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## *Learning Liminality: A Case of Continuing Education in Greece*<sup>1</sup>

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This article addresses the issue of liminality in the making, as manifested by traineeships in the Greek tourism sector. Drawing from ethnographic data collected between 2016 and 2017, we examine the experiences of young trainees in tourism-related enterprises in a national context of mild economic recovery. Our primary focus is on the impact of the selected training scheme as regards both the trainees' self-image and their perceptions of work, occupation and careers in the tourism sector, the so-called heavy industry of the Greek economy. Our findings suggest that instead of concluding with a meaningful and inspiring career path, the actors learn to live in an in-between and transient state for long periods of time as they prepare themselves for navigating a deregulated labour market. Through the lens of liminality, we aim at a more complex understanding of the unsettling and disruptive condition that pertains to the threshold position of our informants, of the transient spatio-temporal characteristics of Continuing Education itself, but also aspects of the transformations and transitions that shook up Greek society and economy during the last decade.

**Key words:** Liminality, Continuing Education, tourism, Greek crisis, skills.

### **Introduction**

At the time of this study (2016-2017) the Greek economy had started recovering from the far-reaching symptoms of the economic crisis, though the social implications of the unprecedented recession and the impact of the austerity-driven policy responses were still present. Unemployment rate was 23.5% (6 units below the 2013 pick, but still high) and considerably higher (47.28%) for those aged 18-29 (Statista 2020). A 34.8% of the total population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (ELSTAT 2017), while one out of five Greek citizens was experiencing some type of material deprivation (a double share in comparison with the 2009 respective data). The news from the labour market were reflecting a slow recovery in terms of new jobs, but deregulation, precarious conditions and low wages were still the key features of the 'post-recession' era, even in dynamic economic sectors like tourism (Papadopoulos and Lyddon 2020). Although Greece was by far the most discussed case of the Eurocrisis, the public and academic debates on the latter have suggested that the core manifestations of the Greek crisis and its formative mechanisms were interwoven with the architecture of the EU itself and the new implications of the neoliberal globalization particularly after the global crisis of 2008 (Currie and Teague 2017).

Many commentators of the Greek crisis have used the metaphor of the 'limbo state' in order to describe the transient and deeply uncertain status of the Greek economy, politics and society in 2012-2015. The referendum of July 2015 echoed this description in a painful manner: for more than a week Greece was in-between Eurozone, the Left was in-between a glorious break with austerity and a humiliating compromise, and those most hit from the crisis (unemployed, precarious workers, youth) were in-between hope (for a prospect policy change) and despair (due to a further deterioration of the labour market condition). Two years later Greece was falling short

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of the condition of a ‘limbo state’, but this was hardly the case for large segments of the Greek society, such as the young unemployed or the precarious workers.

Liminality was not an unknown situation for the authors of the present article either. The first author was working for three years as a full-time counselling expert in the field of Adult Education, conducting research and writing academic articles on his personal time. In his mid-thirties he was considering himself lucky enough to have a full-time job in crisis-ridden Greece, despite the feeling of being overqualified for the specific job tasks, which was also shared with many other peers. He had not reached the status of an academic scholar yet (and the prospects were rather gloom after six years of austerity), but he was struggling very hard to combine administrative workload, service provision and scientific work in the fields of sociology, political science and political anthropology.

The co-author of this study was a Lecturer in a university of a remote area of the UK, but he could not enjoy the benefits of the tenure yet, so he was experiencing a transient period as well. Our experience of being in a bordering condition was the main drive to study how this could be felt by individuals (CVET learners)<sup>2</sup> with less privileged background than ours. As a coordinator (and career professional) of numerous counselling projects in Continuing education, the author had access to various groups of unemployed people participating in upskilling or reskilling activities. The question then was which group would fit better to our main research question on how liminality was experienced and/or learnt in contexts heavily impacted from economic crisis, deregulation and fragmentation. We concluded that any training program designed for young unemployed could potentially constitute a space where liminality is embedded and experienced. Nonetheless some professions or sectors exhibit more ‘in-betweenness’ compared to others. The case of tourism is exemplar in this respect: global characteristics of the product structure in this sector such as seasonality, mobility of labour, dependency on national and international environment, precarious working conditions, and a big share of family-owned businesses leave enough room for undeterminedness, flexibility, ambiguity and flux (Underthun 2015), in short with things closely associated with liminality.

A second major question that we should address before entering the research field is an ethical one: could we as researchers set aside emotional and material investments and ties with the environment that we were intended to study? Or else, how acknowledging personal interests, motives, values and emotional ties would contribute to a reflexive understanding of the informants’ liminal experiences stemming from their interaction with organizations to whom we were formally or informally attached? In ethnography such questions are hardly new. Ethics is about balancing harms and benefits (Iphofen 2013). In our case we decided that the informants could only be benefited from sharing their story with us, while the stakeholder organizations could gain from our research outputs by adjusting future actions accordingly. This potential contribution to the organizations’ improvement outweighs the chances of harm

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<sup>2</sup> Often, Adult Education, Continuing Education (CVET) and VET, are used interchangeably, though there are differences between these terms. Our case study falls into the category of Continuing Education as part of an Active Labour Market Policy. For more details on the definitions of these terms, see Cedefop (2014).

regarding their reputation as service providers. Role conflicts have been avoided insofar as we had consulted with the ‘gatekeepers’ (managers of the two key institutions) beforehand. The Institute of the Greek Tourism Confederation (INSETE) and the Hellenic Management Association (EEDE) recognized our independence and we as researchers committed ourselves to the basic principles of beneficence and non-maleficence regarding the collection of material, analysis and dissemination of our research findings.

In line with other ethnographic studies that examine how people construct their choices under certain sets of restrictions (Pardo 2004) the design of the present case-study is linking our CVET material with the broader picture of a thriving economic sector within a context of mild economic recovery at the national and the EU level. Liminality is the thread connecting different scales and settings.

### **Liminal Spaces, Liminal Actors and Continuing Education**

Liminality in anthropology (van Gennep [1960] 2006, Turner 1977, Thomassen 2009) is defined as a transitionary state in which individuals, social groups and even entire societies slip through specified social orders or positions. In addition, the social identity of those experiencing liminality remains highly unattainable (and even unimaginable), something that results in uncertainty and ambivalence in terms of where he/she belongs when his/her previous and classified status in the social space has disappeared or temporarily suspended but a new status has yet to be assigned (Johnsen and Sørensen 2015). The extension of the term into the social sciences through the work of influential global thinkers such as Z. Bauman and S.N. Eisenstadt signalled the application of the concept in larger scales compared to the initial narrow focus either on ‘tribal’ societies, or on certain spheres of the modern society such as art and leisure (Thomassen 2009) and the attribution of both positive and negative contents (Szokolczai 2014). The latter is crucial because most recent accounts in organization studies overemphasize the unsettling components of liminal situations and downplay or ignore their creative, even liberating potential.

The conceptualization of liminality has led to a variety of uses in multiple empirical scales (Rantatalo and Lindberg 2018) and disciplines (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016) ranging from anthropology, sociology, political science and psychology, to management studies and education. As regards organization studies (Beech 2011) it has been proposed as a way of understanding structural positions (Garsten 1999, Tempest and Starkey 2004), occupations and work processes (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003, Zadoroznyj 2009), sites, events and spaces (Sturdy et al. 2006). The extensive usage of liminality both as a noun describing a threshold position or moment and as an adjective (liminal subject, or liminar) describing the identity (or identities) of the actors who occupy such positions is not unusual, nor always unproblematic (Thomassen 2009, Johnsen and Sørensen 2015, Ibarra and Obodaru 2016). Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus in organization studies that the net effect of this broad use of the concept is positive (Söderlund and Borg 2018). We would also support that many uncharted territories of the post-industrial world of work offer interesting cases of ‘betwixt and between’ positions and pertinent identifications characterized by multiplicity and ambiguity. Garsten, for

example, begins her study on temporary employees analysing their status within the organization but expands her scope so that it includes identity formation processes. As she suggests: ‘temps may be viewed as strangers in the workplace, temporally passing through and being socially undetermined’ (Garsten 1999: 607).

Reconstruction of identity (Beech 2011), identity work or identity growth (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016) constitute a promising field for examining how liminality works at different levels and layers of subjectivity and selfhood. Rantatalo and Lindberg’s work (2018) on liminal experiences in professional education points to a linkage of social spaces and enacting subjects through practice. Though their viewpoint on identity draws on a discipline that overemphasizes the individual’s volition to try out different versions of the self we find their approach on liminality particularly constructive inasmuch as it examines both the ‘who’, the ‘where’ and the ‘what’ of liminal practices. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) have convincingly argued that it is the under-institutionalized liminal experiences (such as unemployment) that are subjectively more challenging (the objective and the subjective liminal moments are mutually co-constituted) and more open to the possibility of an identity growth (interplay of exploration and commitment that leads to identity synthesis if successful).

Work-related liminal aspects have also been researched with a focus on experiences from the workplace. In his ethnographic study Spyridakis (2013) uses liminality to denote an increasing trend whereby workers find themselves in unspecified employment territories in which normal or established identities do not make sense. Winkler and Mahmood’s research (2015) on temporary agency work indicates how liminality is manifested in temporary workers (temps) who are neither employees of an agency nor full time employees of the host organization.

Whilst our study builds on both anthropological and organizational accounts of liminality, we acknowledge that there are key differences between them. For instance, the organizational usage seems lacking the rituals and complete phases of Turner’s conceptualization (Beech 2011: 15) and some other things as well (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016). On the other hand, this lack of completion opens up the room for new research questions regarding the worrying possibility of a permanent state of liminality (Nissim and De Vries 2014). At a more abstract level Szakolczai argues (2014) that liminality does not have to be restricted to a temporary crisis, followed by a return to normality, but can be perpetuated endlessly. In fact, it is precisely the collapse of the taken for granted expectation of a new and stable order that renders liminality a distinct feature of late modernity. This inherent lack of certainty that what is liminal will be followed by something less transient, is more than a contradiction to the initial meaning attributed to the rites of passage; it is rather the price that is paid when societies adopt a more reflexive attitude both towards the world as it is (absurd and entrapped in permanent liminality), the genealogy of this entrapment and the possible way-outs. This is not to ameliorate the anxieties and the anguish of those (countries, social groups, or individuals) experiencing liminality as an everlasting condition. On the contrary, sociological, and anthropological research has the capacity to illuminate the implications of liminal situations, conferring tools for self-awareness. By exposing and analysing experiences of liminality social research could

contribute to a critical reconsideration of the ideology of ‘happy flexibility’ (Procoli 2004a), or what has McRobbie (2016) termed ‘creative dispositif’ in gig economies, which in turn could be a good starting point for the reflection of those experiencing liminality (trainees in our case), or facilitating liminality (career advisors, trainers, mentors, and youth workers particularly in reskilling programs).

Having said that, let us now turn to the liminal settings and subjects of this study. As it becomes apparent through the literature review in organizational scholarship and beyond, liminality can equally be traced in organizational settings, social spaces and/or experiences of individuals or groups of people. In this vein, Continuing Education and Training (CVET) could be seen as a transitory space insofar as its mission is to offer viable pathways from an undesired state (be it unemployment, or a less desired job) to a desired one (employment, or a more desired job). By definition CVET implies something permanent and perhaps recurring. Through practical and theoretical learning (both in classroom and the workplace) it caters for required skills that in future will probably be obsolete and substituted by other skills. It is also considered a cornerstone of the European Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP) and a pillar of the Youth Employment Initiative.

Previous literature developments on traineeships in Europe, the US and elsewhere have shown that trainees are both employees and students and this ambiguity generates identities that fall outside of the status either of insecure employment or the precariat (Frenette 2013: 366). According to analyses that focus on the regulatory framework and the concomitant active labour market initiatives (Appay 2010, Greer 2016), specific aspects of what is described here as liminal, constitute active processes through which precarity is implemented and institutionalized. In Greece as well as in other crisis-ridden EU countries, the voucher system of vocational training has been adopted as a key policy instrument against youth unemployment through a better alignment of skills supply and demand.

Contrary to the positive connotations of the ‘transformational’ aspects of short learning cycles that are usually advertised by EU and national governmental bodies and stakeholders, we found that short-term learning of ill-defined and constantly transforming tasks in work environments characterized by fragmentation and deregulation leads to eroded ‘identity awareness’, a weakening of the sense of ‘who I am and which is my call’. In addition, by learning being liminal the CVET trainees adjust their expectations for a meaningful career pathway accordingly. What matters is the ‘here and now’ in whichever job position this could appear. The following secondary data from three training programs implemented in Greece during 2012-2017 are indicative.

The Institute of Labour of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (INE GSEE) has conducted an evaluation study of three CVET Actions implemented under the auspices of the Youth Employment Initiative in Greece, within the period 2014-2017. One of those Actions concerned the training scheme examined here, while the other two Actions focused on other sectors of the economy. The three Actions shared more or less common characteristics in what regards: the structure of the learning processes, the target groups, and the financial and administrative aspects. Therefore, their outcomes are of great importance for understanding

how CVET actually worked at the time of our research. Table 1 summarizes the status of the 26.395 beneficiaries of the Actions one month after the completion of the programmes.

Status of beneficiaries after the program's end	N	Valid percent
Received a job offer	4110	15.6
Accepted a job offer	3385	12.8
Self-employed	793	3.0
Received a new training/ apprenticeship offer	3342	12.7
No offer received	14765	55.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,395</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1: The status of the beneficiaries of the three YEI Actions. Source: INE GSEE (2016).

The great majority of the trainees (more than 7 out of 10) return directly to unemployment either having received or mostly without having received a job or training offer.<sup>3</sup> But even among those young trainees that accepted a job offer, only 1 out of 3 enjoyed full time employment with an indefinite job contract. The mean monthly salary for those accepted a job contract was only 444.8 Euros (in 2017 the national mean salary amounted to 1,148 Euros for full time employment and 383 Euros for part time employment). As it is made apparent from the abovementioned cases, the completion of a CVET program can hardly be considered as the beginning of a viable and promising career trajectory. On the contrary for most young unemployed the transitional experience of CVET prepared their return to the previous status of unemployment without granting expectations for a prospect 'restart'. As it is reaffirmed from many of the informants of our study, training in these circumstances was primarily about how to cope with (and perhaps accept) liminality and its exigencies. The next section discusses the methodological premises of this study and the selection of tourism as a field (both as a learning site and an economic sector).

## Methods

Our discussion draws on empirical material collected during and after the implementation of the training program titled 'Voucher scheme for a first work experience for labour market entry

<sup>3</sup> The data regarding the situation of the beneficiaries 6 months after the program's end are similar: a 76.5% were unemployed and 23.5% were in employment, education or training (INE GSEE 2016).

of those aged up to 29 in the tourism sector’ (part of YEI actions, funded by ESF Actions Implementation Authority). The 8,000 participants, or the ‘beneficiaries’ to coin a CVET’s term (young unemployed aged 18-29, mainly graduates of secondary and post-secondary education) experienced the following liminal condition: separated from a previous social position (unemployment and/or inactivity) they were subject to an ambiguous state of trial and uncertainty, which was supposed to precede a subsequent return to a new normality (that is, a fresh job seeking activity, a new training opportunity, or, more seldom, a new job). The participants were offered (1) 80 hours theoretical training; (2) a work experience placement in a company (loosely defined as tourism-related) of a total duration of up to 420 hours, (3) certification exam in any one of the offered thematic fields. Table 2 shows the socio-demographic composition of the target population.

<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Gender composition</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>
Secondary/post-secondary education (83.7%)	Male (34.6%)	Greek (96.3%)	18-29 (100%)
Higher Education (17.3%)	Female (65.4%)	Other (3.7%)	

Table 2. Socio-demographic composition of the target population. Source: Own calculations based upon archival material of the implementing bodies (INSETTE and EEDE).

Before collecting and analysing the participants’ accounts, we processed administrative material, legal documents, in addition to evaluation surveys and other material from secondary sources. According to the program’s documentation, its core objective was to help participants achieve a structured path towards labour market entry through their positioning in companies that offer on-the-job training in tourism-related activities (INSETTE 2016). Interestingly the buzzword of ‘structured path’ appears in many YEI (Youth Employment Initiative) actions of the programming period 2014-2020, denoting an expected transition from an unstructured condition (unemployment, random job searching, deskilling) to a structured one. Even if the placement would not lead to a job offer, it would equip the ‘beneficiary’ with a better skillset, a more realistic roadmap to employment and thus a less vulnerable position. But was it actually the case?

To illuminate the program’s objectives, we conducted an interview with the project manager (PM). Three more interviews with professionals who provided guidance services to trainees followed. The PM helped us entering the classrooms and asking for volunteers for a group interview. We selected to start our research from the metropolitan area of Piraeus in one of the most organized CVET providers in Attica. The PM’s introduction in the classroom facilitated the recruitment of 7 informants. Because participants were members of the same seminar, they felt comfortable with one another and engaged in discussions that revealed different perspectives, expectations, and criteria of evaluation, shaped by gender and also educational (vis-à-vis socio-economic) backgrounds.

Reflecting on this first body of information we concluded with the interview instrument and the subsequent design; we conducted 23 semi-structured face-to-face interviews (ranging from 20 minutes to 1 hour) with trainees selected from three different thematic fields (convenient sampling). The interviews have been carried out at the end of the traineeship between June 2016 and March 2017, they were audio-recorded, pseudonymized and transcribed verbatim. As mentioned above the selection of the specific YEI training scheme took into account that tourism was the most dynamic sector of the Greek economy and was much less affected by the crisis in comparison with other sectors. Therefore, we could have a better grasp of how liminality works in a post-crisis situation that starts resembling normalcy. Tourism in Greece shares certain core elements that have been identified in the tourism industry across the globe. Mobility of labour, flexibility in work arrangements, high displacement rates are global trends in hospitality industry (Unterthun 2015). The Greek tourism sector shares many of these labour characteristics as well (Papadopoulos and Lyddon 2020).

To sum up, labour market structure in tourism differs from the rest of the economy. Low-skilled labourers, seasonal employment, low-paying and labour-intensive jobs prevail, and youth, women and migrants are the most vulnerable segments. However, the issue of *liminality in the making* for individuals who experience their first entry into this sector remains paramount for a better understanding of the scattered work trajectories perpetuated through short-term learning cycles. The next section reflects on the initial experiences of liminality at the very beginning of the selected CVET programme.

### **Learning to Be Liminal**

According to many interviewees their difficulty in finding a job was the primary reason for their participation in the training program. Interestingly, the subject area was somehow outside the trainees' prioritization. NI (trainee) had a post-secondary diploma in the ICT field and was previously working in various low-skilled jobs. She made her point explicitly: 'I was trying to find a job without any success. At some point, I saw this program advertised, and I pursued it because I needed the money'. The link between the sense of 'getting locked-in' due to the lack of jobs and the 'choice' of these unemployed to participate in a training program is rather clear and salient.

Many participants expressed professional aspirations and plans, supporting the view that the traineeships were transitory stages to a new position, less uncertain and less vague. The fact that this was much less articulated in later stages of the program's life span was clearly linked to the experiences gained at the learning sites. Therefore, the short-termism and instrumentalism that trainees adopted should be explored under the prism of the dialectics between individual predispositions and the vocational culture emanating from the specific field.

For example, we observed that many trainees were reluctant to select a traineeship in large chain hotels, because of the long working hours and the poor working conditions that prevail in such places, and thus they preferred other options (such as, traineeships in small businesses loosely associated with tourism). This early expressed ambivalence was reinforced by the manipulative practices of many training providers that were channelling the beneficiaries

to the thematic fields that the provider preferred. In this vein, a counselling professional stated as follows:

‘I saw people with very different backgrounds and interests. They took part because the training providers had told them to choose the specific specialty that the provider recommended.’

Nevertheless, the primary source of trainees’ frustration was found to be on the employers’ side. Employer practices that involved the usage of trainees in a short-sighted manner appeared to be the key reason why on-the-job training was either limited or incomprehensive and why multi-tasking performance and extremely low discretion was the norm.<sup>4</sup> For example, we asked KT (trainee) to discuss the contribution of the program to the formation of her career path in tourism and she replied:

‘The conditions in my last placement were really exploitative. I had to do everything, including mopping the floor. If it were different, I would consider this career for sure but not now.’

In addition to this example, the substitution effect of those programs was also reported. The legal parameters of the program that were introduced to protect the existing workforce could be circumvented and they actually were, for instance in those cases where trainees were former (or periodic) employees of the host company:

‘I asked my former employer if he could hire me and he said no. Then I found the program and asked him again and he finally employed me through the program but just for two months.’ (Interview with NP)

These initial experiences left their own traits on the self-image of the actors. Liminality in general does not necessarily lead to disengagement, or cynicism, for in-betweenness can generate a variety of reactions ranging from strong motivation to attain a new identity to frustration for having totally lost the sense of belonging and the hope to retrieve it; from omnipotence (I can do whatever I chose) to powerlessness (I can do nothing). As in every intersubjective situation, agency (trainee’s actions), structure (CVET, labour market) and whatever could be seen as mediating them (class, gender, or ethnic identities, values, beliefs, or ideologies) are also at play here. For instance, according to the counselling professionals most of the participants had not acquired yet a proper level of transversal skills and this should not be overlooked. The project manager also emphasized the fact that most of the trainees lacked those skills and attitudes that would maximize the benefit they could receive from the program. However accurate these assessments might be, the participants’ side indicates a more complex situation.

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<sup>4</sup> This is also in line with the INE GSEE’s findings (INE GSEE 2016). To be fair, the study shows that the YEI schemes had strong points as well as weaknesses and that the participants’ overall assessment was positive. But again, we should not lose sight of the fact that the expectations of the respondents were substantially low.

Reflecting on her own experience with instances of cynical behaviours from the ‘beneficiaries’ side, a counselling professional put it this way:

‘From the beginning of the program, trainees face a very disorganized and uninspiring atmosphere without clear pathways at hand. That explains why they do not care that much and they are not that serious about it.’

Instrumentalism, constant adjustability and short-termism can be seen as conditions that both structure and are structured by the field. In such conditions, scepticism and even cynicism allow the liminal subjects to make sense of their uncertain, volatile, and transient environment.

The irrelevance of the practical training or/and the employers’ indifference was stressed by most of the interviewees. We reported lots of placements in telecommunication companies, retirement homes, call centres and other business activities only loosely connected to tourism and this despite the efforts made by the program’s facilitating body (INSETTE) to attract big hotels as host companies. The limited involvement of enterprises that are active in core tourism activities was a major issue that had to do with two interrelated facts: First, the hesitation of the trainees to select workplaces such as hotels and restaurants, known for the harsh working conditions, particularly in high season. Second the reluctance of the biggest employers of the sector towards CVET traineeships (in contrast with Initial VET, a favourite pool of interns for hotel chains). The contradicting needs of the employers for specialized and at the same time multi-tasking, adaptive and easily re-skilled workers is also reflected here. Conversely the demand for and supply of traineeships in small enterprises of service economy was exceptionally higher as both the trainees and the employers committed themselves towards a flexible perception of job tasks and skills needed.

Even those trainees who were working in small hotels or tourist agencies, hardly considered their daily tasks as meaningful steps towards upskilling. PG had been trained as an electrician during his post-secondary education. He was placed as a receptionist in a small hotel near where he lives, but ultimately, he admitted that the five months spent there had not improved his skill set:

Interviewer: Would you say that you had certain responsibilities there?

Respondent: No, not at all.

Interviewer: Did you learn something new?

Respondent: No, I wouldn’t say so. They didn’t show me anything new, they didn’t care much actually.

When PG was asked what would be the ideal job for him, he (unsurprisingly) echoed many of his peers: ‘I don’t have any preference. Whatever works’. The contingent character of both the selection of the thematic field (theoretical training) and the job matching practice was evident in other cases too.

GK obtained a qualification in nursing (post-secondary education). She explained that her desire for a placement in tourism had not been fulfilled because the intermediary intervened

and ‘imposed’ an irrelevant placement. When we asked GK about her overall experience within it, she expressed her disappointment for the training and her prospects in the labour market:

‘This is not what I would like to do. On top of that, the training is inadequate and the work environment was very stressful and unpleasant. I see no future here (*she means in her placement*) particularly because many permanent employees have left since I came in.’

In line with previous research on liminality (Beech 2011) these quotes exemplify the emergence of a reflexive awareness of substitutability exhibited by most trainees in the final stages of the program.

TP was a graduate of secondary education. His frustrating experience with the program was expressed boldly as such:

‘I learned nothing. In fact, I had to work my way through by myself since there was no direction. This company is using the program to employ a new trainee every six months and has no intention to hire anyone permanently.’

A similar experience was reported by NP when asked to reflect on his experience:

‘I was not hired after finishing my traineeship [...]. The companies are not looking for super-talented people that they can invest in and eventually hire. They seek only for people who will work for free [through the training scheme] so that they can get rid of them without ever offering any meaningful training.’

Commenting the incomprehensive on-the-job training and the uninspiring workplace environment, a counselling professional told us:

‘Some companies broke the deal so to speak and did very different things with the participants than what they agreed to do in the beginning. That led many people to disappointment since they couldn’t learn anything relevant.’

Nevertheless, the lack of direct links between theoretical training and traineeships should also be attributed to the structure of the needs in skills in the labour market. In the evaluation study conducted by INE GSEE, the interviewees (representatives of VET centres) justified the focus on horizontal skills at the expense of job-specific skills on the grounds of the increasing demand for a flexible workforce that is capable of performing multiple tasks (INE GSEE 2016: 115). The importance of developing multi-tasking employees who are prepared to perform the many different tasks that might arise within a sector with fluctuating sets of demands was also evident in our data, as the following quote by BK (trainee) indicates:

‘I was employed in a hotel’s playground because I like kids. I didn’t expect to do other things, but I ended up actually doing everything. I even sewed some uniforms for the kids. I have no problem with that but that’s not what I was supposed to do.’

TC was a graduate of secondary education who was trained in a chain hotel as a waitress. She narrated her own experience and unfulfilled career expectations as follows:

‘I was working there like a normal employee doing many different things. At the end of the traineeship, I was not hired. But from what I saw in this hotel, I realized that businesses are exploiting the free labour that the program provides quite a bit. Most of my colleagues in the hotel were trainees either through the specific scheme or through other similar vocational programs.’

The participation in successive CVET programs blurs the participants’ motives and renders them unable to envisage a structured and meaningful occupational trajectory or adopt a professional identity that could be attained through the acquired work experience:

‘I feel very insecure. I was sort of promised to be employed by that company on a permanent basis, but that (promise) has happened again in the past during a previous traineeship, and in the end, I did not get any job. I also saw people leaving since I arrived at the company. I don’t think they will keep me.’ (Interview with SM)

The participant’s self-concept as vulnerable and insecure was extended over time insofar as having completed successive traineeships the post-liminal condition was starting to fade away. As was indicated by many other informants, the trainees felt that a proper job would be the passport to an adult life in which critical steps such as moving out of the parents’ house might be achieved.<sup>5</sup> The following quotes highlight the frustration generated from occupying this transient position between the ‘family nest’ and adulthood:

‘I get very stressed when I think about the future, since the program will end in two months and then I might not find anything to do.’ (Interview with GZ)

‘I am 27 and I want to move on with my life, but I can’t without a job. I feel like I am 15 years old since my family takes (financial) care of me and (because of that) I can’t really see myself as an adult.’ (Interview with SP)

## **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

In Greece as well as in the rest of the EU, it has been widely acknowledged that economic crisis took much heavier toll on youth. In the light of what happened after the Eurocrisis few would deny that the effect of youth long-term unemployment is actually scarring as it is tightly associated with reduced life satisfaction, decreased optimism and increased possibility of being socially excluded (Eurofound 2017). The current Covid-19 crisis rekindles fears and anxieties about the position of youth in the labour market: according to the International Labor Organization’s analysis on the impact of the pandemics, the second most vulnerable group (just after those with underlying health conditions and older people) consists of ‘young persons, already facing higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, (who) are more vulnerable to falling labour demand, as witnessed during the global financial crisis’ (ILO 2020).

The responses though to the threatening scenario of a rising youth unemployment are to some extent different than ten years ago. Active fiscal policy, employment retention measures,

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<sup>5</sup> Other ethnographic studies on Greek unemployment have also shown the multiple implications of living with the parents as a kind of necessity (Kafe 2016).

expansion of social protection were simply out of the austerity-led agenda which prevailed both at the EU and the national level since 2008. This is not to suggest that the world of work in Europe or elsewhere has kept the danger of deregulation at bay. A combination of counter cyclical policies with accommodation of deregulatory arrangements in the labour market (such as suspension of collective agreements, or individualized work patterns with the use of ICT technologies) should be anticipated. In that respect active labour market policies and CVET will once again be promoted as a remedy against precarity. But what does the previous experience of CVET in crisis or post-crisis contexts taught us?

Other studies (Gialis et al. 2015, Grady 2017) have critically shown that in many cases active labour market policies that are introduced to combat unemployment through a better alignment between supply of, and demand for skills, contribute to – rather than work against – precarity. And yet, precarity in terms of employment status, job contract, position at the organization, or work conditions, is the most visible aspect of the experience of many new entries. There is also another landscape made of uncertainty, ambivalence and fluidity that concerns those young unemployed who initially perceived CVET as a transient condition in the pursuit of a permanent job and a meaning-making career. At the end of the day, for many of them what becomes permanent is their sense of being liminal. In the case of the training scheme analysed here, both the sense of being liminal and liminality as a structural position, are accentuated through the fostering of short-termism, lack of vision and instrumentalism: the ‘beneficiary’ seeks ‘whatever works in general’, the VET provider has pre-determined which skills and placements will be on offer, the host employer accommodates cheap labour giving nothing in return. Identifying such patterns in a field that involves an industry highly resilient to the economic crisis could be suggestive of the dynamics for the entire economy, even in a post-crisis context (or in the context of a new crisis).

As has been argued elsewhere, there is a strong element of deception that lurks in the policy rhetoric of deficit that frames the ‘non-academic’ young unemployed as low achievers with low expectations while it claims to offer them VET opportunities that lead to decent jobs through lifelong learning (Atkins 2010). The same rhetoric is observed in the Greek case of ALMPs of the period 2010-2020: it shifted the blame to those lacking the right skills; it promised them opportunities for lifelong improvement that would lead to better life chances; it delivered policy instruments that cater for lifelong, continuing and perhaps permanent drift at the lower end of wage distribution. Deliberately or not, most vocational training activities detached from the ‘real world’ of the workplace as they are, can hardly contribute to strong occupational identities, not to mention labour rights. This in turn could be associated with the absence of work ethic and commitment, namely with the absence of things that usually characterize strong work identities (Spyridakis 2012).

The claim voiced by many informants of this study that ‘I would do anything’ or ‘I would search for any job’ reflects lowered expectations at the entry level, but also demonstrates a specific vocational culture devoid of demands and aspirations for decent jobs, at least for the foreseeable future. This is the trap of liminality in the making, as discussed above. Without underestimating the significance of agency and other related factors, our ethnographic research

indicates that what happened from the moment that the trainees entered the field was mainly channelling them into a future of alternating low-paid, low-skill work and spells of unemployment, the so-called ‘revolving door’ cycle (Spyridakis 2012). Evaluation studies on CVET programs that have been implemented as part of YEI showed that the ‘revolving door’ was by far the most observed outcome almost one year after the program’s end. We can now imagine how the official institutional narrative of deficit adopted by the Ministry of Labour along with the disparaging practices of the host employers, can lead a young unemployed with a working-class background (not to mention youth living in rural and remote areas) to affirm that he/she is not good enough for something better than the ‘revolving door’.<sup>6</sup>

The experiences of the selected group of CVET trainees in tourism offered us a chance to examine liminality in the intersection of its different dimensions. At the individual and the group level we reconstructed the insecure and transient aspects of being in-between unemployment and labour market, between the promise of a meaningful, solid, and secure career path and the preparation for being constantly adjustable, mobile and flexible. For a period of five months the young unemployed found themselves in the threshold space of CVET: a space where the learners are encouraged to be separated from their previous condition (be it unemployment, or a less desired job) through the acquisition of skills that most probably will be obsolete after some years when the need for a new training will recur. Tourism industry has also been seen as an arena of individual and group liminality where migration/mobility of labour, high displacement rates, and flexibilisation of work are widely shared (Underthun 2015). In the case of the specific training scheme examined here, the individual and group acts of transition took place in a broader context of changing institutional and political arrangements as a result of the deep-seated Greek crisis.

Societal changes should also be considered here as an additional dimension of liminality, particularly as regards its transformational connotations. For instance, the fact that tourism proved to be resilient in terms of job growth made the terrain of the discourses on deindustrialization more contested than ever: those adhered to the old slogan ‘we won’t be the Europe’s waiters’ read the country’s tourist development as another lost opportunity for directing national efforts towards reindustrialization and a knowledge-driven economy, while others see tourism as the vehicle to prosperity (Papachelas 2020). Both views assume that Greek economy and society are in a new transitory state, which subsumes the previous one.

To conclude, liminality reflects a more complex sense of ambivalence than that implied by other neighbouring semantic fields, such as precarity, or precariousness. Most importantly it enables a better understanding of those emplaced subjectivities that face a potential entrapment in permanent or at least chronic liminal conditions. And although liminality can encourage creativity and innovation (inasmuch as anxiety and powerlessness), the vision of a permanent state of uncertainty and ‘in-betweenness’ leaves room mainly for unsettling feelings and frustration (Bamber et al. 2017). In this respect learning to be liminal through CVET could be translated into coping strategies for bearing and digesting the feeling of being *neither-X-nor-*

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<sup>6</sup> According to another evaluation study on similar training schemes in Greece, the ‘beneficiaries’ considered themselves ‘invisible employees’, which is also telling (Karantinos et al. 2014).

*Y* or of being *both-X-and-Y*, which also manifests radical dislocation. The disrupted sense of self and place displayed by trainees when narrating their uncertainties is rather indicative of the unsettling identity changes reported in other studies of professional training as well (Procoli 2004b).

Our analysis highlighted the significant gap between the optimism expressed in the beginning of the program and the disappointment found in later stages which in turn showcases how the informants' experiences from the field shaped and re-shaped their expectations. By making liminality a new normality these programs prepare young people to be constantly adjustable in precarious and ever-changing contexts. Therefore, the formative experience of such training programs gives birth to new rules and structures which extend liminality over time and challenge the temporary nature assumed by previous accounts.

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