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Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe

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Vulnerability in European Lifelong Learning Policies 1992–2018: Seeing Young People as a Problem to Be Fixed?

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Introduction

The concept of vulnerability has become something of a new paradigm in understanding policy and the role of governments (Carney, 2018). In the Enliven project, we explored issues of vulnerability in the context of lifelong learning for adults, particularly young adults. Young people as a social category started to receive European-level policy attention only relatively recently: the European Commission's white paper on young people was published in 2001; the first EU Strategy for Youth was enacted in 2010 (European Commission, 2009). However, analysis of European lifelong learning policy discourse on vulnerability identifies young people

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as one of the main target groups (Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019). Using the lens of vulnerability, this chapter analyses the portrayal of young people in European lifelong learning policies between 1992 and 2018.

In the social construction of target groups, the recognition—and attribution to them—of certain characteristics, values and images contribute to how the groups are viewed by the public (Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Rossi, 2018; Levitas, 2004; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Williams, 2011). To contribute to this discussion, the current chapter focuses on changes over the years, looking in more detail at one specific, rather new, target group for European lifelong learning policies (young people), using vulnerability as the analytical framework. The chapter explores how vulnerable young people are portrayed—or, using social scientific language, *constructed*—in European lifelong learning policy documents. The main focus is on analysing the extent to which the *vulnerabilities* experienced by young people are seen as *individualised*, rather than in terms of their *structural context*. In the light of this, we report on, and discuss, the goals proposed in the documents for young people's lifelong learning.

Through a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of 68 European lifelong learning documents, we consider those documents as social practices (Fairclough, 1989) that express the political goals and values of the European Union. Over the period from 1992 to 2018, strategic and policy documents issued by various EU central institutions have shaped policy discussions within member states, between countries and within the European Commission. At the same time, they reflect the outcomes of those exchanges, as discussions of policy borrowing in adult education and lifelong learning point out (e.g. Saar et al., 2013). With the increased number of EU member countries, the goals and actions of lifelong learning policies changed. The documents can thus be seen as reflecting the outcomes of the negotiations over membership (for examples of how it shaped policy discussion during membership negotiations, see Saar et al., 2013). The significance of European-level policy discourses, in general, and lifelong learning policies, in particular, has in fact increased over the period, with the post-2008 recession supporting interest in lifelong learning as an instrument to address social exclusion and support vulnerable groups. It may be that a renewed emphasis on the social dimension of education and training, and recognition that adult learning is offered in a

variety of settings such as educational institutions, local communities and NGOs—and not concern about learning for personal civic, social and work development alone—imply a humanist agenda (Rubenson, 2018).

This chapter explores the conceptual pillars and underpinnings of lifelong learning policies that see *young* people as a vulnerable group. It proceeds by, first, providing an overview of our concept of vulnerability and the approach we have used in identifying young people as a lifelong learning target group, then explaining our methodological position and presenting the results of the corpus-based discourse analysis. It concludes with a critical discussion of the findings.

Analytical Framework

The term *vulnerability* represents a step forward in the landscape of conceptual frameworks, addressing social inclusion and exclusion, disadvantage, poverty and factors that influence inequality. It also provides a lens for analysing policies and has been seen as a potentially transformative idea for rethinking the role of governments (Carney, 2018). Previous research shows European policies' concern for vulnerable groups, and especially for the protection and promotion of human rights (Abrisketa et al., 2015; Kersh & Toiviainen, 2017); the notion of vulnerability has been increasingly applied by European courts to determine the legal status of vulnerable groups (Ippolito & Sánchez, 2015).

The concept of vulnerability refers to the potential for being harmed by certain social risks (e.g. unemployment, sickness, disability, age, ethnicity and citizenship) and the ability—or inability—to recover from the damage (Zimmerman, 2017). Portraying vulnerability in collective terms underlines the assumption that vulnerable groups need to be provided with special protection. Though viewing vulnerability as intrinsic to individuals can have inclusionary effects (because it suggests protection of vulnerable individuals is justified and necessary), critics see it as potentially leading to people being stigmatised and belittled (Ippolito & Sánchez, 2015). Building on Enliven's understanding of vulnerability (Holford et al., 2018), this chapter draws on a model of vulnerability through the life cycle (Fig. 3.1), which considers individual and

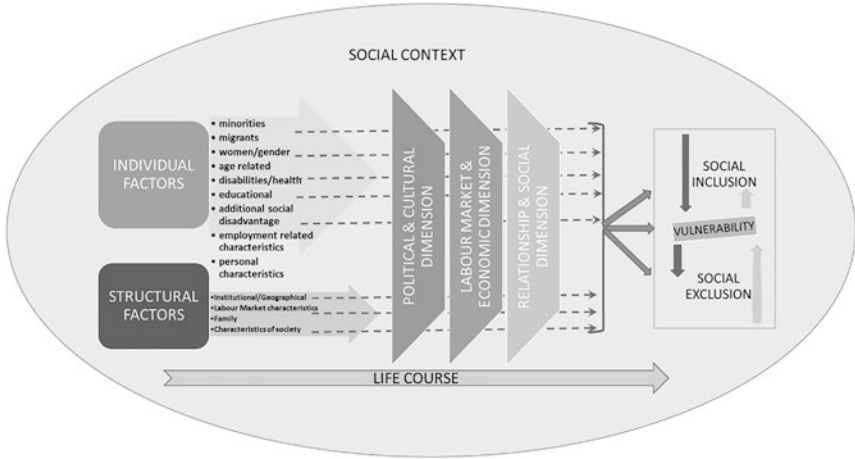


Fig. 3.1 A dynamic model of vulnerability (Source: Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019, p. 22)

structural factors to be interrelated in a dynamic system that affects the way individuals traverse different educational, social and political structures throughout their lives.

Poverty and social exclusion may be temporary situations rather than permanent, unchangeable conditions. During their lives, people face various stressors. Some are relatively stable, such as poverty and family conditions, others more transient, such as the events of daily life (e.g. a deadline at work) or particular moments and transitions in life (Oris et al., 2018). In facing such situations, people use available resources to cope. The traditional welfare systems developed to protect citizens are often poorly adapted to protect from risks of financial instability and the consequences of globalisation (Ranci, 2010). Family and social networks are important: to a large extent social inclusion occurs through them (Castel, 2014, 2016). Following Castel (2014), we identify three levels, or zones, for our analysis: social integration, social exclusion and vulnerability. The first presupposes successful connections in the world of work as well as outside (family, friends, voluntary organisations and other connections). Exclusion is the opposite situation where people lack employment and experience precarious or non-existent social ties. The zone of

vulnerability is typically distinguished by precarious work and fragile relational ties, as well as instability.

In a framework that considers vulnerability as a process (Castel, 2016), degrees of vulnerability are not inherent in specific groups. Instead, vulnerability varies across groups and individuals in accordance with their dynamics of social risk. Hence, this framework sees individuals as well as groups as placed in a continuous state of *exclusion-integration*—at some point in time, a particular individual may experience social exclusion, but at other point, the same person may enjoy full social integration. In the zone of vulnerability, various structural factors may interact and reinforce one another: employment, education, income and so on (Vandekinderen et al., 2018). Although being excluded on one dimension may increase the risk of exclusion along other dimensions, the relationship between the dimensions is not deterministic.

Young People as Lifelong Learning Target Group

Young people are often considered one of the groups most at risk of social exclusion and therefore most vulnerable. The main reason is that they are highly affected by ‘new social risks’, chiefly associated with the challenge of combining job stability with caring responsibilities, especially in the construction phase of the family (Zimmerman, 2017). They may, of course, also face additional risk factors such as disability, homelessness, or coming from an ethnic minority background, a care institution, or a disadvantaged area.

For today’s young people, the risk of exclusion has a different quality from other age groups and previous generations (Beck, 2006). Problems of job insecurity and difficulties in leaving the family home for higher education (less public funding, fewer scholarships, etc.) mark their transitions to adulthood and generate a climate of insecurity and uncertainty. Studies of the situation young people in Europe face identified certain groups, and those living in certain regions, as more vulnerable than others (European Commission, 2018). Young people born outside the country they live in, or who have parents born outside that country, have

significantly higher chances of being at risk of poverty or social exclusion than their native-born peers (Eurofound., 2015). Most poverty indicators also show that higher proportions of women are at risk. In the countries most affected by the economic crisis, particularly Greece and to a lesser extent Spain, young people's risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased considerably (European Commission, 2018). The weakened economic position of sectors where young people were formerly employed results in deterioration of their economic and social position and of their civic status (Benedicto, 2016).

Policy measures aiming to support the social inclusion of young people have been high on the EU social policy agenda over the past two decades, especially since the recession (2008–2009) (Eurofound., 2015). Two important EU policy mechanisms for social inclusion have been the Europe 2020 strategy (from 2010) and its predecessor, the Lisbon Strategy (from 2000). Both acknowledge the importance of social inclusion and set reducing social exclusion as a main method.

The Enliven approach called for a life course perspective (Holford et al., 2018). As mentioned above, many European young people experience a climate of insecurity and uncertainty about the future in their transitions to adulthood (Beck, 2006). Lifelong learning has been proposed as a means of overcoming this disadvantage. Despite good intentions, however, being recognised as vulnerable puts people at risk of being held personally responsible for their situation and of stigmatisation. Scholars in education (Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Rossi, 2018; Ecclestone, 2017) argue for a response to this discourse of vulnerability. In this chapter, we explore how young people are portrayed when, though economic developments are the main reason for their exclusion from the labour market and from centres of power in society, they are (or feel) left to their own devices.

Studying Policy Discourse: Methodology

This chapter examines the discursive construction of young people in European lifelong learning policies during the period 1992–2018. The year 1992 was chosen as a starting point because it was only with the

Treaty of Maastricht (1992) that education became a question of EU competence (Rasmussen, 2014). Lifelong learning is, of course, mentioned in the other fields of EU policy making; our focus here is on how lifelong learning policies have referred to young adults. In pursuit of this task, we use corpus-based *critical discourse analysis*. After a systematic review of previous research, we decided to focus upon a corpus of 68 documents¹ issued by EU institutions² and stakeholders working in the field of lifelong learning (see Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019). The corpus is divided into three periods (see also Tuparevska et al., 2020):

- 1992–1999: Entrance of lifelong learning as a theme in policy debate; seven documents were included in the text corpus from this period.
- 2000–2009: Strengthening the position of lifelong learning in the EU and member states' agendas—the start of the implementation of the *Open Method of Coordination* and adoption of European Quality Framework in 2008; 35 documents were included in the corpus from this period.
- 2010–2018: Further elaboration of tools supporting lifelong learning, developing policy measures, focusing on particular target groups; from this period, we included 26 documents.

Using critical discourse analysis implies understanding documents as social practices. We therefore assume a relationship between how vulnerable groups are constructed and the social reality that frames them (Fairclough, 1989). The analysis combines quantitative analysis with aspects of critical discourse analysis. This allows for an investigation of patterns of change over a significant period. The critical discourse analysis framework is based on the Enliven approach to vulnerability and previous studies of target groups and lifelong learning policies (Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Rossi, 2018; Levitas, 2004; and Williams, 2011). Two methodological strands of critical discourse analysis process are drawn on.

¹The following types of official documents were analysed: White Papers, Conclusions, Communications, Reports, Resolutions, Staff Working Papers, Work Programmes, Decisions, Joint Interim Reports, Joint Progress Reports, Key Messages, and Proposals.

²European Commission, Council of the European Union, Commission of the European Communities, European Parliament.

The first used computer software (Atlas-ti) to investigate patterns in the data. It included identifying the frequency of words in different periods as well as searching patterns of co-assignment of information: words that define groups and frequently co-occur (for the purpose of this chapter, with specific age-based target groups relating to young people). The second strand of analysis follows the method of co-occurrences, referring to when two or more words are used in a specific span. This method can provide the most frequent ideas associated with a word or phrase (e.g. *young people*), in that the co-occurrence indicates the stance adopted in their representation. In Enliven, the span was set at a paragraph for each word under investigation. The linkages were examined by hand in order to determine wider themes to elaborate the categories related to three wider vulnerability themes³ (individual factors, structural factors and education aims). The examination of co-occurrence also contributed to the diachronic characteristic of the study: co-occurrences were calculated for each period.

Associating Young People with Risk: Personal and Structural Factors at Play

Vulnerability: Personal or Structural Characteristic?

In a recent article from the Enliven project, Tuparevska et al. (2020) analysed the concept of *social exclusion* in EU lifelong learning policies (1992–2017), finding the concept to be defined narrowly in terms of specific groups at risk of being socially excluded and in terms of employability. They saw this as suggesting an individualisation of the problem of exclusion, which is abstracted from structural factors. This chapter—also based on lifelong learning policy documents—extends their analysis to the notion of *vulnerability*. It also shows that risk is individualised: young people's vulnerability is more likely to be associated with individual characteristics than structural factors (or the role of social structures in shaping vulnerabilities).

³ The codes and categories developed for the Enliven Intelligence Decision Support System (IDSS) were a source of contrast for the results found in the corpus.

Individual-Level Factors

Altogether, the category *young* appears 147 times in the Enliven corpus, and 19 different individual-level factors appear collocated with it. Divided these into four groups: those related to skills and education; those related to labour market attachment; those pointing to individual background factors that might imply special needs in the lifelong learning context; and those related to socio-demographic categories, such as age group or gender (see Fig. 3.2).

Over the three periods, the most prominent groups of factors are related to skills and education, including *low skilled*, *low qualified*, *early school leavers*, *with learning disabilities*, *feeling a failure and low self-esteem*, *lacking trust in the education system* and *digital skills*. Over time, such factors have a high degree of prominence, accounting for 38% of collocations of individual factors in the first period, 58% in the second and 40% in the third.

Background factors suggesting the need for a special needs approach in lifelong learning included *migration background*, *belonging to an ethnic minority*, *experiencing homelessness*, *coming from a lone-parent family* and

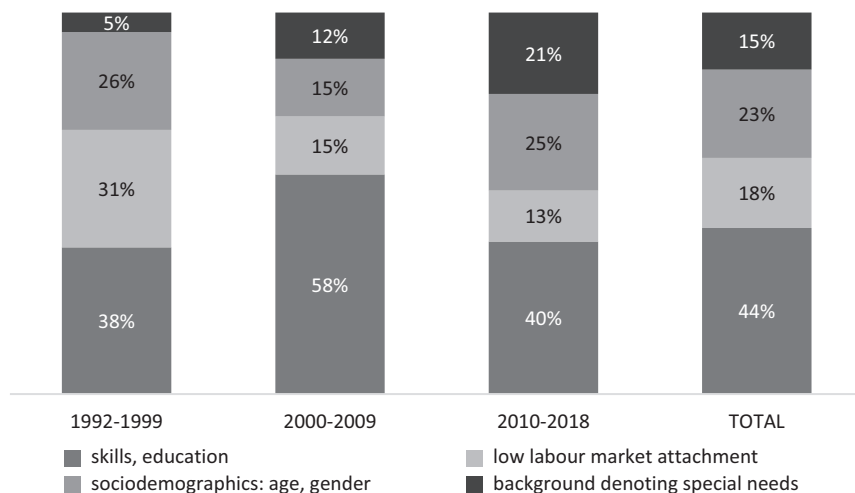


Fig. 3.2 Distribution of individual factor sub-dimensions (%) in the Enliven corpus (1992–2018) for young people

having a disability. Accompanying *young*, these factors were mentioned 22 times in the policy documents, or about 15% of all the occasions that individual-level factors occurred. Their relevance clearly increased over time: from just two mentions before 2000, to four in the years 2000–2009, to 16 in the period 2010–2018, or 21% of all the mentions in those years. Relatively (and in absolute values), more attention to educational level as a kind of precondition for young people to be targeted, alongside more attention to special needs, clearly positions lifelong learning as a growing feature of second chance education. As previous research shows (Abrisketa et al., 2015), the grounds implicitly connected to vulnerable groups seem to be socio-demographic categorisations of gender, age, and ethnic or migrant background.

At the same time, low engagement with the labour market has had sustained prominence in lifelong learning policies. Accounting for 18% of all occurrences, this category includes *unemployed*, *long-term unemployed* and *people re-entering the labour market*. Its relevance has changed over time, decreasing from 31% of mentions relating to individual-level characteristics with the *young* category before 2000, to just 15% in the second period and 13% in the third. However, in absolute terms mention of this category shifts from 12 to 5 and back to 10. The special attention paid to young people not well integrated into the labour market gave way to general themes of low skill and negative educational experiences during the years 2000–2009, and these aspects became more frequent during 2010–2018, probably owing to the recession. It seems that lifelong learning policy attention is returning to young people outside the labour market, seen as a special target group, whilst maintaining a focus on providing skills.

Socio-demographic factors (age, gender) together account for about a quarter of all the mentions of individual-level characteristics (34 altogether: 10, 5, and 19, respectively in each period). No clear pattern emerges, and it is possible this reflects the lifelong learning policy documents' life course perspective, in the context for instance of investing in lifelong learning for young people, or making up for lack of initial education.

In summary, regarding individual factors, we see that terms related to employability (*low skilled/qualified*), education (*early school leavers*) and

labour market (*unemployed*) are the most commonly used to characterise vulnerable young people. Although this can be considered protective, it risks stigmatising them and may also overlook how far vulnerability is anchored in socio-historical contexts (Oris et al., 2018).

Structural Factors

We now turn to structural factors. Socio-demographic categorisations, which usually label specific groups, are underpinned by the assumption that these groups need to be afforded special protections (Holford et al., 2018). In the text corpus, vulnerability appeared not only at the level of the individual but also at the societal level, enabling us to take a more socio-structural approach. This link between socio-economic factors and structural changes has significant implications for entry into the labour market. These factors affect young people's transition processes, making them less secure and smooth than when portrayed as a linear transition from school to work. Comments related to transitions are identified most frequently in the second period (2000–2010), which began with the adoption of the Lisbon strategy and saw the implementation of benchmarking and the *open method of coordination* in lifelong learning. Supporting these transition processes appears as a general objective in the documents analysed. Several documents mention structural factors that complicate transitions and point to lower socio-economic backgrounds, poverty and living in a disadvantaged area as factors weighing down on young people's lives.

Taking the types of structural factors associated with the category *young* together, we distinguished two kinds of structural-level factors: (a) those that refer to a disadvantaged background that may harm a young person's chances to access education or employment; and (b) those that refer to an emerging demand for new skills, which might mean everyone needs to upskill for the sake of a competitive economy. The first includes lower socio-economic background and poverty, disadvantaged areas or communities, lack of jobs locally and related high unemployment, and general levels of inequality. The second includes pressures from a learning society, the demands of technological markets, global competitive

societies and coping in urban settings. This second category does not presuppose that young people in vulnerable positions have especially disadvantaged backgrounds compared to other groups.

As we show below, the overall level of co-occurrences of structural factors with the category *young* was much lower than that of individual factors. Comparing the prevalence of the two types of structural factors, a growing need for new skills in the labour market is referred to much more seldom than disadvantaged backgrounds. Altogether, economic needs account for 36%, or 4 of the 11 total mentions in the first period, 17%, or just 2 of the 12 mentions in the period 2000–2009, and 25%, or 2, of the 8 mentions in the third period (Fig. 3.3). (With increasing numbers of EU policy documents in lifelong learning, this represents an average of 0.3 mentions per policy document in the third period.)

Giving attention to marginalised community contexts has merit in that it points to their special needs and could lead to more tailored provision of learning opportunities. However, seeing the origin of a person's vulnerability in their background also makes it more likely that these will be accepted as special circumstances. The findings show that background and family are frequently alluded to as hindering young people's participation in lifelong learning. For instance, *Efficiency and equity in European*

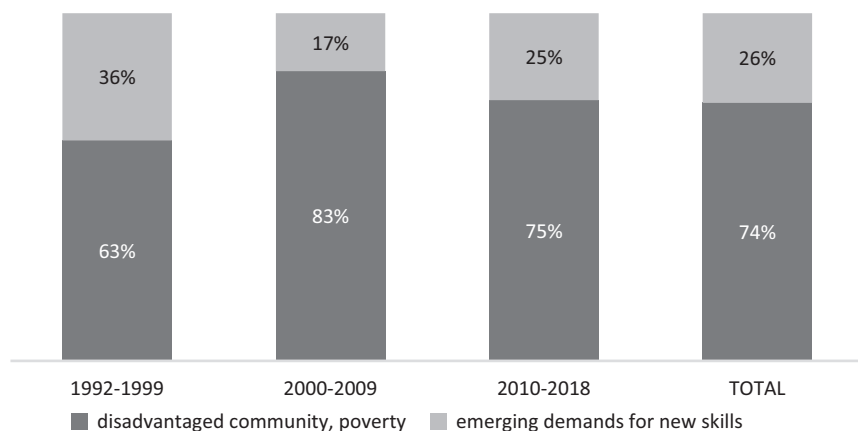


Fig. 3.3 Distribution of structural factor sub-dimensions (%) in the Enliven corpus (1992–2018) for young people

education and training systems (European Commission, 2006) emphasised the risk involved in not having learned to value study—something that Levitas (2004) regards as the construction of social exclusion as a low level of aspiration.

Considering that the changing economy and the need for new skills have been high on political and public agendas over recent years, it is perhaps surprising that they have had relatively low prominence in lifelong learning policies targeting vulnerable youth. Lifelong learning seems still to be regarded, for vulnerable people from disadvantaged backgrounds, chiefly in terms of second chance education. However, this fails to see that—if we focus on economic growth and innovation—lifelong learning may be part of the solution for young people, solving the problems of marginalised communities rather than reproducing their marginalisation.

This low attention to structural factors, and the high importance given to individual-level factors associated with vulnerability, seems likely to have consequences as to what kinds of lifelong learning opportunities are provided for young people and how these are delivered. We look at this more closely below, analysing the lifelong learning goals policy documents foresee the young having.

Educational Goals for Policies on Vulnerable Young People

In addition to showing how young people are portrayed in lifelong learning policies, exploring the discourse on young people considered vulnerable in greater depth helps us understand the objectives underlying the policies. To describe and analyse educational goals and how they changed, we grouped them into four sub-dimensions associated with the young:

- Goals related to basic skills, new competences, provision of training and employability;
- Goals related to social justice and reduction of inequality;
- Goals related to civic participation, democratic society and civic education; and

- Goals related to self-perceptions (motivations, self-esteem and awareness).

Our analysis shows that the most important and current discourse in European policies is economic competitiveness: notions such as basic skills, new competencies and employability. The dimension of social cohesion, inclusion and citizenship, including social justice and civic participation, is less important. Over the three periods, the relative number of co-occurrences has changed most in the category of civic participation, civic education and democratic society (see Fig. 3.4). Co-occurrences in this group dropped from 33% of all co-occurrences before 2000 to 7% in the period 2010–2018: a six-fold decrease. Co-occurrences about basic skills, new competences, provision of training and employability increased from 42% to 53%—also a notable change, giving it the highest overall share of co-occurrences, and pointing to its importance in European policy. This idea is reiterated in a number of documents, such as the European

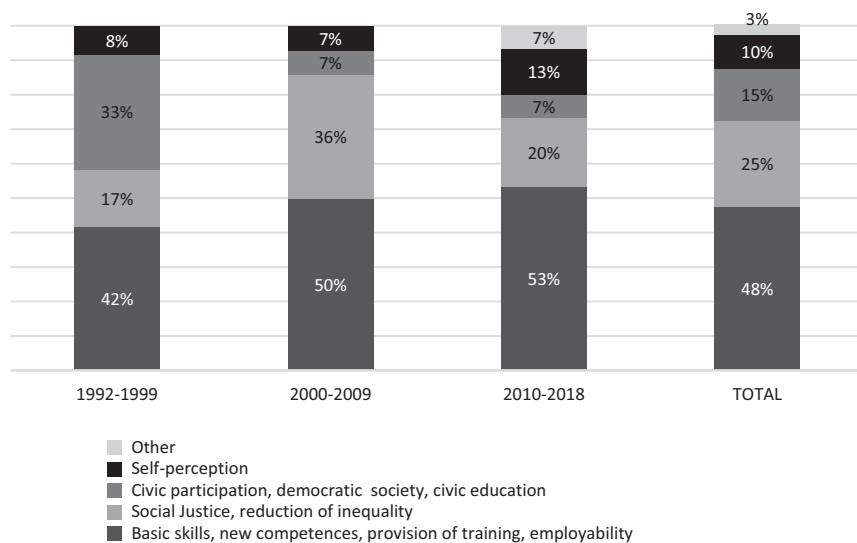


Fig. 3.4 Distribution of educational goals sub-dimensions (%) in the Enliven corpus (1992–2018) for young people

Council's (2016) 'Conclusions on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education'.

Co-occurrences about social justice—certain general objectives related to the type of society desired, and in particular social cohesion—having increased from 8% to 21% in the second period, remained at this level. Co-occurrences of self-perception (motivation, self-esteem and awareness: personal and attitudinal characteristics considered essential for individuals to overcome vulnerability and integrate into the labour market (Brunila, 2012; Levitas, 2006)) increased from 8% in the first period to 13% in the third.

Supporting the development of basic skills is one of the main methods mentioned for achieving employment and social inclusion—a finding still in line with Brine's (2006). The first documents in our corpus, such as the white paper on growth and competitiveness (European Commission, 1993), emphasised the need to improve skills related to new technologies in order to improve human capital and competitiveness. Over 20 years later, with new technologies ubiquitous, *New Skills Agenda for Europe* still recommended the development of 'basic digital skills, to access good jobs and participate fully in society' (European Commission, 2016, p. 4). These are perceived as essential for integration into the world of work and consequently essential not only for high-skilled jobs but, as Brine (2006) also points out, for all citizens, not least those considered more vulnerable.

Concerns about skills needed for work have been articulated in European youth strategies and policy interventions. The white paper *Towards a learning society* (European Commission, 1995) noted how feelings of personal failure can emerge among those leaving education without recognised skills. In the youth work sector, the eight key competences for lifelong learning are part of the conceptual frameworks for planning and assessing youth work activities, for participants, youth workers and trainers. A youth focus emerged in European Commission policies at much the same time as both mounting evidence that young people had been key losers in globalisation processes in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the growing popularity of the idea of social investment, which implies the need to pay more attention to young people as future citizens. Support for young people, particularly measures addressing the acquisition of competences for work, increased markedly.

Providing a suitable environment for acquiring competences relevant to citizenship and participation have more seldom been addressed. The current youth strategy uses the term *engage* as one of its three essential terms. The Erasmus+ programme supports the development of youth activism. The terminology relating to citizenship and participation in the European policy documents suggests that young people are seen as falling into two groups: those from disadvantaged groups and the rest. Providing citizenship experiences for vulnerable groups is mentioned, as is providing experience of volunteering for young people from urban settings. In the latter case, however, volunteering is seen not only as a form of social participation but as a mechanism for developing valuable employability skills.

In 2006, a European Parliament & European Council Recommendation defined key competences as ‘those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment’ (2006, L 394/13). It recommended providing all young people with the means to attain key competences necessary for adult life, proposing a holistic view of lifelong learning—especially for young people who need support in achieving their educational potential due to personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented results from an analysis of 68 documents related to lifelong learning policy issued by European Union institutions during 1992–2018, focusing on how lifelong learning addresses challenges of vulnerability among young people. Although there is no definition of vulnerability in the corpus, we have identified a number of factors related to the Enliven vulnerability model (Fig. 3.1). This contributes to discussion about lifelong learning in Europe, showing how young people, especially those in vulnerable positions, have mainly been constructed as a category that is, or should become, part of the economically active population—with the function of lifelong learning presented as equipping them with skills necessary for the labour market.

In the lifelong learning policy documents we reviewed, being young is less and less seen as a period of life during which civic maturation takes place. Williams (2011) refers to socially excluded people being portrayed (in UK policy) as ‘dependent’, as ‘needing help, through education, to “grow up” and attain full independence’ (p. 457). The patterns and examples found in our EU corpus are not dissimilar: vulnerable young people are seen as having more difficulties in maturing, due to their background or personal characteristics, making lifelong learning valuable as a support for their growth. We seem to see the unfolding, over time, of an underlying European official youth discourse focused on individual characteristics, in which structural factors are at a discount. This individualises the perceived vulnerabilities rather than seeking explanations (and solutions) in the social context. For vulnerable groups, lifelong learning risks becoming a requirement or imperative, rather than an opportunity for personal, civic, social and professional growth (cf Rizvi, 2007; Rubenson, 2018). So far as vulnerable youth are concerned, priority is given to transition into the labour market rather than to their personal and civic development: emancipatory dimensions of lifelong learning are disregarded.

Some additional comments are called for when describing the young and their vulnerable situations. Individual-level factors occurred much more often than structural-level factors: it is individual characteristics, rather than system-level faults, that are seen as unsuitable and needed to be fixed. The few mentions of structural issues across the lifelong learning policy documents were themselves more likely to point to the specifics of a given disadvantaged community or a person’s location in it, rather than to the need for innovations at the societal level.

At the level of public policy and administration, this may point to a role for sectoral policy. Youth is rather a new category in lifelong learning policy, compared with the non-traditional adult learner. Support for the development of individual qualities deemed necessary for effective participation in society is also important in integrated youth policy, where paying special attention to young people in disadvantaged situations—those living in remote areas, from poor socio-economic as well as socio-cultural backgrounds—is also one of the foci. In youth work, a range of non-formal learning methods has been adopted and adapted and are widely used. This can be seen as a special sphere for lifelong learning.

Youth policy could integrate these individual-level lifelong learning efforts within social institutions (see, e.g. Nico, 2018; Taru, 2018; Taru et al., 2020).

The need to consider contextual background factors fits well with our finding that low labour market engagement has become increasingly prominent when young people are presented as a target group for lifelong learning. Another important type of individual-level explanation for young people's vulnerability focuses on low level of skills and education: these were the most prominent individual-level characteristics in defining the young as the target group for lifelong learning. However, attention to special needs and diverse groups has also emerged over time. In this framework, lifelong learning should develop motivation and self-esteem to overcome previous experiences of school failure, encouraging young people to enrol again in education and learning.

This chapter has shown that human capital perspectives dominate European lifelong learning policies, and these underpin a limited view of vulnerability that misunderstands its causes and generates inappropriate policy objectives for socially excluded young people. Given that structural factors make achieving labour market access extremely difficult, there may be a logic to increasing the prominence of other educational objectives in lifelong learning—particularly those related to social justice and reducing inequalities. However, the objective of providing more and better work-related skills remains dominant: individuals' low skill levels are seen as the main cause of their disadvantage. In the context of pervasive and competitive global markets, gaining employment is of great importance, especially for young adults who lack work experience and people with low levels of educational attainment. But labour markets are complex, and the social and cultural dimensions of vulnerability require much deeper study.

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