



## **Work Package 7**

Comparative Analyses and Reporting

### **Deliverable D7.2**

Final Report to Research, Policy, and Practice

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## Executive summary

The European funded research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) (October 2022 – September 2025) is focusing the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across eight EU states (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain) and in selected regions within them. The project is inquiring into the construction of learning outcomes (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.

In CLEAR, we have dealt with an extensive amount of academic literature regarding the conception of LOs and educational (under-)achievement, in particular, its definitions, understandings, measurement, assessment, implementation and evaluation, both horizontally across the European Union, and vertically from the national to the regional and local levels. The project's three selected theoretical perspectives of *Life Course Research*, *Intersectionality* and *Spatial Justice* offer complementary entry points the comparison and analysis educational quality in Europe.

The inclusion of *Life Course Research* allowed us to observe and compare the diverse living and learning realities of European youths at the interface of their individual experiences and institutional embeddedness. From this theoretical perspective, our findings show that

- young people's agency strongly correlates with external limitations and subjective sense of power, as some young adults demonstrate a strong capacity for active agency despite the existing limitations, while the agency of others is more affected by the perceived structural and institutional barriers;
- young people's agency can be mobilised by promoting their spatial, educational, and professional ownership, attributing teachers and trainers a key role to provide room for and foster the development of agency and reflexivity of European youths;
- a culture of participation empowers young people to take active roles in educating themselves and leading societal change.

The integration of *Intersectionality* enabled us to study the intricate impact of systemic and structural barriers that—besides some recent progress in national policies—continue to impede the ability of many young Europeans to find secure long-lasting employment. From this theoretical perspective, our findings reveal that

- policymaking targeting the achievement of young adults neglects intersectional inequalities, as professions frequently fail to draw lessons of programmes tackling systemic and structural disadvantages;

- creating spaces that encourage the free articulation of contradictions and frictions between the educational landscape is one step to develop new visions of education and achievement capable to tackle the re-emerging challenges;
- systemic mismatches need to be overcome to effectively design and implement educational policies for young people, in particular for those in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations.

*Spatial Justice* empowered us to study the multi-layered effects of local spaces, places, and environments have on academic achievement as well as on all actors involved in the construction of LOs to manoeuvre between institutional demands and the needs of young people. From this theoretical perspective, our findings indicate that

- LOs are more often than not detached from the spaces that enable them, with local and regional policymaking lacking the necessary room for intra- and inter-institutional manoeuvres;
- local and regional stakeholders need to be given the power and authority to adapt to the different contexts, in particular through means of facilitating cooperation and exchange of information;
- a systematic dialogue between research, policy, and practice is necessary to bridge different meanings and understandings of LOs, hinting at the great potential of community-based actions to support learners and navigate institutional policies.

In the following report, we have synthesised the key findings of the Comparative Analysis Report (Deliverable D7.1) as well as the insights from the local Innovation Forums (Deliverable D8.2) and formulated recommendations for research, policymaking, and practice.

For *further research*, we suggest to

- Critically reflect on existing concepts of LOs to make research more accessible for various audiences, including young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions, parents, teachers, trainers, career advisors, social workers, labour market representatives, policy-makers and others.
- Adapt flexible and spatially-sensitive approaches to examine the construction of LOs, in particular with regard to the immediate living and learning conditions such as the availability, accessibility and visibility of nearby opportunity structures for education, training, and work, the state and affordability of public transportation, environmental conditions, leisure opportunities, established local communities and support structures.
- Assess the impact of spatiality and intersectionality on the quality of educational achievements, including forms of neighbourhood and district segregation, safety and security related issues, bureaucratic barriers, institutionalised prejudices and others.

- Actively engage various educational stakeholders and practitioners in the research on LOs to bridge different institutional logics and gain first-hand experiences and expertise. Such engagement can create fruitful exchange that closes information gaps between different actors, brings reoccurring local issues to the forefront, enables network-building, and facilitates critical self-assessment.
- Reflect on the role of scholars within the complex interplay of factors, actors, and spaces involved in the construction of LOs to sharpen the understanding of research positionality and responsibility, in particular with regard to (national, regional, local, theoretical, methodological) perception of and approach to LOs, research background, field of interest, and existing networks.

We have engaged an extensive number of policymakers to gain insights on educational policies, in particular the assessment, measuring and implementation of LOs on the different territorial-administrative levels. For *national and regional policymaking*, we recommend to

- Address LOs in their full breadth, also including informal and non-formal skills and capabilities of young learners, as this allows to design and implement policies that better reflect the learning realities of young people and the growing and more complex needs of the local labour markets.
- Actively listen to and involve young people in the design and evaluation of policies that affect their lives to get familiar with the living and learning situation at regional level, which, on the one hand, can increase young people's individual agency and trust in the educational system, while on the other hand, lower the rate of early school leavers and young adults not in education, employment or training.
- Consider spatial and intersectional inequalities in the selection of the preferred policy tools to facilitate a sustainable and inclusive implementation.
- Foster coordination at all governance levels to design policies that reflect the living and learning realities of all educational stakeholders as this allows to draw from their working experiences and increases the effectiveness of policies.
- Collaborate with regional and local stakeholders and provide them enough room for manoeuvre. This can increase their commitment and ability to effectively respond to individual cases and suggest educational and employment pathways for young people with fragmented or incomplete qualifications.
- Create shared spaces for free articulations of conflicts and experiences with educational policies and programmes to cultivate a culture of recognition.

With regard to *local stakeholders and practitioners* related to education, training, and local labour markets, in particular, professionals that work in the field of health studies, hospitality, and information technology, we recommend to

- Establish and foster formal and informal networks with other local actors in education, training, labour market, and support, as this increases the ability to adequately respond to the situations and needs of young learners.
- Create participatory spaces that include all educational stakeholders. This can help building reliable relationships between actors that tackle different aspects of the same issue.
- Foster and improve inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue to enable smooth access to and exchange of knowledge and information between research, policymaking, and practice.
- Empower young people and professionals and include their voices into policy design to facilitate policies that better fit the local context.
- Provide freely accessible and concise information as well as counselling for young people on educational choices, as this allows European youths to make meaningful long-term decisions.

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## 1. Introduction

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 factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes (LOs) across Europe. In the course of the project (October 2022 – September 2025) conducted in Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, we have addressed and emphasized the necessity to move from assessment to the construction of LOs. From research to the design and implementation of policies, for a vast majority of actors involved in education and training, the concept of learning is reduced to the measurable outcomes of formal learning. In that regard, our main objective is to move beyond prevalent conceptualisation of LOs and instead examine the combination of multiple factors, actors, and spaces involved in the construction of young people's LOs. Designed as a mixed-method, multi-level comparative study with transversal participatory elements, the CLEAR project promotes a turn towards holistic, contextualised, and spatially embedded approach to education. We have particularly emphasized the necessity to include diverse voices (young people, trainers, teachers, local/regional professionals, policymakers) into the research design to spark innovative policy approaches and increase social upward mobility for young people.

The combined efforts from the project's three years have yielded valuable insights and new evidence regarding the constructing LOs and educational (under-)achievement. In *WP7 Comparative Analyses and Reporting* (Deliverable D7.1), we summarise the cumulative results elaborated in the previous research stages, synthesise the preliminary achievements, and finalise the project's comparative study. The objective of the *Final Report to Research, Policy, and Practice* (Report) is to coordinate the final reporting geared to relevant audiences—researchers, national and regional policymakers, local practitioners and professionals. The Report is informed by the results of previous sub-studies and extends them to formulate actionable and innovative recommendations.

The Report is structured in three parts: *first*, we briefly present the main project findings along our three overarching theoretical frameworks; *second*, we synthesise the main conclusions and key messages; *third*, we elaborate on the project's findings to provide recommendations geared to relevant audiences.

## 2. Description of Main Findings

In this section, we briefly synthesise the main project findings from the empirical and comparative analyses. The following three sub-sections combine the findings to interpret them from the perspectives of *Life Course Research*, *Intersectionality*, and *Spatial Justice*. The findings are open to further discussion and interpretation about the impact of different factors, actors, and spaces involved in the construction of LOs.



## 2.1 Constructing learning outcomes in young people's life courses

We have adopted the perspective of *Life Course Research* to examine how the construction of LOs evolves during young people's life courses and enters their decisive life events. Three key categories help to synthesise the results: agency, ownership, and participation.

**Our findings reveal that the agency of young people strongly correlate with external limitations and subjective sense of power.** Research has suggested the need to foster young people's agency as part of education; Policy has implemented a logic of measurement that failed to prepare the next generation of the challenges of a highly volatile labour market; Practice as either limited knowledge or lacks the ability to support the development of reflexive agency among European youth; In CLEAR, we have brought the concept of agency to the forefront, integrating it as an analytical tool into our research design, as well as further developed and utilised it as part of the Innovation Forums.

While some young adults demonstrate a strong capacity for active agency despite the existing limitations, the agency of others is more affected by the perceived structural and institutional barriers. Externally, the interplay of institutionalised life courses and local/regional opportunity structures frames young people's choices and decisions (Roberts, 2009; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022). Subjectively, the sense of power that young people experience enables or disables their motivations and actions (Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). We therefore emphasise the necessity to carefully approach young people's agency, acknowledging the wide array of external constraints they experience, but also providing them with sufficient institutional support to spark their creativity and mobility. Furthermore, our analyses highlight 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), our results place emphasis on the underlying connections between socially/culturally ascribed individual attributes (e.g., being of migrant origin, living in remote regions, experiencing mental disorders) and the overarching narratives favouring accountable outcomes and a culture of profit.

(Under-)achievement is relational to the (individual and societal) expectations on success and performance. The logic of measurement automatically translates educational outcomes into variable categories, inevitably labelling—and potentially stigmatising—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 that promote a culture of responsiveness, instead of individualising their current vulnerable situations (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2021).



**The agency of young people can be mobilized by promoting their spatial, educational, and professional ownership.** Research has suggested a strong relationship between young people's agency and their locally available living and learning context. Related policy measures target highly skilled and educated youth to be spatially mobile and adaptive to the changing conditions of the labour market. Practitioners of education face the almost impossible task to activate young people's agency, while at the same time promoting a sense of self-reflexivity to adequately assess one's abilities. In CLEAR, we looked at the impact of teachers and others on young people.

Our results show that at the local and regional level, teachers, trainers, and labour market professionals enter young people's life courses 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). As implementers of the policy programmes, they are aware of the formal, informal and non-formal skills of their students or clients (e.g., reflexivity, resilience, patience, adaptability). 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. Their crucial role as facilitators can have a positive impact on young people's agency and spatial, educational, and professional ownership.

Promoting spatial ownership concentrates on the ability of learners and teachers to jointly envisage the physical and symbolic design of educational spaces, as much as their functional and social implications. Educational ownership, in turn, focuses on the learner's sense of reflectively engaging in their learning processes and owing their outcomes. 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 stakeholders in stimulating their own growth, identifying their improvement capacities (Nehez & Håkansson Lindqvist, 2024), and empowering their target groups through the transfer of relevant skills and competencies.

**A lived culture of participation empowers young people to take active roles in educating themselves and leading the societal change.** Research has suggested the necessity to acknowledge the individual perception of young people and their interactions with educational institutions and state bureaucracy. Policy has recognised the relevancy of young people to tackle the increasing challenges in the foreseeable future. Practice currently faces today's challenges of how to best empower young Europeans, while at the same time dealing with issues related to precarious living and learning contexts at various European countries and regions. The mechanisms of constructing LOs revolve 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 do not automatically result in young adults strategically relocating to that specific sub-region. On the other hand, institutional support does not automatically transform young people into active agents of their life courses, unless they are also enabled to reflect on their own educational choices. 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 CLEAR's participatory actions show the need for a new culture of participation that empowers young people to become key drivers of societal change.

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, a 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. 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. 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 summary, the life stories of young adults from different regions reveal that spatial inequalities in terms of their perceived opportunity structures strongly shape their educational choices and outcomes. Young adults' perceptions of regional opportunities are more influenced by their own vulnerable life situations than by the economic power of their regions. Furthermore, experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, and racism can have a stronger influence on young adults' perceptions of the region's attractiveness than the availability of study places or employment opportunities. In that regard, educational institutions with their diversified and segregated schools and classrooms produce inequalities and injustices in LOs at the regional level, thus producing a new layer of vulnerability to be addressed in future policymaking.

## **2.2 Enhancing educational achievement without re-producing vulnerabilities**

The perspective of *Intersectionality* sheds light on the relational nature of inequalities that enter the construction of LOs and complicate young people's educational achievements.



**The findings evidence that policymaking targeting the achievement of young adults neglects intersectional inequalities.** For this reason, professionals are often on the brink of attributing the actual problems of students and learners to alleged individual features. Such bias also hinders professionals to draw on the lessons of the programmes that tackle disadvantages. We recognise that the sources of young people's inequalities cannot be dissociated and treated solely, but in relation to each other (Bixby, 2024). Similarly, 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, 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. On the other hand, the intersection of multiple disadvantages has a rather relative impact on the actual quality of LOs.

Crucial for the spatially based educational inequalities to persist are two interlocked factors: the spatial embeddedness of young people and their recognition by local/regional policy actors. If young people perceive that their socio-economic, spatial, emotional, and mental health conditions are overlooked and absent in their educational and career assessments, they are more likely to dissociate from the institutional support and seek instead other forms of support and acknowledgment. This highlights that the life chances of young people depend on widespread beliefs of educators and other professionals involved in teaching and training in European regions, as much as upon the institutional capacity of the stakeholders of education and training.

**The analyses emphasize the need to create spaces for free articulation of contradictions and frictions between various educational stakeholders.** Institutional contexts shape educational and career opportunities, but different governance levels often entail distinct 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 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.

Our analyses show 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 fragmented educational landscapes even within centralised governmental systems. In 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. Quite the contrary. Young people are increasingly being targeted as objects of interventions and as sources of information and data by deploying what Heath-Kelly and Gruber have termed "pre-emptive interventions" (2023, p. 3): the *pedagogical* interventions that operate with behavioural incentives, seeking to motivate learners with novel concepts (Hermes et al., 2021; Brade et al., 2022), and the *policy* interventions that 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). Thus, restoring a free and equal space that allows to articulate different demands and visions can provide valuable evidence for the decision-making processes.

**We stress the need to recognize and bridge various institutional logics aiming at the inclusion of groups in vulnerable positions.** The results of our comparative analyses indicate that systemic mismatches between educational stakeholders threaten the design of fitting policies for young people. At the local level, practitioners and professionals working first-hand with young people experience their hardships, ambivalent life situations, but also their—at times naïve and unrealistic—expectations. At regional level, policymakers have to cope with complex combinations of jurisdictions, policies, politics, and social contexts. At the national level, key political decisions and comparative educational metrics decide about the financial and policy priorities, but tend to oversee regional complexities.

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 frequently operate past each other, creating redundancies and misunderstandings. One solution to overcome the blind spots within 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 CLEAR Innovation Forums show the urgency to connect stakeholders to re-scale one's own institutional logics.

In short, the interplay of institutional, socio-cultural, discursive, individual, spatial but also increasingly technological and data-driven factors installs a permanently changing environment, which is exacerbated by attempts to homogenise 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 destabilise 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 (e.g., career guidance workers, counsellors, social workers), who oversee and (re)connect a multiplicity of factors to navigate young adults.

### **2.3 Bridging justice and space across all governance levels**

Finally, the perspective of *Spatial Justice* emphasises 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. Although spaces play an immense role in structuring educational and training opportunities, they are rarely considered in policymaking and career guidance.

**Our analyses clearly demonstrate that 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. The focus is placed on optimising 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 own technocratic logic. This technological/technocratic paradigm contrasts with the more grassroots political critique of the educational injustice. The critique targets the inappropriate systemic response to transitional regimes, teacher and professional training, as well as rigid curriculums and a general objectification of learners.

Bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice means to acknowledge the pitfalls of purely technocratic or 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 analyses have also 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. The results reveal that low 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. CLEAR's participatory actions with local educational stakeholders have corroborated this trend. 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 findings 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, 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). In practice, however, young people perceive their living and working spaces rather functionally than 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.

This spatially- and group-based divergence creates both opportunities and risks. It can potentially lead to inaction of local and regional authorities, as 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 local communities. The results indicate a potential of community-based actions to support learners and navigate institutional policies. Instead of attempting to create a statistical conformity and



presumed educational quality, joint engagement of learners, of educational stakeholders, such as participatory actions, strengthens cohesion and supports reflection of one's own positioning, spatial sensitivity, and social responsibility. 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. The dynamic relations between space and justice impact the construction of LOs, creating unique living and learning ecologies with specific limitations and potentials.

In sum, 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 (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2015). It is further linked to the capability of learners to develop their social structures, build relations, set up families, and fully integrate into 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 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.

### **3. Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

We contribute with our research findings to the current debates on educational quality, especially by addressing 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. We have extensively described this contribution in the previous report and restrict ourselves to the main relevant points.

**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 these issues by problematising its mainstream conceptualisation that risks reducing the complexity of educational processes to quantifiable units. In that regard, we advocate for a systematic re-assessment of the concepts of LOs and (under-)achievement.

As scholars have pointed out, the LOs approach has not only reduced education to learning and narrowed learning down to what is visible and active, but 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). 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 jeopardises 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). 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. 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. We therefore argue for a de-essentialisation of vulnerability and of specific spatial representations of young people that portrays them as 'risk' or 'wicked' youth that leads to stigmatisation and ill-informed policymaking.

In CLEAR we have shown 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 (institutionalised) space is the classroom. 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. 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 conceive the process of constructing LOs as a complex reality that so far resisted attempts to crack its logics. 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 do not simply become more penetrable so as to yield one-size-fits-all solutions, this changed rendition allows us to more fully appreciate the issues at hand on different levels—national, regional and local. It also enables us to scrutinise what impacts 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 as well as local professionals directly involved in constructing educational and life paths.

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. Our analyses evidence that local stakeholders and professionals can play a greater role in facilitating learning experiences. We therefore argue not to simply perform or stage participatory actions, as if they were a burden to the process, 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 education (Silova et al., 2025; Hill 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. 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. Based on our conclusions, we deliver four lessons learned that can further inspire research and policymaking:

- ❖ **Young people's LOs are strongly influenced by the cumulative (dis)advantage in their life courses, although their educational achievements are increasingly individualised.** Educational and other support systems often fail to recognise the intersectional forms of inequality and the diverse needs of young people in vulnerable situations. This calls for a new culture of responsiveness and recognition. Policies and professionals do not, at large, recognise the variation of young people's life course patterns nor the deep social transformations that lies behind the increasing variation. Regarding the formation of young people's identities as learners, citizens, and employees, CLEAR's results underscore the importance of linking non-formal and informal education with formal education. Our results also evidence that the availability of services and support measures alone does not guarantee accessibility for all young people, and that any attempts



to provide institutional support for young people in vulnerable situations must be accompanied by their empowerment and inclusion.

- ❖ **Academic achievement and LOs parallel the class structure.** In CLEAR, most young interviewees had not achieved much in their schooling and came from a family with a low socio-economic status. At school, many of them felt mistreated by teachers, partly because of their social origin, yet all of them endeavoured to plan their future despite these circumstances. Besides class hierarchies, immigrant youth must face legal and emotional barriers to comply with the expectations of a standard life course. Finally, the classifications of LOs easily underpin individualised understandings of LOs. Although the youth and some educators challenge this point, such bias prevails over other perspectives. Educators and public employment professionals normally overlook the social shaping of inequalities (e.g., attribute problems to lack of soft skills; in Southern Europe, confuse policy evaluation with individual academic evaluation).
- ❖ **Persistent essentialist ascriptions and spatial representations continue to shape educational processes, often to the detriment of equity.** To address this, we argue for a reimagining of the spatiality of educational pathways, decisions, and programs, ensuring they are adapted to the interplay of space and education. It is necessary to strengthen local coordination among educational, economic, and social actors, particularly in regions with weak networks; adopt flexible, place-based approaches to LOs, recognising that educational quality depends on responding to place-specific needs; empower youth's and local bureaucrats' agency by integrating their voices into policy design; and invest in measures (transport, counselling, teacher training) to bridge gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged areas. LOs designed without spatial awareness can perpetuate injustice, acting as one of many mechanisms that reproduce spatial inequalities and contribute to the unfair distribution of opportunities for European youth. In this respect, spatial justice is not just about the map of educational opportunities, but about acknowledging the interplay of space, power, and opportunity. CLEAR shows that without spatially aware governance, educational inequalities risk becoming entrenched, undermining social cohesion and youth prospects.
- ❖ **The Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) has successfully challenged conventional analytical categories and methodological practices, proving to be a genuine driver of methodological and cultural innovation.** This approach fostered a more relational, dynamic, and context-sensitive research process, moving beyond traditional notions of objectivity by promoting reflexivity and intersubjective dialogue between researchers and participants. It helped to incorporate a situated understanding of knowledge and significantly expanded the

project's ability to capture the complexities of local contexts. It also enabled the emergence of narratives and perspectives that are often overlooked, facilitating the understanding of knowledge that might not be visible otherwise. CLEAR experience also confirmed that participation is not a neutral tool, but requires substantial resources, specific methodological skills, and a strong ethical commitment to create genuinely inclusive spaces.

## 4. Impact and Recommendations

In response to the EU Horizon Call, the CLEAR project has been designed to facilitate output in the form of policy recommendations that tackle the multiple sources of poor learning outcomes and their subsequent implications for educational quality. In the course of the project's lifespan, CLEAR yielded several key findings that lay ground for the recommendations geared to various audiences.

We offer our recommendations in four parts. In the first part, the recommendations for further *research* aim at contributing to the scholarly debates by moving towards a more holistic and contextualised approach. In the second part, recommendations for *national and regional policymaking* aim at promoting policy design and evaluation at various stages of the policy cycle. In the third part, recommendations for *local stakeholders and practitioners* are developed at a general level and applicable in diverse contexts. In the fourth part, we provide *country-specific* recommendations for the local professionals from our sample countries.

### 4.1 Recommendations for further research



CLEAR has adopted a comparative mixed-method, multi-level approach to study the interplay of actors, factors, and spaces involved in the construction of LOs. In this subsection, we provide suggestions for research based on the lessons learned and insights gained in course of the project.

**Engage in critical reflection on scholarly concepts to stimulate future research.**

Critical self-reflection is the cornerstone of a productive research practice. In that regard, reflecting on key educational concepts, including the concept of LOs, is an inevitable part of scholarly debates and future educational research. We therefore urge to rethink the underpinnings and usage of the concept of learning outcomes and its implications for educators and policymakers. To avoid essentialisation of vulnerability, use carefully spatial and intersectional ascriptions of young people. For example, instead of addressing them as "vulnerable youth" or "youth at-risk", focus on their temporary condition as "youth in



vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations". Young people are often tired of being seen as 'a problem to be fixed', which leads to institutional distrust and demotivation. Furthermore, combine narrative, visual, and artistic tools to make your research more accessible and impactful across social and cultural boundaries.

When it comes to researching the construction of LOs, spatiality is a key factor. Our findings suggest that educational quality depends on how practitioners, experts and policymakers perceive and respond to space-specific needs that differ across countries and regions. We therefore invite to critically reflect on the role of spatiality in the methodological design. One way of doing this is harnessing locally available data and knowledge as further sources of evidence. In that regard, it is important to invest in time, presence, and trust-building to establish stable relations with local stakeholders to activate untapped sources of knowledge and experience. Especially young people can be a vital source of qualitative assessment of LOs, given their interest in securing safe educational and labour market pathways.

**Adapt flexible and spatially sensitive approaches to examine the construction of LOs.**

**Assess the impact of spatiality and intersectionality on the quality of educational achievements.**

CLEAR's comparative analyses have revealed that the concurrence of living and learning spaces is not adequately accounted for by the various stakeholder groups. More research is

needed to understand how multiple institutional, structural, spatial, intersectional, and relational factors affect the living and learning conditions of young people in vulnerable positions. Many of these factors have either been neglected or not linked to other with each other, which creates blind spots for future research on LOs.

CLEAR has integrated participatory actions in the project design. These actions have

**Actively engage various educational stakeholders and practitioners in the research on LOs to bridge various institutional logics, experiences, and expertise.**

demonstrated the value of inclusive and open exchanges with (as well as between) different educational stakeholders. For researchers, this meant to position themselves as observers, organisers, stakeholders, and active participants. Thus, fostering regional cohesion through participatory actions contributes to the acknowledgement of lived realities of groups underrepresented in research and practice. Future research shall therefore facilitate long-term collaboration between different educational stakeholders at local levels to gain first-hand experiences and evidence from those directly involved in the construction and implementation of LOs.



**Reflect on the role within the complex interplay of factors, actors, and spaces involved in the construction of LOs.**

Our findings have underscored the importance of reflecting on spatial and intersectional positionality in the research process. The institutionalised, symbolic, and physical learning environments are highly contested spatial goods, the access to and accessibility of which

decides about the quality of educational achievements and life success. For researchers, it is important to embrace a broader concept of space and move beyond its static and geographically reduced conception. By utilising the full breadth of spatial impacts on learners' disposition and educational achievements (e.g., administrative borders, socio-demographic trends, socio-economic developments, transportation links), helps the researchers to open new avenues in the impact of contextual factors on learning experiences and results. The analysed spatial-educational dichotomies emphasise that education is a highly contested spatial good that decides not only upon residential and citizenship rights, but also upon the quality of the life courses.

#### 4.2 Recommendations for national and regional policymaking

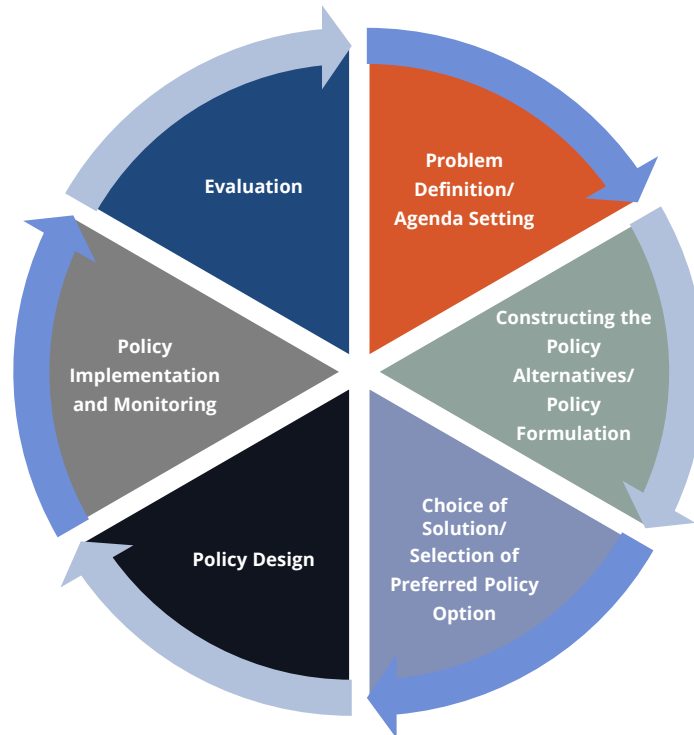


In this sub-section, we provide recommendations for national and regional policymaking. Depending on the perspective of the policymaking process, different models can be utilised as a framework for policy recommendations. Among them, the policy cycle is a suitable tool for deliberating on various steps that can be integrated in the policymaking (see Simons et al., 2009, p. 79). We have selected the policy cycle which is specifically designed to inform "the context within which the policy specialist should act in order to follow best practice." (Young & Quinn, 2002, p. 13). It represents policymaking as a reiterative process of subsequent steps that highlights continuity and reflexivity.

The section contains various types of recommendations addressed to policymakers (see Figure 1). *First*, we provide recommendations on problem identification, agenda setting and the conceptualisation of LOs. *Second*, we outline available policy alternatives to choose from. *Third*, we select our preferred policy option that considers spatial and intersectional inequalities as part of its educational policy design. *Fourth*, we outline a policy design that fosters coordination at all governance levels. *Fifth*, we recommend policy implementation and monitoring to be flexible and collaborative, leaving room for stakeholders to make adjustments at the local level. *Sixth*, we suggest policy evaluation to be expanded, enabling feedback and lessons learned to feed back into the policy cycle.



**Figure 1. Recommendations for policymaking at different points of the policy cycle**



Source: Young & Quinn, 2002, p. 12.

**Problem Definition & Agenda Setting:** At the start of policymaking, recognise and acknowledge that the construction of LOs and (under-)achievement are highly important issues that need 'governmental response' (Young & Quinn, 2002, p. 13), and that it is in the best interest of the government to improve the quality of education. We therefore call for a wider understanding of LOs and academic achievement that conceives of them in their full breadth, also including informal and non-formal skills and capabilities of young learners.

The currently dominant concept of LOs falls short for several reasons. First, it focuses solely on measurable results to determine what constitutes academic success and failure. Second, it offers no guidance for policymakers, educational stakeholders or students. After almost three decades of PISA, there has been no significant long-lasting positive impact on any of the participating countries. This failure calls for a change of course. Instead of repeatedly reusing the concept that hasn't worked for decades, we suggest the following policy actions:

- Conceptualise LOs as a multi-dimensional and changing construct.
- Draw from additional sources of information, in particular from regional/local sources of evidence to shed light on the local living and learning realities.







facilitation of participatory events that include students, parents and teachers, policy experts, social workers, career guidance counsellors and others and have the capacity to produce unique sources of knowledge. On that account, we recommend implementing the following actions:

- Incentivise educational authorities, employment services and employers to link with one another in a meaningful way for each subregion and region. Encourage educational authorities of the member states, the cities and regions of Europe to engage in collaborative policymaking.
- Supranational actors should guide the debates and mediate between actors and countries/regions to create deliberative arenas and promote inclusive approaches.
- Ensure a broad representation at participatory events in terms of age and gender groups, minority or ethnic status, citizenship rights and others.

**Policy Implementation & Monitoring:** The previously designed policies are now to be implemented at their administrative level (see Young & Quinn, 2002, p. 15). The more effective the process of policy implementation and monitoring, the lower the overall costs, meaning that implementation and continuous monitoring are crucial to achieve the aspired outcomes. One crucial aspect for a successful and impactful policy implementation is the collaboration with regional and local stakeholders that require enough room for manoeuvre.

The perspectives of young people provide valuable feedback on the impact of educational policies (in the classroom and beyond), their personal experiences with state bureaucracy, and their perceived opportunity structures. In CLEAR, young adults showed a great deal of critical reflection regarding their personal responsibilities and positioning. Involving young people in the policy monitoring, thus, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of policy programmes. We therefore recommend to

- Avoid essentialising categorisations of learners based on spatial or individual (including mental and emotional) descriptors, to prevent ill-informed designs of policy programmes.
- Include multiple voices in decision-making arenas to make measures more effective, inclusive, and innovative.
- Strive for a representative bureaucracy where decisionmakers mirror the diversity in society. Keep in mind that certain groups (e.g., age, gender, educational status, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, cultural background, migration background) are highly underrepresented within most administrative spaces.
- Collaborate with educators, schools and local educational stakeholders to design remedial, compensatory, affirmative or other measures appropriate for young people in vulnerable positions.

- Empower regional and local stakeholders in their manoeuvrability with regard to institutional requirements, structural constraints, and individual needs, as well as their capacity to translate and transmit between different experiences. In particular, find 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. This requires investments in a "technology" of networking.
- Provide regional and local stakeholders with the institutional authority necessary, to overcome constraining contexts. This includes the ability to make exemptions for special cases to avoid bureaucratic or educational dead ends. In particular, this helps those that need help the most in order to complete education and training, or to find secure employment.

**Evaluation:** The process of comprehensive evaluation (see Young & Quinn, 2002, p. 15) is essential in determining the effectiveness of the implemented educational policy as well as in proving a solid foundation for future policies. Thus, each decision-making process draws from knowledge gathered throughout previously implemented policies designed to improve educational progress, completing the cycle of policymaking. In that respect, we strongly argue for the creation of shared spaces for free articulations of conflicts and experiences with the policy.

The increasing focus on top achievers and the introduction of merit-centred approaches in education and training has become the overall goal of many policies. In this sense, when used to evaluate learners and institutions, LOs should not result in a rigid categorisation of learners, but rather direct education/training policies and strategies towards targeted interventions. We therefore suggest to

- Utilise and expand on already existing policy-evaluations to better reflect on their impact on LOs. This can be achieved by combining quantitative measurements of LOs with qualitative and multidimensional assessments.
- Involve educational stakeholder groups into the evaluation process of policies to get a full picture of the impact of policies.
- Promote a culture of evaluation that is attentive to the outputs and impacts of programmes besides academic performances of individual students. To do this, reconfigure evaluation models by incorporating qualitative indicators related to well-being, belonging or personal fulfilment. In particular, qualitative indicators are tailored to shed light on informal or non-formal skills (e.g., resilience, discipline, integrity, adaptability), which employers are increasingly demanding.
- Create awareness of the importance of policy-evaluation measures, in particular the ability for all governmental levels involved to critically reflect on all previous steps of the policy cycle.

- Utilise LOs as monitoring tools for the general functioning of the education systems, rather than merely for the evaluation of institutions and learners. This does not imply their dismissal for evaluation, but a poignant shift in the approach.

### 4.3 General recommendations for local stakeholders and practitioners



In this sub-section, we provide recommendations for local educational stakeholders and practitioners in the field of education, training, labour market, and support programmes. The section contains five types of recommendations addressed at local stakeholders and practitioners of education. *First*, we provide our recommendations on coordination and cooperation with other local actors involved in the construction of LOs at various stages of young people's school-to-work transitions. *Second*, we then offer our suggestions on participatory forums that allow the free exchange of knowledge between the different actor groups involved in the construction of LOs. *Third*, we subsequently present recommendations regarding the positive impact of facilitating open dialogue. *Fourth*, we subsequently deliver our findings on empowerment. *Fifth*, we provide suggestions on the dissemination of information.

The positive example of educational stakeholders and practitioners joining CLEAR's Innovation Forums showed the benefits of local communication, coordination, and cooperation. The exchanges between the different actor groups related to education provided much-needed source of information, creating the ability for career guidance advisors to better align their programmes with the individual needs and skill sets of young people, creating more opportunities for support programmes to engage with and help young people in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged situations, while reducing young people's risk to run into educational dead ends, where they are fighting bureaucratic windmills. Based on these findings, we have produced a series of general recommendations applicable by different actors and in various governance or administrating units.

**Establish and foster formal and informal networks with other local actors in education, training, labour market, support and others.**

Cultivating personal contacts to trusted sources can help to tackle specific problems, as particularly young people in vulnerable living and learning

situations face a myriad of personal and institutional challenges and require personal contact points. It is therefore recommended to strengthen local coordination among educational, economic, and social actors, particularly in regions with weak networks.

CLEAR has shown that various governance levels target the quality of LOs within their own institutional logics and administrative frameworks, which hints at the poor intra-

**Create participatory spaces that include all educational stakeholders.**

and inter-institutional coordination and restrains the efforts to enhance the inclusion of groups in multi-disadvantaged positions. Cultivating participation is one way to integrate diverse voices and stir stagnating collaboration. Participatory actions can be organised at various levels and with different stakeholder groups, fosters a culture of recognition and institutional trust. Particularly learners and young people welcome discussions about LOs, as they get the chance to express themselves and share their perspectives and experiences. Therefore, provide safe and familiar environments where all young people, especially those in vulnerable living and learning situations, are encouraged to freely participate. In such cases, try to avoid the emergence of hierarchies (e.g., due to age, gender, socio-economic situation, social position) to facilitate a fruitful exchange that creates room to critically reflect and debate on different aspects of education and learning.

**Foster and improve inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue.**

We have demonstrated the benefits of establishing a dialogue between the various actor groups from different administrative and territorial levels. Based on our findings, we suggest fostering free and open dialogue with educational stakeholder from various fields. This allows teachers, trainers and others to draw from insights from multiple institutional settings and experiences related to different stages of education. It is also crucial to stimulate a more systematic, context-driven dialogue between research, policy, and practice to bridge different meanings and understandings of LOs and preclude the misalignment of objectives and working frameworks.

Bringing together the voices of local youths, professionals and practitioners in one single event unveiled distinct blind spots regarding the design, implementation, and evaluation process

**Empower young people and local professionals and include their voices into policy design.**

of educational policies. Thus, being able to voice one's opinion allows to understand different perspectives/experiences (i.e., anxieties, struggles, responsibilities) and strengthen personal agency. Therefore, local professionals are encouraged to promote spatial, educational, and professional ownership of young people and, at the same time, strengthen the cooperation between schools, VET providers, and labour market actors. One key element is the provision of institutional support to foster young adults' reflexivity. Although support structures exist at national levels, they vary considerably in terms of accessibility, quality, and responsiveness. This relates to factors ranging from the organisation of and collaboration between institutional sources of support, to the professionalism and institutional attitudes of the experts working with young people.



Most institutions generally fail 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.

**Provide freely accessible and concise information as well as counselling for young people on educational choices.**

CLEAR findings indicate that a successful school-to-work transition largely depends on the availability of low threshold information and counselling

that young people receive. Educational choices often appear accidental or externally imposed, particularly when guidance is limited or simply misaligned with lived realities, which increases the risk of educational disengagement and school drop-out. For this reason, we recommend ensuring that information is easy to find, easy to access, easy to understand and free of charge. This applies to the inclusion of different languages, also simple language and barrier-free websites. Furthermore, it is crucial to share the information that education and training operations generate. Set up exhaustive and comprehensive information systems that are sensitive to local diversity. As our findings have showed, to the surprise of many stakeholders, young adults sometimes struggle to find the information they need, e.g., recognition of foreign educational qualifications, access to language courses and training opportunities, support for mental health conditions, contact to counselling for legal or bureaucratic issues.

#### 4.4 Country-specific recommendations



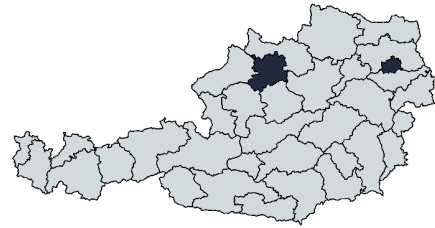
The construction of LOs is a highly heterogenous process, due to interrelation of different administrative, demographic, socio-economic, and political contexts. In CLEAR, we have gathered data at national, regional and local levels. This allows us not only to reflect on general recommendations and implications, but also to draft country-specific recommendations.

We are aware of the fact that our sources of evidence are based on a limited set of indicators. In particular, we have delved into two specific regions and local sites, which we have clustered either as thriving or declining regions based on the available data. Furthermore, the majority of our country-specific recommendations uses the evidence from the Innovation Forums, which have been conducted at one, in some cases at two research sites, thus limiting the generalization of our findings. Nonetheless, they represent pertinent issues related to the poor quality of educational achievements and have been reflected in the Innovation Forums and by the National Partners during their. Against this background, we formulate the recommendations with the aim to inform local policy practitioners about available solutions to very similar issues.



## Austria

In Austria, we have conducted research in the NUTS 2 regions of Vienna (*Favoriten*) and Upper Austria (*Linz-Wels*). On the one hand, the more economically thriving region of Upper Austria faces the challenges of integrating young people living in disadvantaged social conditions,



developing better opportunities for young adults' school-to-work transitions, creating learning environments suited for multilingualism/-culturalism, and catching up with other European regions. On the other hand, the economically declining region of Vienna faces the challenges of countering teacher shortages, promoting digitalisation of the schools, outbalancing the migration of young people, and integrating sustainable ideas in standardised learning curricula. On that account, we have formulated the following suggestions:

- 💡 **Support the implementation of guidelines and policies** that tackle material, systemic and symbolic barriers of young people to promote their successful integration. This means to acknowledge the living realities of young people that face various challenges (e.g., socio-economic; mental health; language skills).
- 💡 **Support smooth school-to-work transitions**, by expanding the concept of academic performance to include and reflect on young people's agency, motivation and personal growth. To do this, modernise the curriculum to make it more flexible, with interest-based subject choices accompanied by knowledge transfer regarding practical knowledge and digital skills (i.e., hybrid curriculum model that balances compulsory basic subjects with student-chosen modules).
- 💡 **Facilitate healthy learning environments** by raising awareness on mental health and emotional well-being as part of curricula and teacher training. To do this, facilitate advisory support structures in schools (e.g., consulting hours with designate separate rooms). Raise overall awareness on the positive impact of trust, encouragement and recognition on academic achievement and personal well-being. Teachers have to be aware on their personal impact on the mental health and emotional state of their students.
- 💡 **Close performance gaps between regions**, by working with local educational stakeholders to draw up exceptions in special cases, i.e., alternative educational pathways, flexible rulings. Being told to not "fit into the system" should not result in educational dead ends. Local stakeholders typically know more about the actual circumstances and about possible solutions. Create low-threshold exploration spaces like research workshops. Rethink school as a space for social mixing and encourage personal growth instead of competition.

## Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, we have conducted research in the regions of North Central (*Gabrovo*) and South Central (*Plovdiv*). The more thriving region of Plovdiv faces the challenges of reducing the highly unequal distribution of educational and economic opportunities between districts, raising the educational levels for young people from the Roma and Turkish communities,

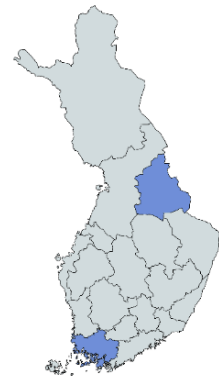


creating opportunities for young people not in employment, education or training to integrate them into the labour market, and lowering the high number of early school leavers. On the other hand, the declining region of Gabrovo has to combat local population decline, reduce educational inequalities between groups of different backgrounds, strengthen vocational education, and ensure equal access to quality education at all levels with sufficient teacher training. In that regard, we recommend to

- 💡 **Reduce unequal distribution of opportunities**, by creating additional education and training opportunities for young people according to their specific skills and interests. Facilitate support for the acquisition of additional knowledge. Strengthen non-formal/experimental learning that enables students to acquire soft skills (e.g., teamwork, communication). Create opportunities for students volunteering and include more practical subjects to prepare them for their future.
- 💡 **Raise the educational levels of minority groups, by raising** awareness on mental health and emotional well-being as part of the curricula as well as part of teacher training. Facilitate advisory support structures in schools (e.g., consulting hours). Expand the number of experts in schools that provide adequate support to adolescents and strengthen communication between parents and teachers. Provide parents with more information about their children's skills.
- 💡 **Create opportunities for labour market integration**, by providing room for young people to choose between different educational pathways. Enable students to reflect on previous decisions, with the possibility to adjust/change educational trajectories, avoiding educational dead ends. This reduces the pressure put on young adults and their parents to make the "right" decision, enabling them to reflect on their wants, needs and capabilities at all stages of education and training.
- 💡 **Reduce the numbers of early school leavers** by shifting towards a more flexible educational system that is more responsive to the needs of young people from different backgrounds. Qualifications need to reflect non-formal skills. Provide room for a more de-standardised assessment of LOs that focusses more on the individual capabilities. Expand the concept of academic performance to include young people's personal growth and motivation. Introduce interest-based subject choices that integrates practical knowledge (e.g., hybrid curriculum model that balances compulsory subjects with student-chosen subjects). Individualise educational pathways according to students' interests.

## Finland

In Finland, we have conducted research in the regions of Etelä-Suomi (*Southwest Finland*) and Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi (*Kainuu*). On the one hand, the thriving region of Southwest Finland is challenged to ensure adequate skills and competences to meet the needs of changing labour markets, promote integration and employment of migrants, create community cohesion and equal opportunity funding to prevent segregation, and raise skill levels by providing accessible services for continuous learning. On the other hand, more declining region of Kainuu has to tackle the declining population trends, support the provision of adequate skills to meet labour market needs, and cope with the quality of the population's (mental) health. We therefore recommend to



- 💡 **Meet the needs of the changing labour markets**, by providing more concrete information about different fields and what studying in different professions is like. Offer young people low-threshold jobs that enable them to gain the work experience. Young people entering the labour market should not be subject to excessive skill requirements. Adopt new models of learning and skills certification.
- 💡 **Promote integration and employment of migrants**, by improving the sensitivity and preparedness of teachers/counsellors through training, to recognise young people's different backgrounds, circumstances, and starting points when seeking help and support. It is not enough that mental health and other services are available, they must also be accessible, which is why young people must be provided with sufficient information and guidance. This includes low-threshold services, a variety of contact methods, a human contact, and bringing together actors from various fields in one place (multi-professional approach).
- 💡 **Foster social cohesion and prevent segregation**, by developing practices to foster a sense of belonging among students, which strengthens participation and prevents isolation within one's own reference group. Examples of activities that might promote cohesion include class and school trips, excursions, and other shared events that provide opportunities to get to know fellow students better. Integrate youth-oriented and peer support-based methods that promote safety. These methods help young people's voices be heard better, increase their trust in the system, and encourage them to participate, such as the "young people telling young people"-model for student guidance and career choice.
- 💡 **Raise skill levels**, by devoting more time/lessons to familiarise students with different educational options and professions, offering opportunities for experimentation, trial and error, and flexible transitions between different educational programs. Take into consideration the ability of families and parents to support young people and the importance of linguistic and cultural background in vocational choices.



## Germany

In Germany, we have conducted research in the regions of Hamburg (*Hamburg-Mitte*) and Saxony-Anhalt (*Halle (Saale)*). On the hand, the thriving sub-region of Hamburg-Mitte faces the challenges of levelling up the differences between groups of population with different educational levels, integrating young people from migrant background, acknowledging skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning, and reducing the number of young people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. On the other hand, the rather declining Halle (Saale) has to tackle the teacher shortages, outmigration of young people, integration of sustainable ideas in learning curricula, and promotion of digital transformation of the school system. Based on our findings, we recommend to



- 💡 **Reduce differences between population groups with different educational levels**, by offering more institutional flexibility for special cases that otherwise tend to fall through the institutional cracks. In the long term, this strengthens social cohesion and economic growth as it allows a smoother process of (re)integration in the labour market.
- 💡 **Integrate young people**, by including their distinct life experiences in training and learning programmes. Do not place the same formal requirements or demands on everyone equally. Offer young people the opportunity to spend a given period of time in pre-training programmes to let them get familiar with the institutional landscape. Finally, provide young people additional time for orientation and self-assessment to lower dissatisfaction and reduce rates of school/training drop-outs. Avoid stigmatisation and ill-advised decisions. View the multifarious educational pathways more holistically, not only through the lenses of formal requirements.
- 💡 **Answer to the need for informal/non-formal skills**, by including informal and non-formal skills as part of qualifications (e.g., extra-occupational interests, critical life experiences) to better reflect young people's capabilities (e.g., flexibility, creativity, critical thinking). This can be achieved by offering young people the possibility to voluntarily add a self-description when they apply for a job or training position. Simultaneously, create space for self-assessment in education and training to get better insight into the skills and capabilities' profiles of young people.
- 💡 **Reduce the number of young people at risk of poverty or social exclusion**, by creating a centralised source of local information that is multilingual, barrier-free, and easy to access to provide young people a general view of the local educational, training and labour market. Due to limited resources, accessibility must be taken into account as an important decision-making factor for those in vulnerable positions, as many young people carefully assess their local living and learning conditions.

## Greece

In Greece, we have conducted research in the regions of Kentriki Makedonia (*Thessaloniki*) and Dytiki Ellada (*Achaia*). On the one hand, the thriving sub-region of Thessaloniki seeks to raise the employment rates among young adults and integrate Roma population into the education system and labour market, address ways to support young people not in employment, education or training, support young students with disabilities with more and better trained staff, and diagnose the needs of the regional labour market. On the other hand, rather declining regions of Achaia faces the challenges of tackling youth poverty, addressing the impact of socio-economic background on educational performance and labour market integration, supporting young people not in education, employment or training, and to improve low participation rates amongst adult learners. In that regard, we suggest to



- 💡 **Raise employment rates among young adults and integrate the Roma population into education and the labour market**, by Institutionalising youth voice structures, i.e., establish school-based and municipal-level youth councils with decision-making capacity in curriculum, evaluation, and student life planning. Introduce narrative-based assessment and pilot narrative, formative, and portfolio-based evaluation methods across Second Chance Schools, VET institutions, and general education as inclusive assessment alternatives.
- 💡 **Support young people not in employment, education or training**, by developing a national recognition framework for informal and migration-based learning. Establish decentralised hubs in universities, NGOs, and municipalities that support the validation of life competences through narrative tools and learner-designed portfolios. Bridge formal and non-formal education systems and create mobility frameworks that allow smooth transitions between non-formal learning environments like youth centres and NGOs, and formal systems like VET and SDE.
- 💡 **Support students with disabilities**, by embedding empathy and co-design in teacher training. This means to reform teacher education in order to include training on intergenerational communication, structural empathy, and participatory pedagogy. Redefine (educational) "success" through curriculum and media integration. Integrate multiple success narratives into textbooks, school displays, and public campaigns—highlighting non-linear, community-based, and creative pathways.
- 💡 **Respond to the needs of the local labour market**, by ensuring long-term forum continuity and local adaptation. Encourage municipalities and ministries to adopt the CLEAR Innovation Forum model as a recurring civic practice for inclusive educational policy dialogue. Include additional actors to further enhance the exchange (e.g., parents; researchers).

## Italy

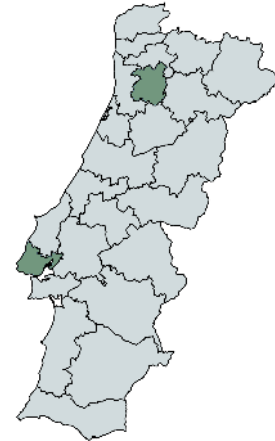
In Italy, we have conducted research in the regions of Liguria (*Genoa*) and Marche (*Pesaro-Urbino*). On the one hand, the rather thriving region of Genoa has to counter the brain-drain of young adults, the demographic decline, the promotion of schooling and lifelong learning participation to reduce the rates of low achievers, and the static labour market which has significant skills mismatch and high levels of youth unemployment. On the other hand, the rather declining region of Pesaro-Urbino faces the challenges of developing education and labour policies that consider territorial specificities, addressing structural obstacles to education access, and to stop out-migration of young people. We herewith recommend to



- 💡 **Counter the brain-drain of young adults**, by utilising schools as a facilitating system that promote the relationship between young people and their spatial, social and economic environment. Empower teaching staff to be less precarious to enable them to build long-term pedagogical programs that are capable of fitting into the context and characteristics expressed by each classroom and pupil. Reduce class size to focus more on the needs and desires of each student.
- 💡 **Address the productive and demographic decline**, by enabling horizontal exchanges among students, professors, educators, and technical-administrative staff to generate trust and recognition. This stimulates young people to openly express the limitations and strengths they identify in educational institutions, promoting agency and civic participation in the younger generation.
- 💡 **Reduce the rate of early school leavers and young people not in employment, education or training**, by providing more opportunities for students to meet with other actors to exchange ideas, and get to know each other and to develop greater empathy. This improves schools both functionally and in terms of personal relationships. Rethink school evaluation systems by expanding the concept of learning beyond numerical grades, and instead integrate more formative, cooperative, and personalised evaluation methods to foster individual growth. Avoid the polarisation between "excellence" and "mediocrity", by valuing everyone's abilities and ensuring equity, regardless of students' socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. Invest in teaching training programmes that include reflective strategies aimed at building empathic relationships with students to promote active listening practices. This helps teachers to understand students' subjective experiences, facilitating a more attentive assessment of individual learning processes.

## Portugal

In Portugal, we have conducted research in the regions of Norte (*Tâmega e Sousa*) and Área Metropolitana de Lisboa (*Amadora*). On the one hand, within the economically thriving region of Lisbon, the deprived district Amadora faces the challenges of ensuring affordable housing, addressing the mismatch between public education supply and individual demand, reducing youth unemployment rates, and decreasing wage inequalities. On the other hand, the rather declining region of Tâmega e Sousa seeks to increase the regional GDP, reduce the disparities in monthly earnings, as well as poverty and social exclusion, and tackle inequalities within the educational system. We recommend to

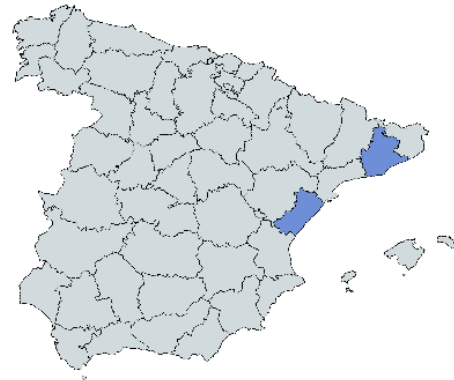


- 💡 **Ensure affordable housing**, by fostering save living and learning environments for young people, especially those living in precarious situations. Acknowledge the reality of youth disaffection, precariousness, and systemic neglect—and the urgent need for preventive measures that go beyond punitive responses.
- 💡 **Tackle the mismatch between public education supply and individual demand**, by reducing the bureaucratic burden on teachers to create additional time for relational and adaptive work. Facilitate smaller class sizes and diversified strategies, such as the inclusion of non-formal education into school curricula. Value educational flexibility and personalised approaches. The call to "listen and to dream" emerged as a key principle, suggesting that system-wide change must begin by acknowledging the lived realities and aspirations of both students and professionals. One way to achieve this is the creation of paid mentorship schemes that enable peer role-modelling. Promote youth participation as a strategy to build hope and ownership. Do this by facilitating joint activities for parents and children to foster shared learning and communication.
- 💡 **Reduce unemployment rates**, by establishing policy coherence and alignment between educational and labour market policies. To do this, strengthen and diversify the qualifications of professionals working in educational and social support contexts and integrate non-formal education into the curricula for both students and teachers. This means to move away from evaluation-centric systems focused on standardised assessments/rankings, and instead to reform the assessment system to prioritise equity and relevance. All in all, recognise schools as autonomous educational communities, not merely administrative units.



## Spain

In Spain, we have conducted research in the regions of Catalonia (*Barcelona*) and Valencian Community (*Castelló*). Here, both regions face rather similar challenges. They need to overcome the huge gaps between young people from migration background and national residents, increase take-up rates of adult education programmes, integrate the previously entrenched 'silos' of Vocational Education and Training delivered by schools, public employment services and employers and prevent early leaving from education and training and 'upskill' early leavers. Based on our evidence, we suggest to



- 💡 **Overcome the gaps between young people with and without family migration background**, by simplifying the equivalence process for academic credentials so that migrants' educational backgrounds could be fully recognised. They argued that migrants are discriminated against when they cannot validate the education, they received in their home countries. Tackle high housing costs, which primarily impact young people from low-income household. Young participants also complained that rising housing costs have become a major obstacle to gaining independence.
- 💡 **Increase take-up rates of adult education programmes**, by providing financial compensation and payment for training courses and internships. Adapt to the local economic context. Impact of how educational on the productive fabric of the region.
- 💡 **Integrate the previously entrenched 'silos' of VET**, by making information about opportunities and courses accessible.
- 💡 **Prevent early school leaving**, by improving career guidance and counselling. Deliver relevant talks in high schools. Such guidance should reflect real labour market opportunities and help them develop strategies to work close to their families. Provide resources and training for guidance counsellors. Regarding guidance, it was noted that although recent legislative changes have improved the educational dimension of guidance, implementation is still severely limited by a lack of resources and training for guidance counsellors.



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