DIMENSIONS OF YOUNG ADULT POLICIES IMPACT ON A COMPARATIVE PRINCIPLE AT AN EUROPEAN LEVEL

Yulia V. Dzhabarova, Blaga P. Madzhurova, Stefan A. Raichev, Dobrinka I. Stoyanova

University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski, 24 Tzar Asen str., 4000 Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Abstract

This paper discusses some priority Life Long Learning (LLL) policies at European level. The aim is to provide a basis thorough analysis and assessment of the effectiveness of these policies and how they support the transition of young people from education to employment and their common well-being. The conclusion in our study identifies the positive and negative effects in certain European countries and highlights the critical points for further research. The aim of the study is to identify best practices through an analysis of lifelong learning policies.

Keywords: *young adults, Life Long Learning policies, employment, education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Life Long Learning (LLL) policies across Europe have been repeatedly described as highly fragmented, sporadious, and often conflicting in their objectives in relation to their target groups and means of implementation. As the policies unfold differently on national, regional and local level they display often competing and ambivalent orientations and objectives, which can mismatch with young adults' life courses. The analysis of the conducted empirical studies reveals problems in these policies across Europe, despite the different specifics of the programs.

The inefficient and incomplete use of the young people's potential considered along with the deepening demographic crisis in the majority of EU countries, highlights the possibilities of improving the overall life being of young people.

The latter raises the need to evaluate the effects of policies and, based on a survey, to set out proposals for the implementation of more effective policies in the field.

In this study, the impact of lifelong learning policies on the development of young people in the EU has been assessed. Using the results of collected analytical quality data through interviews with young adults and experts, the effectiveness of lifelong learning policies in nine European countries has been assessed, with an emphasis on policies in Bulgaria.

2. METHODOLOGY

Methods

The methodology of the study includes comparative analysis and analysis of quality data collected through interviews with young adults (aged 18-29) who have participated in a number of Life Long Learning policies and with experts in charge of these policies. The empirical study covers 150 in-depth interviews, conducted in eighteen regions in nine EU Member States. This enables policy-makers, involved in lifelong learning, to be directly evaluated by the participants and to reveal the real problems in the policy implementation.

In order to gain an exhaustive study of European level, the sample of interviewees met some criteria:

- Eighteen relevant functional regions were identified in nine EU member states.
- The Interviews made reference to the policies. Young adults and experts were selected in a way to be able to study their attitude to the same policies. The gender and any relevant ethnic features of young adults were taken into account.

- At least, some managers of the main institutions in charge of the policies and some street-level professionals were interviewed.

The implemented methodology aims to enable young adults and experts to express their needs and expectations from lifelong learning policies and to compare the attitudes of the two studied groups. The group of Young adults was mostly approached in the institutions where they were taking either services, training or both related to lifelong learning. The management of these institutions was aware of this process. The experts were contacted on the grounds of their current professional appointments. Although they were asked for wicked practices affecting their responsibilities, the interviewers fully respected the 'institutional culture' when probing their opinion. If they decided to stick to any script or any official version, they were not challenged for that. In some countries they give their opinion quite openly, in others they align strictly to the official guidelines.

Since the sample was basically regionally determined, it accounts for a diversity of settings. The interviews were also relevant to both the national and the regional context of the policies and the lives of the young adults. Significantly, urban and rural, as well as prosperous and deprived regions were included in the sample. The respondents were not limited to talk about their region as much as they wish.

3. RESULTS

It is important to mention that in general, the youngsters do not participate in the policy-providing process in Bulgaria, even more, neither policy makers, nor the young adults themselves expect to do so. None of the interviewed young men and women referred to the EU Structured Dialogue. Previous research has found that this mechanism of consultation between young people and policy makers has been established as a legitimate process through which 'youth are pursued and encouraged to make them active citizens capable, as both individuals and communities, of managing their own risk' (Banjac, 2017: 471). Young people are passive participants in the policies, designed to involve them. As a result the difficulties faced by young people in their transition from education to labor market require adjusted lifelong learning policies to the new generation and specific methods for more effective action. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate that there were different degrees of youth involvement in the governance of lifelong learning. In the Southern European countries young people often spoke about the lack of information on the various programs and schemes. It was difficult for them to make informed choice, and there were no opportunities to influence the design of these policies. In those countries, as well as in Croatia and Bulgaria the youngsters complained of the poor career guidance which would inform them about the ability requirements for and prospects after the training. It was clear to the youths that there was no cooperation between the actors involved in the policies. In reverse, the prospect for youths participation in the governance of the lifelong learning policies was better in Germany and to a lesser extent in Austria. In Rhein-Main for example the young participants were highly involved in the design of the program so that it could cover the individual needs.

Lifelong learning policies are a way of limiting the social exclusion of vulnerable groups in the labor market, including young adults, and where participation in one of the varieties of active policies is often the only opportunity to provide employment. „…the proper selection of public policies on the labor market leads to improving the situation and dynamics of the labor market, reducing the types of unemployment, increasing employment and, as a result, improving the efficiency of the labor market. In addition, they lead to a reduction in income inequality" (Raychev, 2016)

Moreover, the European programs have a very positive impact on the interaction between all the parties involved in the skills and labour market, such as young individuals, educational institutions, labour institutions, local authorities, NGOs, businesses, etc. (Dzhabarova et al, 1017)

These policies are in favour not only of young people, but also of employers' needs for a more skilled workforce and lower social costs. They are an opportunity to increase the economic activity of society as a whole.

On the one hand, this implies the need to analyze the experience and expectations of young adults from participating in lifelong learning policies and benchmarking between countries.

On the other hand, it is also important to analyze the views of the experts to observe whether the institutions are effectively implementing the policies. Most schemes and measures aim to increase the competitiveness of young people in the labor market and their activation. However, this is a prerequisite for creating temporary employment, with which the issue is solved just in a short term, and thus the integration problem becomes delayed in future. It could be concluded that often schemes do not allow a proper transition to a more sustainable employment, just temporary. Measures should be flexible and geared to achieve long-term sustainable results in the labor market, otherwise there appears a risk of inefficiency of activities and failure to address the problems (Stoyanova, 2016).

In order to compare young adults' and experts' expectations from the policies and the set up objectives in them, the main characteristics (objectives and target groups) of the studied policies in the different countries are considered:

In Austria, policies have been explored to facilitate the formal recognition of the qualifications of some young adults who could not complete an apprenticeship. Other policies tackle the problems of early school leavers and NEET youth (Pot et al, 2017).

In Bulgaria, the Youth Guarantee is a mainstream programme of the Employment Agency. Some of these policies help young adults to acquire a job experience during their education and to start their career, sometimes by starting a new business. (Kovacheva et al., 2017).

In Croatia, policies are not differentiated, so the main activities of the involved institutions are addressed. (Boulliet et al., 2017).

In Finland, emphasis is placed on policies such as: tailored workshops for young adults with poor academic skills, coaching services, work preparatory workshops, guidance centers for low-skilled workers and on-the-job training (Tikkanen et al., 2017).

In Germany, policies to promote further education and support vulnerable young adults to complete an apprenticeship as well as policies targeting certain groups of women to acquire higher skills are assessed (Verlage et al, 2017).

In Italy is considered the Youth Guarantee, which offers a few different services in Genoa compared to Milano. In Milano, all young people are delivered an amount of vouchers that they can spend in training (Palumbo et al., 2017).

In Portugal, a number of vocational education and training programmes were selected. In addition, youth policies and local development policies were explored (Rodrigues et al, 2017).

In Spain, policies for the vocational training of young people have been studied. (Rambla et al., 2017).

In Scotland (UK) were included a varied sample of skills development programmes. (Doyle, 2017).

Results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews with young adults

The results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews with young adults reveal how they perceive policies, how they assess the weaknesses and strengths of the policies, how they communicate with relevant institutions, what is the importance of the social environment on their experiences.

From the primary data it is concluded that the effectiveness of the policies studied depends to a large extent on the motivation of the participants. It may also include receiving a formal certificate in order to continue studying or improving qualifications and competencies.

In Bulgaria, the tendency is that young adults' motivation to join programs is a consequence of the pressure they get from their current and potential employers. Thus employers save money that they would have to pay for the wages and social security contributions of young workers.

Young adults reveal some opportunities and challenges in their participation in lifelong learning policies, with challenges taking precedence.

The main source of satisfaction from the LLL programs and schemes in Austria, Germany and Finland is their flexibility, which is related to the adaptation of training to the needs and abilities of the young adults.

Another positive side of the programs is the acquisition of professional skills and competencies by young adults as a result of their participation in these programs. This allows them a better realization on the labor market.

Young people also appreciate other significant effects from their participation in the lifelong learning policies such as: acquiring soft skills; identity development; and an opportunity to better plan their life realization.

Despite the opportunities of the programs, young adults emphasize on the shortcomings of lifelong learning policies.

First, there is a problem of lack of opportunities for apprenticeship and a limited choice of courses, which diverts young adults from their desired realization. In these cases, young people feel that their individual needs are not sufficiently satisfied during their participation in the programs.

Second, the lack of sufficient information on the programs, their content and the requirements to the participants hampers the appropriate choice of program and the inclusion of more young adults. This leads to discrepancies between the interests of young adults and the skills provided in the programs. The ultimate effect is the devaluation of young adults' abilities.

Third, the unrealized expectations of young people to obtain employment after the end of training and the use of programs by employers as a mean of hiring employees at a lower cost hampers the transition of young adults from education to the labor market. The result of the latter is the need to re-register at the employment office, to undertake other training or to hire a fixed-term employment contract. Such experience, however, puts young adults in a bad position in front of the employers.

Fourth, cumbersome procedures, a big bureaucracy for inclusion in programs and high demands of candidates are becoming barriers for new entrants.

Fifth, the trainers' unwillingness to devote time to train young adults leads to their demotivation and refusal to participate in lifelong learning policies.

The analysis of young adults' experience of their participation in the research programs shows that the effectiveness of lifelong learning policies depends on a number of factors such as: socio-economic conditions; gender of the participants, personal development and skills of the participants, etc. The qualitative analysis derived from the interviews with young adults reveals the expectations of the participants, and serves as a proper basis for making concrete proposals to improve the effectiveness of the policies.

Results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews with experts

The basis for qualitative analysis of the interviews with experts is their understanding of lifelong learning policies. Experts' opinion reveals the possible effects of the policies, what are the expectations of policy-makers, and how these policies in fact change the lifestyle of young adults.

The interviewed experts come to a consensus about the positive impact of the policies on the life of young adults. They differentiate the effects in the following way:

Firstly, the results of the analysis show that lifelong learning policies contribute positively to the autonomy of young adults, strengthen their self-esteem, and bring them into working life.

Secondly, policies contribute to improving the overall well-being of beneficiaries, which ultimately improves their employability.

Despite the positive effects of the policies, experts also meet some difficulties in their implementation. The biggest difficulty is due to the significant bureaucracy.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews with experts includes some more important recommendations for improving the effectiveness of lifelong learning programs:

In Austria, experts recommend that vulnerable young adults have initial work experience before taking any lifelong learning measures. In their view, programs should be based on practical approaches, rather than course-based training.

In Finland, experts emphasize on the need to develop services that aim to empower young adults to improve their functional abilities and self-esteem, to train them to manage life, and to acquire better social skills.

In Germany, experts recommend the implementation of different measures to meet different needs, thus improving employability and reducing the unemployment rate among young adults.

In Scotland, experts highlight the need for a change in employers' attitudes that is geared to greater engagement with the training and recruitment of young workers.

Lifelong Learning Policies in Bulgaria

The collection of empirical material from the interviews with experts and the performance of qualitative analysis of some priority lifelong learning programs in Bulgaria and in particular in the Functional region of Plovdiv enables the subjective views and experience of the interviewed experts on policies and practices to monitor the effectiveness of research programs and their capacity to support the well-being of young people.

Expert interviews provide information on several lifelong learning programs aimed at two wider programs: Student Practices and Youth Guarantee. Based on the analysis, the following conclusions were drawn regarding the opportunities and challenges of each of the programs (see Figure 1)

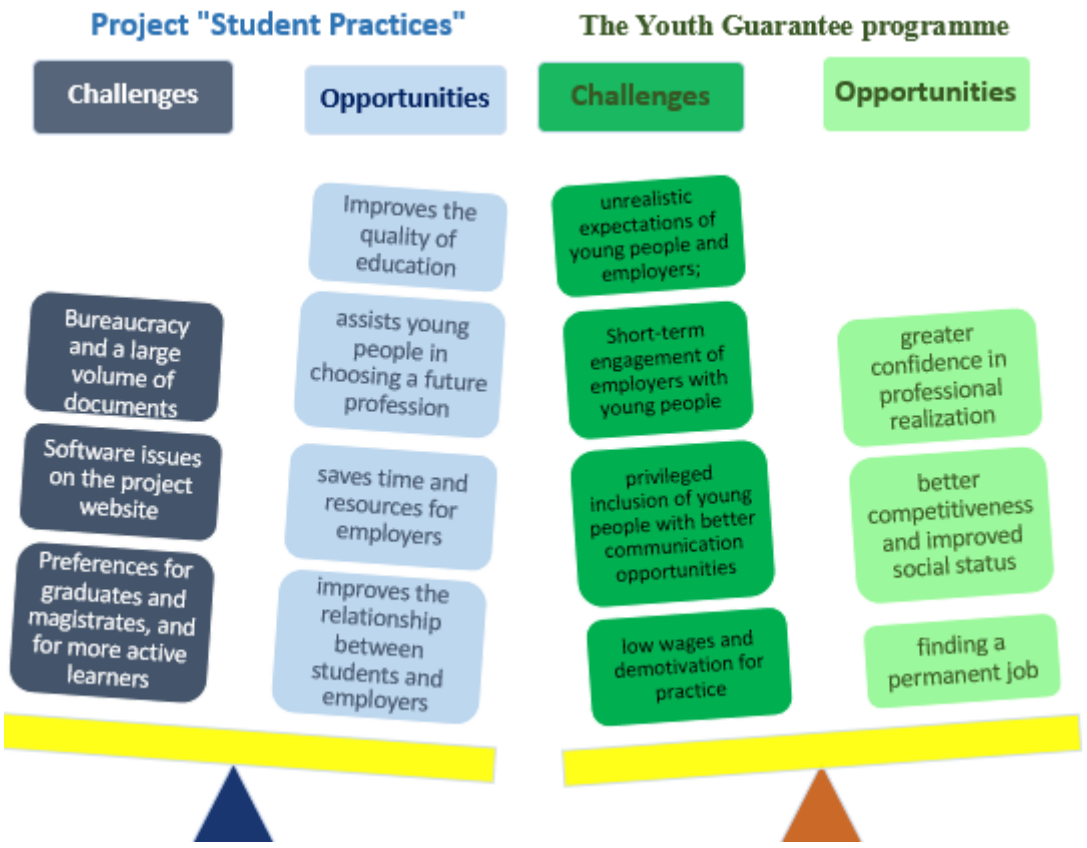


Fig. 1. Project "Student Practices" and The Youth Guarantee programme- Challenges and Opportunities.

Source: own figure

Nevertheless, the unemployment rate of youth unemployment in Bulgaria „remains high due to the contraction of the labor force, influenced by the negative demographic developments and aging of the population. The high level of youth unemployment is particularly high, as the access of young people to employment in Bulgaria remains limited. It is largely due to the broken link between education and employment and the transition from one to the other. The balance between youth demand and supply on the labor market is distorted. This leads to the high share of Bulgarian youth who neither study nor work." (Madzhurova, 2017)

To investigate the effectiveness of lifelong learning policies, it is also necessary to monitor the interaction between the institutions that manage them (see Figure 2). In Bulgaria, institutions are divided into three sectors: private, public and third sectors. As representatives of the private and public sector are responsible for developing measures such as Continuing Education and Practical Training, and Starting a Job and Business. The public sector representatives, apart from the two listed measures, are also responsible for helping young people from the minorities.

It is clear from the figure that the institutions of the three sectors interact with the implementation of the relevant measures and that the interest of the institutions is focused on Continuing education and practical training.

Greater commitment to lifelong learning policies shows institutions such as universities; employers and regional employment services. They are involved in the implementation of most of the programs for young adults.

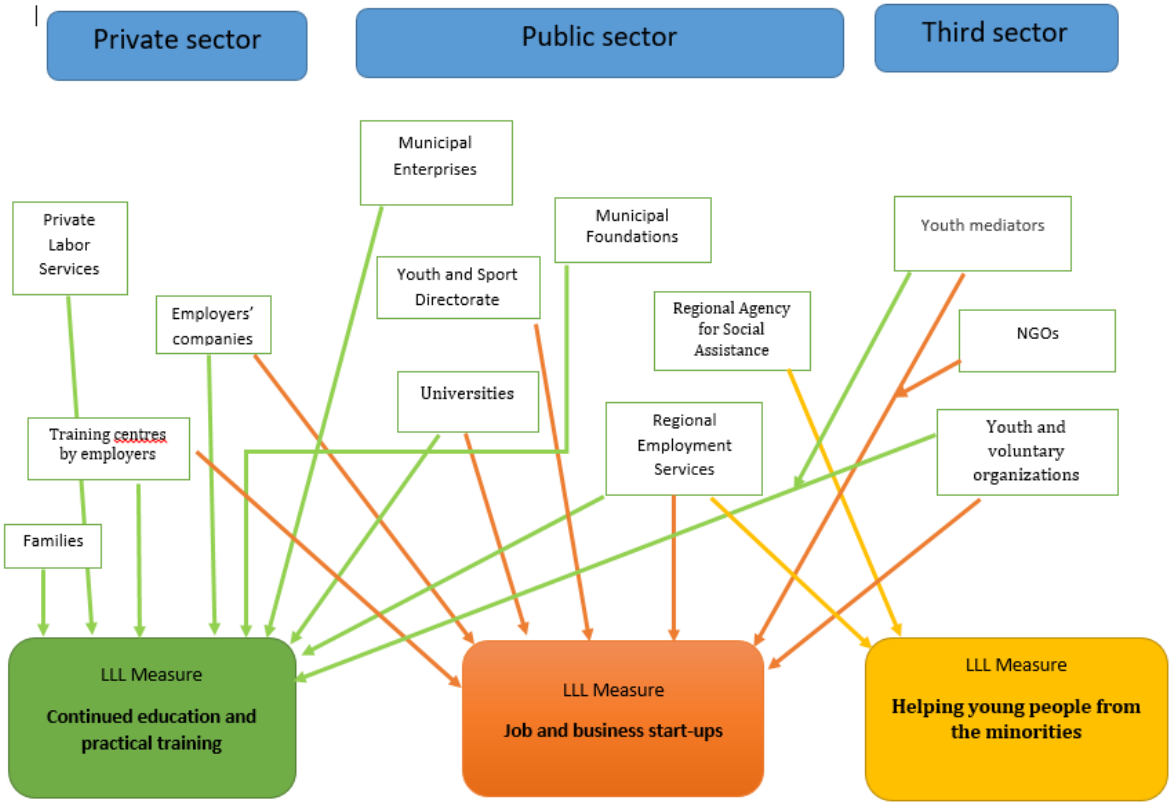


Fig. 2. Interactions between actors / institutions managing lifelong learning programs in Bulgaria

Source: own figure

The analysis of the regional governance of lifelong learning policies in the studied eighteen regions results in two main conclusions. On the one hand, while horizontal relationships and synergies are important everywhere, hierarchical governance is essential too. Albeit diverse, vertical command raises the main predicaments everywhere. These predicaments have to do with specific targets, the powers of municipalities and conflict. On the other hand, while lifelong learning systems are well established and

governance networks are quite interlinked in some countries, in other countries the lifelong learning systems in the making and governance networks have not generated so diverse and interconnected links. Apart from these regions, some modes of complex governance seem to be in the making. This trend has a potential, since networks can broaden official perspectives by including new stakeholders. However, if networks remain too closed or too fragmented, this mode of governance may also provoke some perverse effects in the middle term.

Additionally, based on the information gathered in the nine national reports /two Functional Regions per country/ – there can be identified patterns of similarities and differences across the regions that helped us to identify the different perception of social expectations underlying policies and initiatives, their compatibility with personal interests and orientation, and thus gauging the possibility of individuals to create subjective meaning and continuity. As mentioned above, this report analyses 168 interviews with young adults aged between 18 and 29 years, who live in eighteen regions located in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Scotland (UK). These young people were exposed to some factors of social vulnerability and were attending vocational courses or taking counselling or similar services, and some were in socio-economic precarious situations receiving social benefits. The policies that delivered these measures are conceived as lifelong learning policies in the vein of a long tradition in the EU policy-making. For this reason, a sample of 128 experts involved in these policies were also interviewed. Based on two points of view- the young adults and the experts, the following results are driven: The self-presentations of the young adult interviewees clearly indicate that mental health, family conflicts, violence and school bullying hurt many of them. Currently, they are vulnerable because many signs of their social status coincide with the standard indicators of social exclusion. Early school leaving, lack of job experience and very low incomes are quite commonly spread among them. These self-presentations also reveal a harsh aspect of social vulnerability — remarkably, their parents also faced some of these extreme conditions. In fact, the social reproduction of inequalities across generations has significantly contributed to shape the contours of social vulnerability that social researchers find among young adult Europeans nowadays. These men and women attempt to carry out their life course in a new sphere of social activity as the labour market. However, many are enduring the scars of previous negative experiences with families and schools. Sometimes poor mental health intermingles with these complex circumstances. Even though this initial observation invites to pessimism, the analysis of both these self-presentations and their experience with lifelong policies induces to qualify possible self-defeating conclusions. Despite their hard lives and the difficulties of their social background, these young adults do not tell a fatalistic story of themselves. That is quite visible in two of their common themes. One of these themes is their life projects. Certainly, many interviewees stated that they wanted to wait before deciding their next step and figuring out what they would do. Therefore, it is not possible to realize if they felt like overcoming their immediate adversity. However, many others elaborated on a quite explicit life project. In this way, they told stories of reaction and resilience. Their view of the policies is also telling. Most of the young people engaged in the interviews of this research thought that lifelong learning policies were eventually helping them. To say it in a nutshell, either they found a more suitable pedagogic approach than the one in the schools they had attended, or they were learning how to work in a service economy where low-skilled workers face huge uncertainties. The point is that most of them said that they were actively searching for a job, they were strengthening their basic skills, and they felt they were capable to cope with the challenges ahead.

This delicate balance between constraints and opportunities is not constructed from scratch. It is the outcome of biographies but also the effect of socio-economic transformations and institutional contexts shaped by certain policies. In the interviews, the experts raised a final set of issues that affect the potential of lifelong learning policies at the macro-scales of social activity. To be precise, a couple of institutional variations invite to reflection, further debate and political debate.

On the one hand, the ‘theories of change’ that underpin lifelong learning policies are explicit in some member states, but the evidence seldom notices the influence of these theories in other cases. The point is that some tension between these explicit approaches and the prevalence of the deficit orientation was identified. Certainly, lifelong learning policies may have no effect, or worse, may provoke perverse effects, if professionals blame vulnerable young adults for their problems. For this reason, it is worrying that some experts actually made denigrated claims in some interviews. However, it was not the case in

many other interviews, particularly in the countries where the approach of these policies has been defined in a more systematic way.

Anyway, this finding should not be interpreted as a silver bullet but as entry point for democratic deliberation. Having a clear general framework is helpful for planning, managing and evaluating policies. It may also be helpful for preventing the perverse effects provoked by stereotyping. For sure, the contribution of these theory-based frameworks may be seriously weakened if they are automatically translated from one language and one setting to other ones. Professionals need to appropriate them if they are to be effective.

On the other hand, the governance of lifelong learning policies lies in a combination of hierarchies and networks everywhere. Hierarchies are instrumental to guaranteeing rights and redistributing resources. Networks gather diverse stakeholders in common efforts. Despite varying density and complexity, the point is that networks are widely present. It is clear that transferring these institutional arrangements automatically would not make sense. However, it is also clear that these networks settle a very favorable basis for the above mentioned democratic deliberation. The point is even stronger if young adults themselves participate in the lifelong learning policies. It was the case in some policies in Germany, but mostly in the systematic approach adopted in Finland. Therefore, the room for debate is large.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative analysis of the interviews with young adults and experts provides an opportunity to evaluate and compare key outcomes and conclusions about the potential of lifelong learning policies from the perspective of young adults and experts. Based on the information gathered in the nine national reports, the different perceptions of the social expectations underpinning policies and initiatives have been identified, thus measuring the possibilities for individuals to create subjective significance.

Based on the requirements of the study, three perspectives - life course research (LCR), cultural political economy (CPE) and governance (GOV) - with conclusions can be identified:

The LCR highlights how problems in one dimension of life put pressure on the behavior of people in other dimensions of life. The physical, contiguous context is not enough if the projects and the experiences of vulnerable young adults are to be taken into account. Moreover, this strand of research also asks how the experiences of young adults match with the views of experts. The question is not only if they do but also why and how.

Then, the CPE scrutinizes how policies are selected among many alternatives, and sometimes, how target groups are constructed in accordance with that selection. So, vulnerable young adults are expected to respond to social norms that have been established by somebody else. This is really a complex semiotic process whereby policy-makers define routes, professionals develop their expertise, and institutions constitute daily routines. By realizing how complex the process is, anybody who is interested in lifelong learning will also find the clues to understand many problems that inevitably emerge.

The GOV argues that social interaction shapes the coordination between public departments and other stakeholders. The outcome is an array of combinations between hierarchical and network governance. Since lifelong learning policies operate in the interfaces of education, labour market and social policies, it is obvious that their governance should not be overlooked.

The main conclusion that follows from the analysis is that most of the young people involved in the interviews of this study believe that lifelong learning policies ultimately help them.

The conclusion drawn from interviews with experts shows that lifelong learning policies have great potential, but at the same time they call for reflection, further debates and political debates.

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