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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Training in the age of liberalization and crisis: Understanding the learning experiences of young Active Labour Market Programme Participants

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Abstract

Vocational Training has been a prominent aspect of Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) across EU member states, as part of efforts to boost the employability and human capital of young unemployed people and address new social risks arising within knowledge economies. However, young people's learning experiences of these programmes, and how these shape their early formative experiences in the labour market is underexplored. We address this gap by presenting new analysis of an extensive qualitative dataset, involving interviews with participants in Greece's Continuous Vocational Training (CVET) Program. Drawing on Unwin and Fuller's influential theory of restrictive and expansive learning environments which was developed through examination of formal apprenticeship programmes, we explore the extent to which these short-term vocational training programs provide meaningful learning and work experiences for young people. We show that vocational training facilitated through ALMPs is often experienced as restrictive, underpinned by a lack of meaningful training, occupation-specific skills, supportive guidance and quality employment prospects. Furthermore, we show how ALMPs in such contexts not only fail to support young people, but they also reinforce and legitimize precarious work practices by socializing the

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younger generation of workers into low-pay, temporary and routine jobs.

KEYWORDS

activation, learning environments, subsidies, vocational training, young people

1 | INTRODUCTION

The EU and member states have long designed and implemented Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) with the aim of improving young people's skills and increasing chances of labour market entry (Bonoli, 2010; Hall, 2020). Activation plays a prominent role in these policies with emphasis increasingly shifting from traditional welfare provision (unemployment benefits) to placing unemployed people into some sort of work or training activity (Deeming & Smyth, 2015; Rønsen & Skarðhamar, 2009). ALMPs may include the following work and training measures: (a) labour market training, (b) job match assistance, (c) wage subsidies and (d) public work programs.

Labour market training programmes aim to boost the employability and human capital of unemployed people to help them move into regular employment through skills enhancement alongside work experience. Upskilling has become a key tool for addressing social policy issues (in response to new risks arising from the knowledge economy), especially for young people who are likely to face labour market exclusion due to limited skills (Bonoli, 2013; Papakitsos et al., 2020). However, in-depth insights into how young people experience these programmes are lacking, as the evidence base is dominated by quantitative policy evaluations. A lack of theorization also inhibits a fuller understanding of how young people experience such programs and the ways in which they shape future labour market experiences and tackle social risks like exclusion.

Our article contributes empirically to the international evidence base by presenting new analysis of rich data generated through qualitative interviews with young ALMP participants in Greece. We also contribute theoretically by showing how, when placed in a broader political-economy framework, Fuller and Unwin's (2003) influential concepts of 'expansive' and 'restrictive' learning environments provide a useful analytical lens through which to explore ALMP participants' learning experiences. Our main aims are to explore (i) the extent to which the learning opportunities provided to young people were expansive or restrictive; and (ii) how such programmes contribute towards the socialization of young people, working to normalize short-term and poor quality jobs.

This article is organized into six sections. First, we review the existing evidence base relating to vocational training programmes, as part of ALMPs in Europe. Second, we provide contextual information about the Greek ALMPs and voucher programs. In Section 3, we present the theoretical framework underpinning our analysis. We then discuss the methodology, approach to data collection and analysis, before presenting a thematic analysis of new empirical data. Finally, the discussion and concluding section summarizes the main findings and outlines our contribution to existing social policy literature and broader theoretical debates.

2 | BACKGROUND: EXISTING LITERATURE ON TRAINING THROUGH ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICY

The short- and long-term impact of youth training programs on earnings and employment in Greece and elsewhere has been examined through detailed statistical analyses conducted as part of micro-econometric impact evaluations (Winterhager et al., 2006). Quantitative analyses of ALMP interventions suggest that overall approaches involving training have better long-term employment outcomes (see Card et al., 2015; Osikominu, 2021), however these effects are variable.

Proponents of subsidized training programs argue that these policies provide specific occupational skills that help low-skilled young unemployed people to retrain and improve their employment prospects and earnings (Strittmatter, 2016). Critics point out that training programmes are likely to involve 'creaming and parking' and deadweight effects as employers select those considered most 'employable', many of whom would likely have been recruited without the program (Greer et al., 2018). Equally, studies critically analyse the overall ideological and political underpinnings of training programs, highlighting the work-first, contingent and flexible nature of most positions (Peck, 2001).

However, work integrated learning has been found to be a valuable tool for offering employment experiences to learners to relate their studies and classroom-acquired knowledge to on-the-job experience (Kramer & Usher, 2012; Virtanen et al., 2014). In particular, the on-the-job training element (practical training) of activation programs has been perceived as the most appropriate tool for developing skill sets/abilities because of the proximity of trainees with their training specialism (European Commission, 2020). That said, existing studies in the educational research literature have mainly focused on long-term and more structured programs like apprenticeships with less emphasis placed on shorter-term initiatives that explicitly prioritize the fast integration of young people into the labour market. For instance, Weil and others (2017) studied activation programs by investigating the narratives, perceptions and ideas of young people who participated in ALMPs in a series of EU countries. Brady (2014) provided a detailed qualitative account of unemployed peoples' experiences with training programs in Germany during the Hartz reforms, offering insights into how participants deal with and comprehend their experiences. These studies have focused more generally on the experiences of welfare recipients and how they are impacted by workfare policies, rather than investigating the learning dimension of activation. Surprisingly little is known about the experiences of ALMP participants in relation to the extent to which participants learn new skills and qualifications in short-term vocational training programmes. This is an important gap to address because, as Fuller and Unwin (2003) argue, learning and workforce development differs significantly in different organizational, national and institutional contexts, and is therefore likely to result in very different outcomes.

3 | STUDY CONTEXT: VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN GREEK ALMP

Greece's experience with vocational training programmes is an informative case study, especially considering the increasing emphasis placed on the potential of ALMPs to help young people enter the labour market, achieving simultaneously the goals of efficiency and inclusiveness (Bonoli & Emmenegger, 2021). The EU and many countries are focusing on training to tackle rising unemployment and labour market problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2020). Analysing the Greek experience provides lessons from a crisis-stricken country that introduced activation programs following the economic crisis to help young people learn new skills for the service economy. Responding to the special call, the Greek case is helpful for exploring the ability of activation programs to respond to the efficiency enhancing dimension of training by redirecting trainees to new required skills and qualifications, while at the same time securing inclusive and equality outcomes by offering decent training and long-term employment to trainees (Carstensen & Ibsen, 2021; Hall, 2020; Thelen, 2019).

However, ALMPs in Greece have been limited and underfunded compared with other EU countries. Vocational training elements have historically been underdeveloped, with both resources and their administration offering little help to unemployed people to acquire the necessary skills to enter employment. The picture changed since early 1990 due to European funding directed to further vocational training interventions. However, some accounts argue that political dynamics like reform pathologies and path dependencies, for example clientelistic relations prevented reforms from boosting employment through activation programs (Petmesidou & Polyzoidis, 2015; Zartaloudis, 2013). Poor matching between skills and labour market needs due to a lack of screening mechanisms was highlighted as an additional problem (Matsaganis, 2011). It has also been established that prior to the 2009–2010 crisis Private Training Centres were heavily funded by the State and took advantage of EU funds and favourable rules to increase their profits at the expense of quality training (Ioannidis, 2017).

Greece was hard hit by the 2009–2010 economic crisis and the subsequent labour market reforms. The youth unemployment rate reached almost 60% during the crisis and those in employment were concentrated in temporary and low-paid jobs (Papadopoulos, 2016). With the reform of Vocational Education System in 2011 and the introduction of ‘innovative’ practices like the Training Vouchers there was an anticipation that training programmes would equip low-skilled young people with skills and human capital necessary to navigate a challenging labour market (Cedefop, 2018). Training Vouchers are part of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the initiative *An Agenda for New Skills and Youth on the Move* that are funded by the Youth Guarantee Scheme. Responding to previous criticisms of the VET, Training Subsidies were supposed to reduce bureaucracy, provide higher transparency and quality and more crucially give trainees the freedom to choose for themselves the Training Provider (Nteli, 2015). Although they have been implemented in several industries, hospitality and tourism sectors were identified as the most dynamic and fast-growing sectors so investing in young people's skills and qualification in this sector became a policy priority (Cedefop, 2018).

The existing evidence base shows that Training Vouchers have had limited effectiveness. Some accounts have attributed this to the lack of consensus and ownership of the VET reform, including the chronic absence of evidence-based links between education and labour market needs (Petmesidou & Polyzoidis, 2015). In addition, the lack of evaluation and certification criteria have also been problematic, with Private Centres and Public Authorities criticized for using VET programs to extract economic profits and political benefits, such as votes from beneficiaries (Ioannidis, 2017).

Some accounts argue that the Greek State subsidized private companies with free labour in a deregulated labour market with employers making no financial contributions to the program and having no obligation to hire employees at the end of it (INE-GSEE, 2016). Furthermore, the blurred boundaries between trainees and employees (many trainees do regular work) is exacerbated by the poor terms and conditions of many traineeships including the lack of social security, no entitlement to sick pay and paid leave (Journal of European Union, 2014). The fact that a small percentage of young people find a job upon completion of these programs along with the low connection between acquired skills and jobs is another problematic feature (Nteli, 2015). Although existing evaluative studies provide important evidence regarding the labour market outcomes of traineeships (Kourachanis et al., 2019), they do not explore in any detail the learning dimension. This is an important omission given that such initiatives aim predominantly to equip young people with valuable skills and training experiences and in theory achieve both efficiency and inclusiveness. In addition, current studies have not examined the socialization aspect of traineeships and the extent to which these initiatives normalize short-term and flexible jobs.

4 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To explore and advance theoretical development on the learning dimension of ALMP, we draw on the framework developed by Fuller and Unwin (2003) based on their notion of an ‘expansive’ versus ‘restrictive’ learning environments continuum (see Table 1 for an overview). Although applied to a different context (Apprenticeships in the United Kingdom), we argue that the two opposite learning environments included in the framework can be helpful conceptual tools for categorizing and understanding the learning experiences of participants in the Greek Training Subsidies Program. We draw on specific themes of the framework that are more appropriate to our case study and where necessary we enrich the analysis by drawing out the contextual factors, for example the nature of the program, institutional arrangements, that are characteristic of the Greek case.

Numerous factors contribute to workplace development and the creation of learning environments. Expansive learning environments link to high-value competitive strategies that prioritize meaningful learning as a source of competitive advantage, while restrictive learning environments link to cost-minimization strategies that promote work intensification (Unwin, 2017). The expansive framework is aligned with gradual transitions to full/expert participation producing good learning outcomes, meaningful tasks and challenges, and stimulating reflection.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of expansive and restrictive learning environments

Expansive	Restrictive
1) Participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace	Restricted participation in multiple communities of practice
2) Primary community of practice has shared 'participative memory': cultural inheritance of apprenticeship	Primary community of practice has little or no 'participative memory': no or little tradition of apprenticeship
3) Breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences built in to programme	Narrow: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks/knowledge/ location
4) Access to range of qualifications including knowledge-based vocational qualifications	Access to competence-based qualification only
5) Planned time off-the-job including for college attendance and for reflection	Virtually all on the job: limited opportunities for reflection
6) Gradual transition to full participation	Fast-transition as quick as possible
7) Apprenticeship aim: rounded expert/full participant	Apprenticeship aim: partial expert/full participant
8) Post-apprenticeship vision: progression for career	Post-apprenticeship vision: static for job
9) Explicit institutional recognition of, and support for, apprentices' status as learner	Ambivalent institutional recognition of, and support for, apprentice's status as learner
10) Named individual acts as dedicated support to apprentices	No dedicated individual ad-hoc support
11) Apprenticeship is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability	Apprenticeship is used to tailor individual capability to organisational need
12) Apprenticeship design fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing	Apprenticeship design limits opportunity to extend identity: little boundary crossing experienced
13) Reification of apprenticeship highly developed (e.g. through documents, symbols, language, tools) and accessible to apprentices	Limited reification of apprenticeship, patchy access to reificatory aspects of practice

Source: Adapted from Fuller and Unwin (2003).

The restrictive framework, in contrast, favours fast transitions as quick as possible and partial expert participation as training is loosely planned and hardly connected with a coherent personal development plan. A Work First approach is evident here with employers using participants as cheap labour source expected to perform from day one with limited training offered. More specifically, expansive learning environments are based on shared 'participative memory' whereby cultural inheritance of apprenticeship is established whereas in the restrictive environments, the community of practice has little or no 'participative memory' or tradition of apprenticeship.

Moreover, the expansive framework is linked with explicit institutional recognition of, and support for, apprentices' status as learner (dedicated support) whereas ambivalent recognition and no dedicated support are features of the restrictive framework. In addition, the expansive framework is associated with the vision that trainees are supported to build and follow a career in the specific occupation where in the restrictive framework the post-training vision is about finding and remaining in one job without career prospects. The extent to which organizational needs are aligned to individual ones (expansive) or if on-the-job training is used to tailor individual capabilities to organizational needs (restrictive) is another useful element of the framework. This distinction may be particularly relevant in

industries such as hospitality, where aligning organizational goals with individual needs might be less feasible and desirable since pay is low and turnover is high.

The political economy and institutional contexts are crucial because they shape organizational approaches to workforce training and development (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018) but have not been tightly integrated into Fuller and Unwin's framework. However, we contend that this must be included to provide a fuller account of the ways that the political economy context interacts with the learning environments, producing specific (and on-demand) socialization processes. Many scholars have argued that the employment relationship has become more precarious, giving much more leverage to employers, and making employees vulnerable (Rubery et al., 2018). The success of these programs depends on employers' willingness to provide quality training and education (Di Statio & Solga, 2017; Protsch & Solga, 2017) which is in its turn influenced by the political economy and institutional setting in which it is located.

Thus, to fully comprehend the impact of political economy and institutional context on the learning experiences of trainees, more emphasis needs to be placed on the national factors that explain the attitudes/strategies of the key players involved. The Greek economy is characterised by limited technological innovation, low productivity and lack of liquidity and credit boosting capital-intensive production (Gourzis & Gialis, 2019). In addition, the prevalence of an imports deindustrialized low-growth model—especially since the decline in competitiveness after the introduction of Euro—based on poor employment protection and high deficits—gave rise to labour-intensive industries like hospitality and further devalued capital-intensive manufacturing industries (Gialis & Leontidou, 2016).

Resultantly, the Greek labour market, similar to that of other Southern European countries (despite differences) has historically been characterized by high unemployment, fragmentation, informality, limited well-paid jobs especially for young people and short-term and atypical contracts leading to one of the highest high inactivity levels (21.4 in 2021) in OECD countries (Avagianou, Kizos, & Gialis, 2022; OECD, 2022). Hospitality and tourism in particular tend to generate low-paid, seasonal, and informal contracts that require horizontal skills and multifunctionality, while their low-skilled and low-capital investment orientation prevent the development of qualifications and skills (Gialis & Leontidou, 2016).

Since the onset of the 2008/2009 crisis and the dismantling of industrial relations institutions and labour protections (abolition of sectoral agreements and prevalence of flexible work) all Greek regions (including Attica) and sectors have seen a surge in temporary/insecure contracts and low-paid positions, especially among young people (Avagianou, Kizos, & Gialis, 2022). The dominance of underemployment and the frequent cycling between unemployment and low-paid jobs, has been a constant feature of the post-2009 Greek labour market, that affects many young people regardless of qualifications and work experience (Gourzis & Gialis, 2019).

In that context, education and skill upgrading are viewed as insufficient to tackle a predominantly demand-side issue linked with the lack of stable working conditions (Avagianou, Kapitsinis, et al., 2022; Papakitsos et al., 2020). Concurrently, a weak welfare state leads young people to rely on family support and often become completely disengaged from the labour market as evidenced by the high numbers of Greek young people who are NEET (Avagianou, Kizos, & Gialis, 2022). In parallel, many businesses rely on paternalistic management practices and lack the internal organizational structures, economic resources and in-firm training tradition, *inter alia*, necessary for meaningful on-the-job training (Papakitsos et al., 2020; Petmesidou & Polyzoidis, 2015).

In such an environment, a marked absence of State planning and funding in the areas of continuous vocational training coincided with the indifference and opportunism displayed by many players (Private Training Centers and specific firms). The latter used training programs to secure cheap labour and drove many young people to become disappointed with or excluded from learning and training activities (Avagianou, Kapitsinis, et al., 2022). There is also evidence that low investments and reduced productivity are the causes of limited investments in vocational training and not the outcomes as some accounts claim (Karamessini, 2022).

By mapping the field of Training Vouchers through an analysis of their primary objective, that is, to provide learning to young people, our research attempts to explore the opportunities and constraints associated with vouchers and more crucially to unveil the mechanisms behind their operation and impact on young people.

The tourism and hospitality industry has been linked with poor working conditions, high turnover and menial work, so the scope and incentives for learning initiatives in this sector are less developed, although policy makers and employers insist that the right occupational skills and qualifications can help them secure decent employment in the sector (Papadopoulos & Lyddon, 2020).

5 | METHODOLOGY

This article presents original qualitative analysis of data generated through interviews with participants on and facilitators of the short-term Greek further vocational training program in tourism and hospitality. A qualitative methodology was adopted in order to enable an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and socialization processes that trainees have been through during their participation—insights which are lacking in the existing evidence base on training in ALMPs.

Participants were recruited through a training provider involved in the programme. Programme participants took part in a combination of off-the-job classroom-based training (80 h) and on-the-job training in tourism-related companies (450 h of traineeship) over a 5-month period. Nationwide in scope, the program was designed to offer work experience to young unemployed people aged 18–29 who were on the unemployment register, to help them exit unemployment (INSETE, 2016). From a total of 8000 participants, 1100 were higher education graduates. The rest were educated to a secondary and post-secondary level. In addition to theoretical and on-the-job training, which was delivered by means of the Training Voucher system, the beneficiaries (participants) received three sessions of career counselling and guidance. Subject areas covered by the training voucher included several specialties: Telephone Operator; Restaurant and Catering; E-Commerce and Hospitality Sales and Marketing; Receptionists and Information Clerks; Housekeeping Clerks; and Tour Representatives. Participation in interviews was voluntary and findings have been anonymized. Interviews were conducted between September 2016 and February 2017.

Fieldwork was conducted in two stages. First, we conducted an interview with the project manager (at program inception) and four interviews with career counsellors who provided theoretical training and guidance services to trainees. Interviews lasted between forty minutes and one hour.

These early consultations informed the second data collection stage, helping the research team to understand the key issues emerging from the program and formulate relevant questions. 35 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were then conducted with young programme participants from across Attiki, a large urban conurbation in the eastern edge of Central Greece that encompasses the entire metropolitan area of Athens, the country's capital and its countryside. Attiki is divided into eight regional units and our participants were drawn from all of them. The majority (20) however were drawn from the regional unit of Piraeus (largest port in Greece and one of the largest in Europe) since in this region, there are more hospitality businesses located and in addition (Table 2). Our sample did not include program drop-outs which may have created some bias.

Participants were purposively sampled due to their specific experiences as trainees in the program (Ritchie et al., 2003). Most came from a low socio-economic background: Twenty-five participants came from working class background and ten from lower middle class. The majority have an education level often below that of tertiary education (see Table 2). Interviews were conducted at the end of the programme and focused on multiple issues including: (a) reasons for participating in the program, (b) experience during the theoretical training, (c) connection between theoretical training and on-the-job training, (d) content of on-the-job training, (e) employers' and colleagues attitudes towards training, (f) employment prospects upon completion. We triangulated our data with reports and studies that analyzed the operation of the specific Program and other Training Subsidies that preceded it (e.g. the Evaluation of Youth Employment Initiatives report drafted by the Labour Institute of the General Confederation of Greek Workers, INE-GSEE, 2016). Using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software, we analysed the data thematically according to a combination of broad themes that emanated from our literature review and initial thematic data analysis (Mason, 2002). After undertaking a first round of analysis alongside further engagement with the literature, Fuller and Unwin's framework emerged as a helpful framework

TABLE 2 Interviewees by location, gender, educational qualifications, social background and employment prospects

Characteristics	% (number)
Location	
Peiraeus	66 (23)
Athens	34 (12)
Gender	
Men	54 (19)
Women	46 (16)
Educational qualifications	
Upper secondary education (General upper secondary school)	34 (12)
Upper secondary education (Vocational upper secondary school)	34 (12)
Tertiary education (University)	14 (5)
Tertiary education (technological educational institute)	18 (6)
Social Background (self-identification)	
Working class	71 (25)
Low middle class	29 (10)
Employment outcomes (after completion of the program)	
Employment in hospitality-related sector	14 (5)
Employment in non-hospitality-related sector	14 (5)
Unemployment	57 (20)
Training	14 (5)
Total	100 (35)

through which to further explore the data. In a second deductive phase, we explored the data in relation to the key themes in their framework. While a key limitation of this analysis is that interview schedules did not ask specifically about the dimensions of their framework (see Table 1), the fact that several key aspects of this emerged unprompted from our data demonstrates its clear utility. Future research could usefully explore the utility of this framework further by using a quantitative approach with a representative sample.

We present our findings in relation to broad themes that reflected the main elements of the expansive/restrictive learning environments as well as important aspects of the program as they emerged from participants' narratives.

6 | FINDINGS

6.1 | Greek ALMP: Expansive or restrictive learning environments?

Through analysing the interview data in relation to the learning environment characteristics identified by Fuller and Unwin (2003), (see Table 1), we find that interviewees largely experienced restrictive learning environments while participating in the programme.

Participants overall reported limited opportunities for meaningful learning and skills development. Several of them voiced disappointment with their placements, claiming that the lack of relevance between their preferred choice and the actual placement resulted in them undertaking narrow tasks and gaining little new

knowledge. There was a gap between the occupational specialty that they had chosen in the theoretical stage of their training and the actual content of what they did during their placement. Some participants found training placements were only loosely connected, if at all, to tourism, for example telecommunication companies, retirement homes, call centers. As a counselor involved in the programme explained:

Most training providers did not live up to the expectations of trainees, and in a sense, they broke the deal [between the government and employers].

Across the interviews it was clear that business needs predominated over individual training needs and aspirations (Theme 11), as one male trainee who undertook his placement in a travel agency explained:

I did not get much training in my specialty. I was supposed to learn how to manage websites and communicate with customers, but I mainly translated advertisements from Greek to Russian (Interviewee speaks Russian) to help the business attract Russian tourists. My employer showed no intention to teach me anything more relevant or useful (participant 5).

An expansive learning environment would require the opposite process whereby training is used to match personal preferences with good opportunities, aligning in that way individual development goals with organizational capabilities. A female participant who was placed in a large hotel aptly describes the lack of personalization and the dominance of organizational needs at the expense of trainees' preferences and choices:

I was supposed to be trained in the kitchen of the hotel, but my duties involved many more tasks than that like mopping the floor and cleaning, things that I was not supposed to do (Participant 1).

A key contributing factor is likely to be the fact that many placements were not freely chosen. Instead, private providers often used fast-track processes to place trainees in any placement they could find, since their profit-seeking goals were dependent on high completion rates.

No, or little, tradition and memory of learning and/or training was evident (as would be expected in expansive learning environments) in these businesses that have become accustomed to use trainees as cheap dispensable labour (Theme 2). As one female participant placed in a call centre explained:

No support was given either by my colleagues or managers. The induction was very limited and the attitudes of most colleagues not supportive. When customers asked about specific products, I had no idea what to say. Customers were getting angry, and I did not know what to do, when I asked for help I did not really get much. There was no intention to make us (trainees) part of the team even temporarily and no feedback was given to improve our work in the future. There was no prior tradition in the company with this sort of activities and I think that also played a role (participant 22).

Here we observe neither a tradition of engaging in training programmes (Theme 2) nor institutional recognition of trainee's status as learner (Theme 9) and a limited presence of dedicated support to apprentices (Theme 10) to monitor the tasks and responsibilities of participants. Mechanisms for reporting participants' problems were also lacking.

There was nobody (inspector) there to check what I was doing, so I was doing many different things that added nothing new to my knowledge (participant 1).

Training Subsidies were supposed to help trainees improve their prospects for moving into good work opportunities in the hospitality industry through experiencing meaningful and gradual on-the-job training activities. However, participants were commonly placed in routine and monotonous jobs, with very limited learning. In line with a Work First approach, participants were expected to make a fast transition into their role as quickly as possible (Theme 6), which suggests the practice of 'creaming and parking' (Greer et al., 2018) may have been in play as employers were expecting participants to be fully functioning workers from day one.

In that way, ALMPs such as the Training Subsidies are not linked with good opportunities for meaningful in-work experience that serves trainee's needs. Rather they were found to perpetuate an environment of routine and low-skilled work already found in hospitality and other sectors of the crisis-stricken Greek economy:

The main beneficiaries of the program were businesses...They were given the opportunity to cover their needs with 'free' labour for a period of 3-4months without having any commitments towards these people. So yes, most of participants were placed into generic work roles that required limited or no training and employers saw no incentive to train them further as the program was for a very short period (Programme Counsellor).

Participation in on-the-job training was closer to the restrictive learning environment where fast transitions into temporary monotonous and repetitive jobs were prioritized at the expense of more gradual and well-rounded ones (Theme 3). A male participant placed as a receptionist in a small hotel clearly explains the dominance of the Work First (of low quality) dimension and the negative consequences of that for participants:

I was working like a regular employee from the first day until the end. The employer cared about me doing the job he wanted which was not very interesting and relevant to my choice. So, although I was trained to be a receptionist, I was doing everything including cleaning the hotel. I added nothing to my skills (participant 15)

Under these circumstances, creating a structured and meaningful occupational trajectory or professional identity (rounded and full participant, Theme 7) through work experience appears to have been implausible. The objective was to help participants to enter the labour market by using the work experience, qualifications, and skills they had acquired during the program. However, as the following quote illustrates, Training Subsidies were more commonly experienced as temporary work placements with no career progression or support for development attached to them (Theme 8). The incentives behind employer's participation framed the chances of participants for career progression in very concrete ways: the post-training vision was one that was 'static for the job' (Theme 8) that would be terminated at the end of their placement:

When I spoke to my employer at end of the voucher, he said that I can continue working there. When I asked for the employment contract after a couple of days he was surprised and said that I could stay only through another voucher. He just wanted me to work for free (participant 6).

This finding resonates (see Table 2) with an evaluation study conducted by the GSEE-INE according to which most participants in Training Subsidies (around half) do not receive any employment offer in tourism and hospitality after the completion of the program. Some respondents found temporary and low-paid jobs that have limited relevance to hospitality and on-the-job training they had received while a significant number of them (20 out of 35) returned to unemployment after some time (Table 2). Although these findings are related to the limited number of available jobs during the period that the program was running, they might be also related to the low relevance of their placements since hospitality and tourism businesses were growing at that time.

6.2 | Socialization and normalization of poor work quality

Early work experiences are formative, and our evidence suggests these poor quality learning experiences had an important socialization effect. We found that, at the early stages of their time on the programme, most trainees were motivated to engage in training and enter the labour market, although considerations about the financial support they gained through the Voucher were also evident. The following quote by a female participant who was unemployed before entering the program and without prior experience in the hospitality industry clearly shows the attitude shared by many:

Besides the financial support I would get for six months, pursuing a career in a cutting-edge tourism occupation was part of the reasons I took part in this program. It is a growing industry, and I am here because I want to learn new things and improve my CV (participant 10).

However, this enthusiasm waned considerably when trainees had completed their placement and the gap between their experiences and initial expectations became apparent.

The work was very intense, and the working conditions were not pleasant (participant 8).

Our findings highlight that due to the limited existence of workplace learning opportunities which appealed to trainees, drive and willingness to participate and devote time and energy were naturally diminished at the end of the programme:

I did my placement in a coffee shop. There was a lot of pressure to do work quickly while no training was provided as to how to use the coffee machine. I was just serving customers (participant 8).

The impact of poor job quality prevalent in the sector was evident; many participants' narratives echo widespread dissatisfaction with working conditions in the Greek hospitality and tourism found in previous studies (Papadopoulos & Lyddon, 2020).

In this context, vocational training also appears to facilitate the alignment of participants' expectations and aspirations with the poor conditions that the labour market offers. For instance, many trainees saw regular employees working long hours without getting extra pay, while others observed employers rewarding such an attitude. Again, these are features of the hospitality industry that were reinforced during the Voucher Program. While our data show that young people sometimes resisted poor employment practices, one participant explained how his employer reinforced this specific image of a 'good' employee:

Working long hours without payment was acceptable in my workplace. We were ten people doing this placement and only one of us was working more hours than we were legally allowed to work. She was the only one hired at the end (participant 3).

Despite negative assessments, Training Vouchers are perceived as the 'necessary evil' that offer some extra income and experience in a context of insecurity and low pay. In their current form, the activation paradigm reinforces precarious features of the labour market (low pay and low-skilled jobs), responds to employer's needs, and socializes a whole generation with an employment landscape that prioritizes temporary and flexible jobs. The following quote from a programme counsellor is indicative of that trend:

Under the pretence of placements, Training Subsidies legitimize and generalize flexible, low-skilled and insecure forms of employment. They are concealed forms of employment that entail cheap and atypical labour without employment rights. Although they work as regular employees, trainees are treated as beneficiaries

This exposes the risks and dangers inherent in training programmes developed in contexts wherein the learning needs of employees are incompatible with the narrow scope of employers' strategies especially in sectors of the economy characterized by low skills and pay.

Finally, 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 can perform 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.

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 (participant 6).

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper set out to explore (i) the extent to which the learning opportunities provided to young people were expansive or restrictive; and (ii) how such programmes contribute towards the socialization of young people. The findings show that participants' learning experiences were commonly characterized by lack of meaningful training, occupation-specific skills, and quality career prospects as described by the restrictive learning environment. Unlike in Unwin and Fuller, where the quality and quantity of learning participation in apprenticeships was found to vary widely, our study reveals a consistently poor experience for these ALMP participants. The study participants were unable to connect their experiences with purposeful activities, structured around meaningful work-integrated learning and gradual transitions to full rounded participation as would be the case in expansive learning environments. Previous accounts have mainly attributed poor learning outcomes to a lack of coordination, systemic evaluation, inspection, and accreditation and the market-based logic of the system (Hipp & Warner, 2008) linked to the private interests of Private Providers and the State limited intervention in cases of violation of the program's principles (Fotopoulos et al., 2013; Galata and Chrysakis, 2016). Our findings support these earlier findings and illustrate that limited focused and long-term training was a significant deficiency of the program underpinned by the lack of connection between the theoretical training and the practical training.

However, the paper makes a further theoretical contribution through exploring the features of the Greek political economy and institutional context that explain the restrictive learning environment that trainees find themselves in. We explored this by looking at the structure of the Greek economy, the sectoral composition, the prevalence of low-paid and insecure jobs, the traditional lack of investment and interests for training and the perception that short-term training programs are substitutes for social support. The dominance of business priorities and the lack of organizational support (and their alignment with trainees needs) for trainees were associated with the structures and logics of a political economy based on poor employment protection and low-paid/insecure jobs (Gialis & Leontidou, 2016). Such a political economy depreciates specialization and skill development because it is dominated by low-productivity industries (hospitality and tourism) that prioritize flexibility-adaptability and informal practices integrating the crisis-driven institutional changes such as the deregulation of the labour market.

Therefore, the lack of support for learners' needs and the symptomatic, fast-track and anarchic character of the learning process were the outcomes of a labour market dominated that require and perpetuate routine and low-skilled jobs in an informal context underpinned by high youth unemployment (Gialis & Leontidou, 2016; Gourzis & Gialis, 2019). Equally, the narrow access to tasks and knowledge and the partial participation in learning activities—centred on generic or 'soft' low skills—corresponds to the demand of hospitality industry for a functionally flexible workforce that can perform multiple tasks (INE GSEE, 2016). Consequently, the fast, unplanned, unorganized and

opportunistic manner by which Training Subsidies operated was linked with industry features, demonstrating the limitations for quality learning opportunities in the specific industry which has dominated the Greek political economy. The historically underdeveloped role of the State as the principal actor in skills formation system (in the tradition of Scandinavian countries) in combination with the limited resources for inspection and more long-term interventions, especially after the crisis, might have contributed to the lack of a coherent and well-developed strategy which served the short-term interests of both employers and the Private Training Centers.

Our contribution lies in not only empirically demonstrating the limitations of training vouchers to offer quality learning to young people, but mainly in theorising the ways that learning experiences are manifestations of wider societal-economic-intuitional-cultural changes linked to the Greek productive model and the recessionary spirals that Greece underwent since 2008. This is important because our discussion goes beyond previous accounts by connecting learning theories with political economy analysis and demonstrating that there are systematic-structural mechanisms which influence the subjective learning experiences of trainees and the learning strategies that employers and the State adopt. This matters because such an approach departs from accounts that see trainees' poor learning experiences as merely bureaucratic and implementation failures linked to corruption and nepotism (Ioannidis, 2017; Petmesidou & Polyzoidis, 2015). Instead, our approach highlights the value of understanding the limitations of applying universal models of training and learning in political economy contexts that are spatially geographically and historically constituted (Avagianou, Kapitsinis, et al., 2022). Therefore, the inability of the Greek labour market to produce jobs is the major cause of the low effectiveness of VET (longer-term ones) so any reversal in the fortunes of this system requires a more rejuvenated labour market and a more rigorous State inspection system to prevent violations by employers (Karamessini, 2022; Papakitsos et al., 2020).

The dominance of low-service activities especially after the economic crisis and the weak and peripheral position of Greece in the EU system in combination with the existence of a myriad of businesses with limited capacity to invest in training, cannot be separated from the limited capacity of the labour market to provide good quality jobs requiring and creating an environment within which meaningful and employment enhancing learning can be provided. Although previous studies on Greek traineeships identified critical issues, including employers using traineeships as cheap labour (Gourzis & Gialis, 2019; Karamessini, 2022), there has been less emphasis on how trainees are socialized into the world of work, lowering their expectations, and not anticipating decent work in the future. As our findings show, contingent and flexible employment at the lower end of the labour market has become the norm after the completion of these types of programs. In these conditions, training is not a stepping-stone to quality employment but a learning process towards accepting and internalizing the poor employment conditions or just exiting the field.

In response to this special issue's call to consider the possibility of utilizing skill formation systems to achieve the economic and social policy goals of efficiency and inclusiveness, we draw the following conclusions (Bonoli & Emmenegger, 2021). In the field of Training Vouchers, the tension between employers' interests in short-term efficiency—which leads to precarious and cheap labour—and the long-term inclusion-equality of young people in the labour market become more visible (Carstensen & Ibsen, 2021). The goal of achieving inclusiveness and equality has not been only side-lined but also actively undermined by reinforcing processes of socialization that internalize and normalize efficiency-oriented considerations leaving social risks unaddressed.

However, our findings also show the contradiction of such an approach since VET-based interventions, only informed by efficiency-enhancing logics without catering for equality concerns, are likely to not be stable and enduring in the long-run as the low desire of some of our trainees to find a job in hospitality and tourism demonstrates (Carstensen & Ibsen, 2021). Despite these issues, the paper empirically demonstrates that at least at the micro-level (firm level) which was the focus of our study, employers defend and promote their interests and set the priorities for vocational education and training emphasizing effectiveness and not equality or inclusiveness (Hall, 2020; Thelen, 2019). Therefore, inclusive oriented measures like providing better protections and quality training might require interventions external to the training system, deriving from the macro-policy framework (State) as previous accounts have suggested (Durazzi & Geyer, 2022).

In this article, we have explored how measures introduced in the aftermath of the Great Recession were experienced by young people in the Greek context of extreme levels of youth unemployment. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, young people across Europe are expected to fare incredibly badly. As policymakers develop responses to mass youth unemployment, learning from previous approaches is paramount. Policymakers should ensure that opportunities offered through training programmes display characteristics associated with expansive learning environments—both to increase the likelihood that these will be experienced positively by their young participants, and ultimately lead to better, higher quality labour market outcomes.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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