unjust distribution of rights and opportunities involved in the construction of LOs. Our findings evidence that although spaces play an immense role in structuring educational and training opportunities, they are rarely considered in policymaking and career guidance. We assess the impact of ***spatiality*** on LOs by elaborating on the complex relations between space and education.

We depart from the observation that the nature of spaces is ambivalent, i.e., spaces do not have *per se* positive or negative characteristics. We therefore analyse them as determining the quality of social relations, but also as dependent on the actions of social agents. Zelinka and Parreira do Amaral (2026) have proposed a series of dichotomies that traverse the relation between education and space. Together with the results of our qualitative interviews with young people and quantitative cluster analyses, the

dichotomies enable us to assess the spatiality of educational sites. In following, we discuss a sample of the dichotomies in light of the project's qualitative and quantitative data.

The narrative biographical interviews with young people have focused their learning and living experiences, seeking to understand their perception of local and regional spaces and opportunity structures. The cluster analyses, in turn, have used selected indicators related to educational, labour market, and socio-economic contextual indicators to identify the most distinctive characteristics of regional clusters. Figure 14.5 below summarizes the results of cluster analyses, devising four distinct clusters: 1) regions with *low human capital and trapped development* (navy blue): decreasing tertiary qualifications, poor employment conditions, slight population loss; 2) regions with *unequal decline and growth* (blue): decreasing rates of low-educated youth, rising youth unemployment, slow economic growth, shrinking and aging population; 3) regions with *knowledge-intensive growth* (light blue): increasing tertiary qualifications, strong trend towards knowledge economy, poor labour conditions for medium-qualified workforce; and 4) regions with *strongly improving youth integration* (white): increasing tertiary education qualifications, decreasing youth unemployment, aging population.

Figure 14.5 Groups of regions according to their Rate of Change (2007-2019)



Source: Deliverable D3.2 Cross-national/cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report (p. 47)

The quality of (educational) spaces can be determined through many aspects. One particular parameter of the spaces is their *capacity to develop*, i.e., either accelerate economic and societal growth or decline/stagnate. By this parameter we simply mean the ability and plasticity of space to change and adapt to ongoing circumstances. While some places are (also due to a combination of countless other factors) able to transform into attractive global sites, others remain lagging peripheries facing out-migration and related problems (see Löffler et al., Chapter 5 in this Report). As the figure portrays, large parts of Finland (albeit caution is advised, since the statistical categories applying to the Finnish case are partly misleading), Northern Italy, and parts of Spain and Greece exhibit a trapped regional development, with structural changes progressing at a low pace. Under such conditions, young people are forced to suppress their ambitions and expectations:

> *Maybe in 10 years things will completely change, but I think you can't have too many ambitions at the moment. You are limited by the place where you live, as there are fewer possibilities than perhaps in a large city such as Milan, Rome, Paris, or London. […] I haven't seen any kind of change since I was little. It's been 15/13 years, and I haven't seen any radical change. (WP5_IT_M_P_1)*

> *Well, you can't do much with just a basic education certificate, so at some point I have to go and study something. And then, my home village has no options, so it also means that I have to move away from there. I still live with my parents, so moving away from my parents' place, because you can't do anything there, it's a small, a dying village. (WP5_FI_P_K_8)*

The ability of spaces to close or open *local/regional opportunity structures* points at another crucial dichotomy. Depending on the flexibility of regional and national governance bodies to act on the opportunity structures (see Cefalo et al., Chapter 8 in this Report), the latter can be experienced as rather restraining individual ambitions, or as providing a good basement for them. Regions with unequal decline and growth, including Southern Finland, large parts of Spain, Southern Italy and parts of Greece, offer ambivalent opportunities, which not everyone can equally utilise. While some perceive them as structurally given, others relate them to their existing social networks:

> *Good opportunities. For example, you have so many options in terms of education. You have schools in Turku and in towns nearby [names of towns]. Good opportunities for the future, if you start studying or try to find jobs, there are quite a lot of jobs. (WP5_FI_E_S_3)*

> *Meaningful opportunities… I don't know if they are meaningful but there are opportunities. They are good for me. I mean I didn't miss anything all these years being here and living here. And I don't think that it is the place. It is the people who give the opportunities. (WP5_EL_E_A_4)*

Another dichotomy is the *sense of belonging* that tells us how spaces are related to the self-understanding and future imagination of individuals and collectives, i.e., either uniting them with their communities or separating them from the places they live in. When perceiving their environments as hostile, young people are more likely to fall in

frustration and (spatial and institutional) disconnection. If, on the other hand, they find acceptance and support, they are more likely to rely on their social capital and spatial subjectivities (see Zelinka et al., Chapter 9 in this Report). By using the example of regions with knowledge intensive growth, like the ones in Portugal or Austria, we can illustrate that the sense of belonging decides on young people's ability and motivation to seek educational and labour market opportunities with relation their lived spaces. The two experiences of young people demonstrate how the spatiality of places is co-constructed through different biographical pathways:

> *Amadora is dangerous. It's really very dangerous. I wouldn't advise anyone to come here, but this is the justice we have. [The person moved to the neighbourhood during adolescence.] (WP5_PT_L_A_20)*
>
> *This neighbourhood has given me everything I have. It taught me everything I know. I owe a lot to this neighbourhood, in a positive sense. [The person was born and raised in the neighbourhood] (WP5_PT_L_A_12)*

One last dichotomy that helps to visualize the relations between space and education is the ability to *empower or constrain* individual or collective actions. Learning environments can foster creativity, self-realization, and ownership (see Tikkanen et al., Chapter 2 in this Report), but they can equally limit individual or collective attempts and curb the academic success. In regions with strongly improving youth integration, such as Germany, this dichotomy enters the interplay of institutional and structural conditions leading to completely different outcomes, as the following two quotes greatly demonstrate:

> *I lived in Berlin for a year, and unfortunately in one year, I had zero per cent. Zero per cent. In three months of moving, after three months of moving to Hamburg, I found an apprenticeship for myself, found a nice apartment, found a nice good job, with a good salary and feel really comfortable here in Hamburg. (WP5_DE_H_H_10)*
>
> *I wanted to learn since learning keeps my life going. I didn't want to end up as a woman with children and stuff. I didn't want that. I wanted to become a woman who has something, who works, who is doing her formation and things like that. The worst thing for me here [in Germany] is that I am not allowed to attend a school. (WP5_DE_H_H_2)*

We have touched upon a limited set of dichotomies to address the intricate relation between education and space and emphasize the vast potential of integrating spatial perspective into educational policymaking. We argue that education is not only a positional good (Durst, 2021), but a highly contested spatial good which decides upon access to and accessibility of educational provision (Stauber & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). It is further linked to capability of learners to develop their social structures, build relations, set up families, and fully integrate to the society. The most critical situation in this regard is experienced by young migrants and refugees, whose learning and living prospects are threatened by spatial and temporal fissure in their lives (see Ferraz et al., Chapter 12 in this Report) disrupting their families, futures, and spatial belonging (Abbasi-

Shavazi et al., 2018). Addressing poor LOs, therefore, must move beyond the static and naïve conception of spaces and embrace the full breadth of spatial impacts which we have indicated in the comparative analyses.

14.3 Discussion and conclusion

In the last section of this Report, we re-connect with the scholarly and policy debates from which we have departed since the beginning of the CLEAR project. In particular, we contribute with the project's findings to address three overarching topics: 1) the meaning and use of the concepts of LOs and (under-)achievement in educational assessment; 2) the impact of vulnerability on youth inclusiveness and educational pathways; and 3) the role of participation in co-creating just and sustainable educational landscapes in Europe.

The analysis in CLEAR has identified and problematised many shortcomings of the mainstream conceptualisation of educational (under-)achievement and LOs and calls for a systematic re-assessment of both concepts.

In the CLEAR project, we have examined the issues of poor LOs and (under-)achievement first by problematising its mainstream conceptualisation that risks reducing the complexity of educational processes to quantifiable units. While some scholars continue to advance the research on educational (under-)achievement by considering "other types of systems, besides countries (e.g., municipalities, states, districts); other subject domains, besides the core of mathematics, reading and science; and regarding affective and non-cognitive outcomes of schooling." (Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022, p. 23), we argue that this does not substantially change the situation (see Enchikova et al., 2024) and leads to more conceptual confusion than clarity (see Neves et al., Chapter 10 in this Report).

Crucially, we advocate for a systematic re-assessment of the concepts of LOs and (under-)achievement. LOs are not only used to assess learners, improve school curricula, or compare countries and regions, but increasingly to forecast and anticipate policy actions. Our research aims at problematizing this dominant concept of anticipatory governance (Robertson, 2022; Mertanen et al., 2019; 2021) in which achievement and LOs become a 'chimera of quantifications and comparisons' (Mølstad & Pettersson, 2019) premised on the 'powers of numbers' (Hacking, 1990; Rose, 1991). This 'chimera' assumes the equivalence of 'number-intelligent' and 'education-intelligent' activities and claims to 'tell the truth' about education (meaning its quantification) and 'understand' it (meaning its comparison), which in turn supports and legitimizes only specific ways of doing and seeing (Mølstad & Pettersson, 2019). Indeed, as scholars have pointed out, the LOs approach has not only reduced education to learning—leading to a true 'learnification' of education (Biesta, 2009); it has not only narrowed learning down to what is visible and active (Hattie, 2009); it has completely detached education from the lives of real people. This 'metrological realism' turns education into data that represents universal values, it tackles complex educational problems by mono-disciplinarity, and it restricts expertise to performance management and datafication to ensure success in a market of data and

measures (Grek, 2024). In this context, LOs "changed from individuals' personalities and personal skills, to a measurement of the fulfilment of tomorrow's curriculum, which becomes a 'myth' of tomorrow's possibilities." (Pettersson & Popkewitz, 2019, p. 32)

We claim that the indifferent, decontextualised application of educational data threatens the just provision of education and risks prolonging unequal relations. The performance-based (Madsen, 2024), anticipatory governance jeopardizes the necessary openness for the upcoming challenges, as the global consensus build around the merits of competitiveness (Hadjar & Becker, 2016) forecloses other, possibly asymmetrical claims about educational future(s). Indeed, as Susan Robertson has pointed out, large international organizations, like OECD and UNESCO, "mobilise a range of anticipatory strategies and devices – from indicators to scenarios, foresight and anticipation as a discipline, as well as compete with each other regarding hegemonic education futures" (Robertson, 2022, p. 201), instrumentalising and exploiting human capital. Against this background, anticipating learners in multi-disadvantaged positions in the future calculations and scenarios reinforces their double role as scapegoats for educational underperformance and as a target group for policymaking and research. Our conclusions contradict the instrumental use of LOs as an anticipatory tool and call for not just learner-centred, but also context-sensitive approach to (under-)achievement.

In CLEAR, we have provided evidence for structural and spatial factors affecting the quality of LOs and posit the need to de-essentialise vulnerability and spatiality in relation to young people.

Tackling poor LOs is first and foremost related to offering young Europeans the conditions to thrive and live meaningful lives. Although, from a societal point of view, this also pertains economic and social goals, it has direct bearings on the lives of millions of young people across the continent. For young people, education changes lives. Achievement or the lack of it becomes a stepping stone, or a dead-end, for their dreams and aspirations. Well aware of that, European learners, educators, and policymakers alike align in the attempt to create the best possible conditions so that everyone can thrive and flourish (Stoyanov, 2020). However, the recurrent inability of policy measures premised on measuring and statistically enhancing levels of educational outcomes raises concerns not only about the inefficiency in the use of resources, but also in failing to provide for the social inclusion of a significant portion of European youths, often reinforcing essentialising claims about their presumed vulnerable status (see Filippi et al., Chapter 3 in this Report). We therefore argue for a de-essentialisation of vulnerability and of specific spatial representations of young people (e.g., villagers, hinterlanders, street children) that flattens them out as 'risk' or 'wicked' youth with a great potential of stigmatisation and ill-informed policymaking.

The weak social position of many young people, particularly those from migrant background, was further reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemics (European

Commission et al., 2023) and the outbreak of armed conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, or Palestine. As scholars emphasize, "[e]specially in our time of renewed ethnic conflicts and wars, which always produce vast trauma, impairment, and forced migration, the gaps between ideals, rhetoric, and lived realities extend, often to the breaking point." (Powell, 2024, p. 7) Thus, addressing the issue of social (and spatial) justice in Europe goes beyond mere educational horizons. Yet, in CLEAR we have showed that learning and living spaces conflate at multiple intersections, with the potential for educational research and policymaking to go beyond instructive pedagogies (Morais et al., 2001) and dive more deeply into the nature of spatial-educational relations. One exemplary nodal point connecting education and (institutionalized) space is the classroom. While in classroom, students spend much of their active life, build their relations, or think of their future, it also serves as space of conflict, contest, and lived injustice as the structural contexts bring about different classroom practices and pedagogies which might (dis-)favour some students over others (Sturm, 2024). In this regard, one of our central findings suggests that neither the teachers and professionals, nor young people fully acknowledge the spatiality of their learning and living spaces (see Rambla et al., Chapter 7 in this Report). It is therefore necessary to examine how the spatiality of educational pathways, decisions, and programmes can be re-imagined to better fit the challenges and opportunities resulting from the interplay of space and education.

CLEAR's Transversal Participatory Approach has illustrated the role of innovative policy arrangements in tackling poor LOs. Therefore, we advocate for a stronger recognition and participation of local/regional voices in educational policymaking.

We have conceived of the process of constructing LOs as a complex reality that so far resisted attempts to crack its logics. In line with this, we have aimed to avoid doing research "which is always *for* and never *of* social reality." (Parreira do Amaral, 2019, p. 129) In other words, even though the research aims at bettering a social reality, it first and foremost, is about better understanding this reality and the needs of those involved in it. While in this approach the logics of educational inequalities does not simply become more penetrable so as to yield one-size-fits-all solutions, this changed rendition does allow us to more fully appreciate the issues at hand on different levels—national, regional and local. It also allows us to scrutinize what impacts on the quality of learning for those in multi-disadvantaged positions, to better understand the fit between (policy) solutions devised and the contexts of their implementation, and finally, to more closely account for the voices of young people and street-level professionals directly involved in constructing educational and life paths (Walther et al., 2019).

Importantly, besides re-framing the role of factors and spaces in constructing LOs, we make a strong case for the empowerment of actors directly involved in educational processes (European Commission, 2025). Our analyses evidence that local stakeholders and professionals can play a greater role in facilitating learning experiences distorted by

the discursive and political imaginaries that turn learners into clients, democratic accountability into technical-managerial accountability, and professional knowledge into evidence-based solutions. In line with other scholars, we therefore call for radical changes that can "challenge, interrupt and resist the redefinition of the professions" (Biesta, 2020, p. 111) at the local and regional levels and empower those in direct contact with young people and their learning and living environments. Participation is key to the transfer of ideas and practices, as it urges to recognise and reflect on one's own positionality and role in developing sustainable educational and living spaces (see Benasso et al., Chapter 13 in this Report). In that respect, we argue not to simply perform or stage participatory actions, but to re-frame the construction of LOs from a more top-down model of policy incentives and requirements, to a more sustainable, grassroots-driven, and pluriversal understanding of educational transformation (Hill et al., 2025; Silova et al., 2025).

With regard to the educational policymaking, we are well aware of the fact that policies targeting LOs result from complex interactions, negotiations, fine-tunings, consensus, and attempts to define and re-define policy objectives at the EU and national levels. As Alexiadou and Rambla have pointed out, the process of negotiating new educational policy priorities "reveals the vulnerability of education for capture by other more politically powerful fields (such as Employment), and its continuing struggle to be an independent and autonomous policy space." (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023, p. 866) In the field of education, the governance principle of subsidiarity applies, which requires consensus-based agreements by the Member States. By their nature, educational policy actions "are mostly of a 'soft' governance variety" (ibid., p. 853), but flexible enough to "assert an autonomous presence and capability to be an institutionalized area with a strengthened position within the EU policy landscape" (ibid.). Against this background, we have demonstrated the vitality of local landscapes to inform the design of policy actions and call for a stronger recognition of local and regional voices, those of young people, policy practitioners, and professionals in education and training. In light of the Call's objectives, every attempt to profoundly assess educational practices and policies risks remaining in its own echo chamber unless it can listen to other voices and lived experiences.

Future research should deepen the analyses of the construction of LOs, especially by considering how new technological advancements, such as the evolution of generative AI-assisted programmes (Chugh et al., 2025) or the algorithmisation of education (Jornitz & Klinge, 2022) enter the discourse on educational (under-)achievement and how can educational stakeholders navigate their decisions in an immensely complex, ambiguous, and at times contradictory social reality. With our findings, we have sought to create and mobilize conditions for an impact to occur, assuming that "impact is an emerging property, which depends on later choices and events beyond the scholars' immediate control." (Reale et al., 2018, p. 305) We are certain that the conditions we have created allow for re-thinking the role of education in shaping more prosperous life courses and more inclusive societies in Europe.

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