



The stepping- stones of lifelong learning policies: politics, regions and labour markets

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Introduction

The present special issue looks at lifelong learning through the lens of policy studies. The articles explore an array of official strategies that have attempted to deliver varied forms of lifelong learning in Europe and Latin America. These strategies have to do with adult education and learning, vocational education and training, higher education and employment policies. All of them focus on how decision-makers have designed and implemented certain policies in these areas.

Policy agendas around the world set the priorities that are at stake in political debates at a certain moment. Increasingly, the ultimate references of these debates are becoming similar across the world, particularly within world regions like Europe and Latin America. Certainly, all educational authorities do not necessarily make the same decisions, but they share some common concerns on what is important and what kind of actions must be undertaken. The editors invited the contributors to this special issue to scrutinise the implications of lifelong learning policies in a variety of states and localities to explore the interplay between commonalities and differences within and across Europe and Latin America.

A rapid look at the Sustainable Development Goals, the widening intervention of the European Union (EU) in the educational field, and the working of UNESCO in Latin America easily documents the relevance of lifelong learning in global policy agendas. Thus, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) expects to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p. 14). In the same vein, the EU has enacted a policy framework that encourages its member states to expand education to all age groups. The European Council has issued a series of recommendations on early school leaving, adult education and learning, and vocational education and training. A relevant recommendation urges member states to implement a Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS). All these initiatives encourage national and sub-national governments to provide education beyond the ages of compulsory schooling (European Council, 2013). In Latin America, the regional vision of UNESCO has argued that current socio-economic transformations have transformed lifelong vocational education and training into an indispensable policy (UNESCO- Oficina Regional de Educación para América Latina y el Caribe, 2016). In this view, this policy is an optimal instrument to address the simultaneous challenges related to the demographic bonus and the middle-income trap.

This special issue draws on the outcomes of several wide-ranging research projects that have recently investigated which programmes attempted to deliver lifelong learning on the ground. Thus, most articles report on findings of two projects that received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Particularly, ENLIVEN: *Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe* studied interventions in adult education markets and how these can be made more effective (Grant Agreement No. 693989); whereas YOUNG ADULLLT: *Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course* undertook a comparative analysis of lifelong learning and inclusion in education and work in nine member states of the European Union (Grant Agreement No. 693167). Two more contributions on Latin America enrich the geographical and institutional scope of this special issue. One such contributions draws on the project RCUK-CONICYT *Governing the educational and labour market trajectories of secondary TVET graduates in Chile*, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through the Newton Fund (Grant Agreement No. ES/N019229/1).

The context of lifelong learning policies and the constant interaction between stakeholders

The guest editors and the contributors to this special issue hope to rise the interest of experts in lifelong education on two of the crosscutting themes of the issue. Thus, all the articles acknowledge the secular controversies on the weight of education as such and the pragmatic of vocational training that is sensitive to the real labour market. Similarly, these pieces also notice that a wide array of programmes, initiatives and other types of institutional actions eventually concretise the general principles on the ground. However, taken together, these contributions point out two further questions regarding the context of policies and the constant interaction between the main stakeholders involved in their enactment.

The first theme lies in the contextual features of lifelong education and learning. Three key research questions account for the most relevant contextual aspects: Who are the providers? Where does provision take place? How do providers deliver education and other learning opportunities to learners with a wide array of ages?

If SDG4 is to become an ultimate principle of education policy, it has to appeal to many types of providers, thus it is crucial to interrogate who educates who. In fact, schools make a difference by teaching core skills and channelling students through post-compulsory pathways of education and training. Other professionals like higher education lecturers, adult educators, vocational trainers, employers and many types of public officers also tackle to the needs of people who approach education and training from very different perspectives at many points of their life course. Besides thinking on theory and practice back and forth, all these practitioners have to experiment with variable and always changing designs of national and local policies.

The tension between understandings of lifelong learning driven by either human empowerment or by short-term job search, as well as between many types of programmes, strongly reverberates with the identity of these providers. In general, education and welfare departments are committed to guaranteeing education to everybody at any moment of their lives, while business and employment departments are interested on reducing unemployment as much as (and as soon as) possible. Nevertheless, even though poignant conflicts and contradictions divide these actors in many occasions, it is not difficult to notice that sometimes they establish feasible formulas of collaboration. In the EU, variegated arrays of stakeholders have woven a complex policy network that includes both perspectives.

The second question asks where these providers operate to deliver services related to lifelong education and learning. Although analogous tensions affect policies in Europe and Latin America, geographical particularities are extremely important. In the EU, recent research shows that public employment services collaborate with schools, employers, local governments and the third sector in quite variable modes. While the EU sponsors local programmes in all the member states, research starts to unveil the intricacies and the potential of local lifelong learning policies. In contrast, the articles on Latin America convey a growing concern with the making of national models of vocational education and training.

Finally, this special issue explores how lifelong learning services link policy sectors. Human capital and public choice theories have proposed very general models, which mostly highlight the positive externalities of education for economic performance, public health and family planning. However, this kind of theoretical approach overlooks the variety of links that education establishes with other policy sectors. For instance, labour market policies, social services and higher education institutions approach lifelong learning with very specific strategies and dilemmas in mind. For this reason, many professionals prioritise the long-term effects of inequalities for both the academic performance and the professional potential of individuals.

The second crosscutting theme lies in the interaction between many stakeholders that operate at various geographical scales and bridge education with employment in variable ways. The issue accounts for these interactions by discussing politics, regional policies as well as skills and employability.

Continuously, these actors engage in complex sequences of conflict and negotiation that produce varied outcomes. For some authors, the outcomes may be beneficial for human well-

being, while for others the inevitable contradictions between education and capitalism disrupt the potential benefits quite severely. The point is that politics may lead to both types of outcomes. It is particularly noticeable how the EU has built a system of governance that may lead to either conflict or negotiation depending on the particular events and the influence of key stakeholders.

Lifelong learning policies depend on the coordination of schools and universities with varied forms of adult education and learning and social benefits (such as the YGS). The bulk of this coordination takes place at the local level, where the general bureaucratic governance intermingles with networks of stakeholders who construe variable images of learners and beneficiaries. The policies that impinge on skills and entrepreneurship illustrate these interactions quite clearly. These policies stage long-term conflicts and negotiations between the representatives of workers and employers. At the same time, in this area policy-makers have shifted from previous focus on national labour markets to a growing awareness of local particularities and regional disparities.

The contributions to the special issue

Three sets of papers discuss the politics and the regional dimension of lifelong learning policies in Europe and Latin America, and particularly, politics and regionalism in the area of skills and employment.

The first group of articles focuses on politics. Elena Tuparevska, Rosa Santibáñez-Gruber and Josu Solabarrieta Eizaguirre open the discussion of politics. Their thesis states that lifelong learning policies may underpin equity and tackle social exclusion if decision-makers and practitioners widen the scope of skills-centred designs towards critical literacy. In contrast, Adriana d'Agostini and Mauro Tilton unveil the contradictions of lifelong learning policies in one Latin American and one European country. They find out similar constraints to the educational potential of these policies in very different contexts. The third paper illustrates how this debate can inspire interesting further research. Thus, Marcella Milana, Gosia Klatt and Luigi Tronca use the tools of network analysis to observe how the European Union navigates between the two sides of these unstable politics. Their findings suggest that the equilibrium (or the exacerbation of tensions) is likely to depend on the composition of the networks that influence policy design. The roles of employers, public employment services and educators are crucial. Moreover, the capacity of the networks to constitute themselves as a forum and connect the participants also affects the outcomes.

A second cluster of articles deals with regional policies. Xavier Rambla, Yuri Kazepov, Judith Jacovkis, Lukas Alexander, and Marcelo Parreira do Amaral attempt to make sense of the construction of social vulnerability in two regions. The young adults who benefit from the YGS and other lifelong learning policies engage in very different social relations in Girona (Spain) and Vienna (Austria). Although official discourses share an analogous commitment to employability, in Girona street-level professionals perceive vulnerability as a burden for social services, while in Vienna these professionals think that they can upgrade the skills of the labour force by tackling some deficits of these young adults. Mariana Rodrigues, Rita Queiroga, Ana Bela Ribeiro, Natália Alves, and Tiago Neves compare two regional policies within a single EU member state, Portugal. They find out that local stakeholders have built different networks of collaboration in Litoral Alentejano and Vale do Ave, but professionals have coincided to express biased assumptions on the standard life course. Mauro Palumbo and Valeria Pandolfini unveil contrasting policy orientations within another EU member state, Italy, where Milan has traditionally adopted a market-friendly approach while Genoa has relied on closer cooperation between the regional and local governments with the civil society as partners in the same initiatives.

Finally, the contributions on skills and employability spell out the underlying tension between humanism and economism in this area. Clearly, the theme does not impose a perspective that favours short-term fixes that may reduce unemployment. On the contrary, Oscar Valiente, Adrián Zancajo and Judith Jacovkis openly question the assumptions that have inspired technical vocational education and training (TVET) policy in Chile. Contrary to the assumptions of the hegemonic human

capital theory, market competition between private providers has not helped to educate and train more qualified and employable generations. On the contrary, it has stimulated private providers to deliver many vocational qualifications that are not relevant for the labour market. Nor have high expectations on market competition convinced employers to engage in dialogues with training institutions. The point is that not only employers have hardly participated but they have also adopted recruitment practices that severely narrow the opportunities of TVET graduates. Pepka Boyadjieva, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, Valentina Milenkova, and Rumiana Stoilova also challenge one-dimensional readings of market mechanisms in Bulgaria. In this country, the specialisation of higher education institutions defines the composition of the local labour force. Regional disparities are very visible between the capital and the provinces. In a similar (and critical) vein, Ellen Boeren, Alan Mackie and Sheila Riddell analyse the pedagogical dimension of the employment and skills policies that are in-built into the EU YGS. They notice that the beneficiaries are mostly satisfied with individual support. In addition, most professionals stand for a closer coordination between stakeholders and a greater participation of the youth in the implementation and the revision of the current programmes.

In conclusion, this special issue observes that politics, regional policies, and skills and employment, are the stepping-stones of lifelong learning. Politics is the arena where stakeholders meet, negotiate and experience conflict. A close look at the heterogeneity of policy actors who are interested in lifelong learning indicates very plausible reasons why they have disseminated contrasting perspectives. However, any account of politics must look at regional policies carefully. The very constitution of regions is diverse in many ways, for instance, global cities and constellations of middle towns configure very different contexts for lifelong learning policies. Regions also greatly differ within EU member states. Rather than simplistic conclusions on the prevalence of economics, the analysis of skills and employment unveils the same type of tensions in this policy area. On the one hand, markets intermingle with politics. On the other hand, both training and labour markets are deeply embedded in local realities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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