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Introduction: Exploring Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies across Europe

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1.1 Lifelong Learning Policies for Young Adults

Lifelong learning (LLL) as a concept developed amidst long and rich debates that emphasised different connections from early childhood to adult learning and stressed the universal right to education. “Learning to

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S. Benasso et al. (eds.), *Landscapes of Lifelong Learning Policies across Europe*,
Palgrave Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-96454-2_1

be” was seen as a lifelong process along the life course. From this point of view, policies were to be organised along the principle of a humanistic, rights-based and holistic view of education. More recently, however, the political focus on LLL has shifted to labour market security and economic competitiveness and a stronger orientation towards human capital and employability became central to policies implementing European strategies. With this, the meanings of the concept of LLL have thus changed considerably since it was first introduced in the 1960s. While the early “maximalist” perspective on LLL (see Wain, 2001) considered the whole of society to be a learning resource for each individual, considering the wider cultural, social, and political context and conditions under which education and learning take place, the 1970s witnessed a narrowing of the concept and the first move towards a more “functionalist” view of LLL in relation to the labour market. In this narrower and more instrumentalist discourse, the concept of LLL is linked with further training, professional development and economic growth. The importance of LLL as preparation for the needs of the labour market gained more ground during the 1990s, when social problems such as low employability, unemployment and social exclusion were increasingly explained with reference to a mismatch between competences acquired in schools and the competences demanded by a fast-changing economy (Walker, 2012). In an increasingly complex world, with a rapidly changing economy, LLL plays a crucial role in preparing a workforce that is able to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the economy (Rizvi, 2007).

Alongside this shift in the meaning of LLL, special attention has been devoted to supporting young people to become and remain employable by means of education and/or labour market policies, that—despite different logics of intervention: prevention, compensation, activation, and empowerment—to a large extent focus on solutions to a problem that is commonly attributed to young peoples’ dispositions, competencies and aspirations (see Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019). This points to a

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clear mismatch between structural problem-perceptions and individual problem-solution. That is, although the majority of the policymakers realise the structural difficulties that young adults are exposed to, they nonetheless oftentimes devise policy solutions grounded on individual interventions. This potentially further opens up the cleavage between young adults' possibilities and their chances to achieve the socially and culturally created and expected outcomes, reinforcing inequalities and oftentimes leading them to frustration and/or disinterest.

Moreover, the analyses in this book depart from the assumption that young adults are not passive recipients of LLL policies across the places analysed. On the contrary, although some people express how they struggle to build their own life course in extremely uncertain circumstances, others are quite assertive about their life projects and openly criticise the constraints they face. While in most places young people have internalised a discourse of self-responsibility and achieving autonomy through labour market inclusion, still they attribute different meanings to their involvement and place it within a much wider framework of life strategies. Against this background, this volume sets out to explore the different landscapes of LLL across Europe by shifting attention to the widely divergent realities in which young people pursue their life plans and in which LLL policies are implemented—in other words, we shift attention to different places and spaces. It also attends to the varying pathways made possible and used by young people. Not least, the discussions in the different chapters in this volume are attentive to issues of social and spatial justice.

The following section will introduce these ideas, both framing the research conceptually and highlighting the issues dealt with in the collection.

1.2 Landscapes, Pathways, Young People and Social Justice

This section presents and discusses the main concepts and ideas drawn from in framing the research: “landscapes” refer here to the different places and spaces under examination, the diverging pathways that open up or narrow down opportunities for young people, and not least mark

a concern with social and spatial justice imbued in the discussions throughout the book. By adopting these concepts, our aim is to address a shortcoming of more traditional approaches to policy analysis when applied to the field of Lifelong Learning. In our view, it is a necessity to tackle the dynamics which unfold in the domain of LLL policies by taking into consideration their processual nature, the interplay between structural and cultural dimensions on different levels (from international to regional/local), and the negotiations among the actors who, from very different positions and with varying power differentials, interact around the policies. This multidimensional view of the LLL policies makes their analysis resemble the exploration of a landscape consisting of physical/geographical features (height of mountains, length of rivers, the breadth of the plains), but also of paved (or dirt) roads and trails used to journey across it, including the barriers, cliffs or impassable tracks. Not least, it also involves considering people's perception(s) of the landscape as an agreeable, challenging or even menacing environment, if they see themselves as travelling alone or with others, since this will also impact on how they move in it. The following sections deal with these concepts in turn.

Focusing on landscapes entails understanding spaces as dynamic products of social relations which can be analysed by different, complementary, perspectives. As argued by Doreen Massey in her critical approach to geography, the space is much more than "a flat, immobilized surface" (Massey, 1994: 4). Instead,

the spatial [...] can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time notion of space. (Massey, 1994: 4)

Likewise, the exploration of the LLL landscapes goes far beyond the one-dimensional evaluation of the capacity of the policies to meet the expected outcomes as reported on official documents. It aims to grasp the

interplay of material and immaterial factors in the processes of LLL policymaking and delivering, by taking into consideration how their unfolding is always shaped by their specific context and by the social relations among the actors involved.

Metaphorically locating them in an urban space, the LLL landscapes may also help us represent the different pathways to the city-centre—the main space of productivity, where employability is often the most exchanged and valued currency. Notably, this representation resonates with the targeting logic of the currently most relevant educational labour policy for youths at the European level: the Youth Guarantee scheme, which profiles its recipients exactly on the basis of the operationalisation of their “distance” to the labour market.

The LLL pathways can be explored by paying attention to their organisation, considering how they are structured by different national welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and transition (Walther, 2006) regimes, as well as by local governance patterns. Moreover, the focus can be placed on the regulation of the access to the LLL routes, and the underlying rules for their usage, which are affected by the ideological dominant conceptions of what should be the “right” goal pursued in passing through them. The interplay of these factors produces different LLL pathways and possibilities of movement within them, depending on the prevalence of understanding LLL policies as a support for personal empowerment or as a tool for economic growth. The latter kind of routes are structured aiming to reduce the distance between the peripheries and the city-centre in the fastest possible way, intervening throughout the itinerary on the deficits attributed to their users, so as to adjust their profiles to the standards of the city-centre. The former provides longer and less targeted paths, designed to favour the experiences of the pedestrians rather than swiftly bringing them to a destination. In brief, according to the dominant conceptions of the overall meaning of the LLL policies in a local context, we can observe different prevailing models of LLL pathways: less standardisable and experience-oriented routes, where the transition is more relevant than the arrival, shortcuts towards the access to the city-centre are possible, and the goal coincides with an integration in the labour market as sustainable as possible.

Yet, if the LLL pathways are socially constructed landscapes, their exploration cannot stop at the reading of the roadmap, as it must also consider how different people experience their crossings, the relations build while passing through these experiences, and the ways in which these movements impact the more general direction of their biographical trajectories. Considering that people usually access the LLL pathways as a more or less focused attempt to get closer to the centre, to better understand their motivations and expectations we need to firstly pay attention to the varying distances they depart from. Since the LLL policies addressed in this book are mainly targeted to young adults in diverse conditions of vulnerability, most of them move from deprived outskirts, where they have often amassed negative experiences of relation with the local representatives of institutions (especially within the education system), and can usually rely on limited amounts of economic, cultural and social capital. Previous analysis of the living conditions of young adults in many European countries has shed light on these aspects (see Scandurra et al., 2020). According to variable intersections of disadvantages affecting the youths coming from the suburbs, the journey into the LLL pathways might further discriminate those who are sufficiently equipped to support and make sense of their movement towards the centre, finding in the LLL policies opportunities for integration, from those who struggle to recognise their own goal, risking to get lost in a loop of movement with no clear (and often neither aspired) direction.

However, the inequalities faced by these youths are not only a matter of low individual resources, as they also deal with a more general trend towards the “peripheralization” (Naumann & Fischer-Tahir, 2013) of youths in many European countries. As some studies have shown (see Woodman, 2020), the intergenerational imbalance in terms of economic and political power to the detriment of the younger generation is visible in many fields of social life. On this point, we may, for instance, consider that the research conducted in the YOUNG_ADULLLT project on the processes of policy-making has highlighted that the engagement of youths’ organisations and voices is very weak, and often totally absent, even when the policies are explicitly designed to target them (see Parreira do Amaral et al. 2020).

The symbolical overlap between the distance from a centre and the social and structural disadvantage finds its actualisation in the perspective

of spatial justice, as framed by critical studies. Departing from the concept of the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968), scholars such as Harvey (2006) and Soja (2010) prompt us to question how social (in)justice materialises in the spatial organisation of the city, reproducing inequalities through spatial segregation, unequal distribution of resources, and geographically uneven systems of opportunities. As Soja (2010) argues, in the wake of the so-called spatial turn—which stems from critical geography—a critical spatial thinking is fostered in current societies by a new spatial consciousness and the acknowledgment of the related conditions of injustice.

The new spatial consciousness [makes us] aware that the geographies in which we live can intensify and sustain our exploitation as workers, support oppressive forms of cultural and political domination based on race, gender, and nationality, and aggravate all forms of discrimination and injustice. Without this recognition, space is little more than a background complication (Soja, 2010: 19).

As described by Soja for the case of Los Angeles, this new consciousness paves the way for bottom-up movements claiming for a compensation of the spatial inequalities produced by the capitalist and neoliberal organisation of today’s cities.

Returning to the imagery of LLL pathways as connections between peripheries and the city-centre, how can we identify “claims” for spatial justice in this context? In addressing this question, we first want to clarify that we do not mean to produce a naïve depiction of “heroic youths” struggling for justice through participation in LLL policies, as we acknowledge the influence of power imbalances within this field, as well as reasons for instrumental participation. Furthermore, the analyses presented in this book clearly show that the possibility to exert agency in this context is profoundly affected, on the one hand, by the availability of individual resources, and on the other by the more or less rigid structuration of LLL pathways (see Chap. 2, in this volume, for a discussion of opportunity structures). The negotiation of spatial justice in this context may be sought at a micro-subjective level, and it coincides with the possibility of constructing subjective meaning attached to the movement

towards the city-centre. The agentic capacity of the LLL policies' addressees is visible in their sense-making of the aims of the policies they have accessed, which can enable them to reframe their participation as a support for their life course management. Again, the leeway for applying agentic capacity certainly depends strongly on the nature of the diverse policies, as the variable focus on individual deficit or empowerment affects the scope for addressees' "customisation". Yet, it also depends on the kind of relations built on a micro-level throughout the pathway, and we find in this space a privileged perspective from which to observe youths' agency in making sense of the reachable opportunities that not necessarily overlap with the ones determined by the institutions and discourses surrounding them.

Therefore, to understand how LLL policies work in their contexts of implementation, we need to overcome the mainstream monolithic representation of youth recipients as passive subjects, which flattens them out as a homogenous group on the basis of an imputed lack of employability. Instead, we suggest exploring the spaces of re-subjection and personal empowerment "crafted" by the young addressees of the LLL policies by means of their relations with the actors they have met in their trajectories within the policies. One the main challenges of this book is thus to show heterogeneity within these groups "on the move" and their different reactions to the opportunity structures available to them.

1.3 Exploring Landscapes of LLL

The governance of individual life trajectories in times of markets' instability, hyper-flexibilization of professional careers and educational inflation is a common problem for many today's young adults. Yet, they unfold their "biographical work" (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) dealing with very heterogeneous contexts in terms of structural and cultural features across Europe. Indeed, in different EU member states, young people have different living conditions and they are faced with a wide variety of institutional and structural settings. The interplay between education systems, labour markets, skills ecologies, welfare regimes, governance models and cultures occurs at different levels, resulting in different contextual

opportunity structures. In constructing their life plans, choices and the very subjective understanding of the notion of opportunity, the young adults interact and negotiate with these variable combinations, developing different strategies of action.

Against the background of this heterogeneity, a continuity in the institutional response in many EU countries is visible in the promotion of LLL policies as pathways towards opportunities. The overarching idea is that policies supporting education-to-work transitions play a pivotal role in compensating the uneven distribution of opportunities for labour market integration—or, alternatively, for personal empowerment. Yet again, the variability of the contextual features produces a fragmentation and diversification of the LLL policies spread across Europe, which must prove successful in quite different settings while catering for the needs and interests of highly diverse target groups. Diverse landscapes of LLL policies are thus shaped by multiple factors, and the analyses presented in this book aim to show their variation and highlight relevant features.

Furthermore, particular attention is devoted to showing how the LLL landscapes impact differently on the opportunity structures available to young adults. Due to the different orientations, goals and time horizons of the policies, contrasting and potentially adverse effects for beneficiaries may indeed arise, reducing rather than increasing their opportunities.

Our exploration is inspired by the concept of opportunity structure, here applied to the analysis of the complex interrelationships captured by the focus on unique landscapes of LLL policymaking and implementation (see Chap. 2, in this volume). Departing from Dale and Parreira do Amaral's (2015) distinction between discursive and institutional structures of opportunity, our research integrates a third component focusing on the micro-relational level, to enable the analysis of the consequences of the actor's different interaction patterns in the LLL landscapes.

The multidimensionality of the LLL landscapes requires a research design to capture the multi-layered nature of the phenomena at hand. For this reason, the chapters in this volume adopted a case-based methodology that does not simply assume the “cases to be “naturally” existing phenomena to be “discovered”, but rather as constructs resulting from a multi-method, multi-level approach aimed at showing the dynamic interrelations of LLL policies and their contexts (see Chap. 3, in this volume).

1.4 Sources of Empirical Evidence

The empirical foundation of this work lays on the research materials collected throughout the European research project “YOUNG_ADULLLT—Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe”. The project, carried out between 2016 and 2019, was designed as a mixed-method comparative study focused on LLL policies for young adults, and particularly for those in “vulnerable” positions, with the aim to critically analyse current developments of LLL policies in Europe. It was carried out in nine European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

The research carried out in the YOUNG ADULLLT project was designed as a multi-level and multi-methods study structured along three main theoretical perspectives: Life Course Research (LCR), Cultural Political Economy (CPE) and Governance research (GOV). To “feed” these research lines, a variety of empirical materials was collected by the project partners.

First, macro-quantitative data were gathered by querying (at the Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) 2 level) international databases such as Eurostat, OECD, EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) and EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) to observe the main structural features and the living conditions of the young adults in their local contexts. Referring to a ten-year period (2005–2016) and focusing on the 18–29 age group, the dimension of living conditions was operationalized by means of a set of indicators including: economics (based on GDP per inhabitant; R&D expenditure; researchers in all sectors; motorways railways); demography (based on old dependency ratio; median age of the population); education and training (based on data concerning students in tertiary education; participation in education; early school leavers; NEET; lower education; upper secondary education; tertiary education); labour market (based on data concerning employment; youth employment; employment since attainment of the highest education; weekly hours in main job); material conditions (based on disposable income; risk of poverty or social exclusion; severe material deprivation); health (based on life expectancy and infant mortality).

Furthermore, a mapping and critical analysis of policy documents of the most relevant LLL policies in the countries involved in the project Consortium were carried out. Given the manifold nature of the aims and actions fostered by LLL policies across Europe, the documents collected and analysed (N=129) included policies regulating the fields of education, labour market, social inclusion and youth at the regional and national levels.

Through semi-structured qualitative interviews (N=121) targeted at managers and street level professionals involved in LLL processes, different understandings of the role played by LLL policies in supporting their addressees' life transition were observed, and data about the main (material and immaterial) factors affecting their implementation were collected. This line of work was complemented by 81 semi-structured interviews to LLL policymakers and relevant stakeholders at the regional and national level, whose narratives allowed to reconstruct the mechanisms operating in the local systems of regulation regarding the match between skills' demand and supply.

Biographical interviews (N=164) with young adults participating in the LLL policies were also carried out. The non-directive approach used in these interviews enabled the interviewees to provide detailed accounts of their life trajectories, plans and projections for the future, devoting particular attention to the moment (and related aims and expectations) where their biographies met the LLL policies.

Finally, the research findings were discussed and shared in Policy Roundtables (N=20) with diverse stakeholders (N=206) in every functional region studied.

The analysis of these different research materials served to produce a wide range of national and international research reports and was finally integrated through the development of case studies (N=18). In the YOUNG_ADULLLT project, the case studies enabled the combination of different empirical materials, analytical entry-points and theoretical perspectives. Through their comparative analysis, different patterns of policymaking in LLL were framed, based on their modes of operation at a local level. The case studies presented in this book draw on the same "raw" empirical materials and follow the same rationale for their building yet shift the analytical focus to fit the research questions that have prompted this work.

1.5 Overview of the Chapters

This edited collection is organised in three parts. Part I focuses on the conceptual and methodological discussions of the research. Part II presents six chapters that bring a variety of comparative case studies of LLL landscapes. Finally, Part III provides a chapter that summarises and discusses the main insights and lessons from the case studies and discuss the challenges of governing the life course in multi-level landscapes of LLL.

The first part includes Chap. 2, written by Sebastiano Benasso, Ruggero Cefalo and Jenni Tikkanen. It introduces the readers to the conceptual lenses adopted in the chapters of this volume. The authors provide an overview of the life course research, Cultural Political Economy and governance perspectives through the integration of the case studies analysed in this book. Further, different epistemological framings of the concept of opportunity structure are discussed, introducing a potentially “new” dimension, that of the relational opportunity structure, which aims to complement the analysis based on the more established approaches of the discursive and institutional opportunity structures.

The first section of the book closes with Chap. 3: “Comparative case studies” by Marcelo Parreira do Amaral. He discusses the methodological basis of case-based research, also highlighting the methodological requirements of examining LLL landscapes. The chapter offers a discussion of recent developments in comparative scholarship to provide insights into the issues at stake and to suggest a heuristic approach to the comparative cases studies in the chapters in Part II.

Part II of the book presents comparative case studies. As further detailed in Chap. 2, the six empirical chapters share a common theoretical framework, yet they devote attention to different dimensions. Specifically, Chapters 4 and 5 tackle the topic of LLL policy participation mostly drawing on the biographical interviews to young adults.

In Chap. 4 Valeria Pandolfini, Borislava Pektova and Thomas Verlage build three case studies by following the trajectories of young adults accessing LLL policies in Italy, Bulgaria and Germany. The core of the chapter is the analysis of the relation between the addressees’ life plans, aspirations and visions of the future and the systems of opportunities

they have met through the mediation of LLL policies. Particular attention is devoted to the impact of the relational dimension in shaping the meanings attached to the experiences of participation.

The six case studies constructed around LLL policies in Finland, Spain and Scotland by Jenni Tikkanen, Judith Jacovkis and Ellen Vanderhoven in Chap. 5 are analysed comparatively to frame different styles of participation among their beneficiaries. Integrating the data from the biographical interviews with young addressees with the views of the professionals involved in policy delivering, the authors look at the negotiations of the meanings and the aims of policy participation to observe different uses of youths' agentic capacity in relation to different cultural and institutional contexts.

The main focus of Chaps. 6 and 7 is on the cultural dimensions resonating in and shaping the processes of policymaking and delivery.

In Chap. 6, Queralt Capsada-Munsech, Ralph Chan, Jenni Tikkanen and Oscar Valiente analyse the influence of institutional, economic-material and discursive opportunity structures on the aims of LLL policies, as a pivotal dimension shaping the impact of participation on the beneficiaries' life trajectories. The comparative analysis devotes particular attention to the relation between national regulations and the local implementation of the policies, focusing on the translation of national skill formation regimes in LLL policies interacting with local skill ecologies.

Chapter 7, by Jozef Zelinka, Ana Bela Ribeiro and Monika Pažur, explores how the underlying cultural assumptions in LLL policies can foster the production of vulnerable and dependent subjects. Drawing on case studies from Germany, Portugal and Croatia, the Foucauldian notion of subjectivation is applied to highlight how power relations are mediated through LLL policies, although with different impacts related to different local institutional settings.

The governance patterns applied in the implementation of LLL policies are at the core of the comparative case study analysis delivered by Chaps. 8 and 9.

In Chap. 8, Domingo Barroso-Hurtado, Monika Pažur, Ana Bela Ribeiro analyse case studies built around LLL policies in Spain, Croatia and Portugal. These share a common orientation towards the

improvement of their addressees' employability. The chapter provides a reflection on the how diverse governance patterns are applied in relation to different contextual features to pursue a common aim.

By focusing on the governance patterns in VET systems in Chap. 9, Ruggero Cefalo, Mariana Rodrigues and Rosario Scandurra apply the perspective of institutional opportunity structures to show how variable governance solutions shape the youths' access to opportunities for integration in the local labour market.

Part III of the Volume consists in a chapter that offers conclusions and reflects on the challenges of governing life courses through LLL.

Chapter 10, by Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, Sebastiano Benasso, Tiago Neves and Dejana Bouillet, draws together insights generated by the comparative case studies and revisits the themes dealt with in view of the theoretical framework adopted. Here, questions regarding the meaning and relevance of the discussions for life course research and opportunity structures for young people are dealt with in an attempt to move forward from cases to lessons.

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