

The Long Road for Vulnerable Jobseekers Transitioning to Green and Socially Sustainable Employment

Carla Valadas ^{1,2} 

¹ CEIS20, University of Coimbra, Portugal

² ESECS-IPL, Portugal

Correspondence: Carla Valadas (csvaladas@gmail.com)

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Abstract

Although the role of education, training, and life-long learning has become widely recognised in EU social policy, not all EU citizens have had the opportunity to maintain or acquire the skills necessary for full participation in society and success in the labour market. This article examines interventions specifically designed to support vulnerable unemployed individuals for (re)entering and succeeding in the labour market. It presents a qualitative, case-specific study of training programmes implemented by a local unit of the Public Employment Service (PES) in a Southern European country. Portugal serves as a compelling case for examining how and why the effort to equip under-skilled and underqualified citizens with (new) skills remains challenging. Our theoretical framework builds on historical institutionalism to identify the enduring limitations of Portuguese active labour market policies, as well as other institutional and actor-related constraints that hinder unemployed individuals from navigating the challenges of an increasingly complex and diverse labour market. To explore these dynamics empirically, we conducted a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders—including PES staff, training providers, and unemployed participants—focusing on their perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of training programmes and their implementation. Additionally, we used supplementary sources such as official documents related to training and other labour market policies, as well as relevant statistical data, to contextualize and triangulate our findings. The findings demonstrate that institutional weaknesses, combined with the shortcomings of training programmes, fail to accommodate the specific needs and conditions of vulnerable unemployed individuals, leaving them without the skills necessary to secure stable employment and to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the ecological and digital transitions.

Keywords

active labour market policies; European pillar of social rights; green transition; Portugal; skills; social investment; training programmes; vulnerable unemployed

1. Introduction

As the world—and the European Union in particular—navigates turbulent times, specific strategies have been implemented to address ongoing challenges that threaten citizens' lives and working conditions. Advancements in EU social domains have always been constrained by legal, political, and financial obstacles, even though it is accepted that EU institutions play a crucial role in shaping member states' public policies in areas related to workers' rights and employment conditions (Erne et al., 2024). The increasing regulation of social policy issues at the supranational level goes along with a growing willingness to further reconcile economic, social, and ecological goals (Sabato et al., 2022, p. 199). Among the challenges pertaining to the trajectory and scope of EU social policy lies the need to reorient the economy toward a greener and environmentally sustainable path (Im et al., 2023; Pociovălișteanu et al., 2015). Achieving this goal—aligned with the evolving industrial and technological landscape and strategies of member states—requires preparing workers for new employment opportunities, “green jobs” in more environmentally sustainable industries (Sikora, 2021). Authors like Fischer and Giuliani (2025) emphasise how important it is for EU institutions to address environmental and social goals and policies in an integrated manner, within a “new growth model” (Koch, 2025). As examples of this commitment, two key initiatives were recently supported by the European Commission in the areas of employment, social protection, and environmental policy. The first is the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), proclaimed in Gothenburg in 2017, which addresses critical social dimensions such as equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection (European Commission, 2021). The second is the European Green Deal (EGD), a flagship initiative of the first EC led by Ursula von der Leyen (2019–2024), which aims to achieve climate neutrality and promote a just ecological transition by 2050 (European Commission, 2019a).

A growing body of literature has traced the historical trajectory that led to the launch of these initiatives (Hacker, 2023), analysed their political and legal characteristics (Arabadjieva & Barrio, 2024; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2017), and highlighted the strategic role of key actors in shaping recent EU social policy (Dura, 2024). However, the impacts of these policy measures on the everyday lives of EU citizens—beyond aggregate quantitative indicators and their evolution at the country level—remain insufficiently explored.

This article seeks to fill this gap by analysing a specific set of training programmes for low-skilled unemployed individuals, implemented by a local unit of the Portuguese Employment Service (PES) in the central region of Portugal. Our research question is: To what extent do training programmes implemented in Portugal under the EU's social policy agenda equip low-skilled and under-qualified unemployed individuals with the skills needed to adapt to ecological and digital transitions and secure stable employment?

This article adopts a historical institutionalist approach to examine why active labour market policies (ALMPs) in Portugal—particularly those aimed at vulnerable unemployed individuals—have evolved incrementally despite supranational pressures for reform. Informed by the contributions of Pierson (2000), Mahoney and Thelen (2010), among others, it analyses how past policy legacies, critical junctures (such as the eurozone crisis), and institutional path dependencies continue to constrain the capacity of PES to implement more transformative social investment approaches. While European Union initiatives like the EPSR promote ambitious activation and re-skilling agendas, these goals often clash with entrenched bureaucratic routines, fiscal constraints, and segmented labour markets typical of Southern European welfare regimes. Rather than radical change, the Portuguese case illustrates a pattern of institutional layering

and drift, in which new policy objectives are grafted onto existing structures without fundamentally altering their logic or effectiveness.

The programmes analysed correspond to the following EU-standardised categories: (a) apprenticeship courses (for example, automotive mechatronics technician) with dual certification (upper secondary school diploma (12th year) plus EQF Level 4 vocational qualification); (b) adult education and training (EFA) courses with a “school-leaving certification pathway” (equivalent to upper secondary education); and (c) courses from the “Vida Ativa” (active life) programme, with, for example, a medium-duration vocational training in secretarial studies. These programmes reflect both continuity and adaptation. On the one hand, they remain governed by bureaucratic requirements—such as minimum cohort sizes and mandatory full-time attendance—and by compliance with EU agency guidelines and policy frameworks. On the other hand, caseworkers retain a degree of discretionary flexibility in interpreting and applying these rules, particularly when determining participant eligibility. These discretionary practices are shaped not only by local labour market conditions, administrative capacity, and budgetary constraints, but also by longstanding institutional routines. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this interplay between formal regulation and bounded discretion illustrates how new policy objectives are layered onto existing structures, often without fundamentally altering the underlying institutional logic.

This article’s empirical analysis is anchored on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2019 and March 2020. The study involved 23 working-age individuals and six interviews with stakeholders. The first group consisted of individuals who were either temporarily unemployed or who had been labour market inactive for more than 12 consecutive months, some of whom had been out of work for a significant period. Their ages ranged between 21 and 63 years old, and they were enrolled in various training programmes. The second group comprised stakeholders with distinct roles, expertise, and levels of responsibility. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis using both deductive and inductive coding (Knott et al., 2022). We conducted 23 interviews with programme participants, focusing on their expectations regarding the training experience and anticipated labour-market outcomes. In addition, we interviewed two front-line caseworkers and two trainees to explore the administrative and organizational dimensions of programme delivery. Finally, two senior managers at the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP) were interviewed to examine the agency’s evolving role—particularly since the 2008–2009 crisis—its coordination with national and EU partners, internal performance challenges, and changes in the training portfolio.

The article addresses one of the key objectives of the EPSR, namely, increasing adult participation in training to enhance employability amid green and digital transitions, and examines how this goal can better equip disadvantaged groups to fully engage in a labour market and society facing major challenges.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, the article reviews recent developments in EU initiatives aimed at enhancing workforce employability and adaptability in changing labour markets, through skill development. The article then analyses the trajectory of a Southern European country—Portugal—which, since joining the EU in 1986, has made considerable efforts to adapt its institutions and social policies in line with EU social policy frameworks. Focusing on training programmes targeting vulnerable groups of unemployed individuals, the article examines the persistent institutional constraints and limitations that continue to hinder the effective implementation of these policies. This is followed by a presentation and

discussion of the empirical research findings, highlighting the limitations in promoting the labour market participation of (vulnerable) individuals. The conclusion summarises the key results of the analysis.

2. Activation and Skills Investment: Cornerstones of EU Social Policy in Recent Years

Among the distinctive features shared by most EU member states is their commitment to the so-called European social model—a societal model that values social cohesion, universal social protection, and inclusive economic development. While interpretations vary across EU member states, common principles include the protection against social risks, promotion of equal opportunities, and solidarity (Esping-Andersen, 2003; Hemerijck, 2013). Within this framework, member states are encouraged to allocate portions of their national budgets to education and training while shaping their national policies to uphold citizens' rights to work and decent living standards.

As EU economic integration advanced throughout the 1990s, the need for welfare state reforms became increasingly evident (de la Porte & Palier, 2022). These reforms were largely guided by a social investment approach aimed at “preparing, supporting, and equipping individuals to participate in the knowledge economy and respond to the new social risks associated with it” (Morel et al., 2012, p. 355). In a context of accelerating economic and demographic change, social risks became more complex and diversified. “Old risks” such as unemployment, sickness, accidents at work, and old age—traditionally the primary focus of classic welfare state regimes—are now increasingly interrelated with “new risks” arising from evolving family structures, changing forms of labour market attachment, and the possession of low or obsolete skills (Bonoli, 2007; Greve & Paster, 2022). Some of these risks have been exacerbated by the social effects of climate change, which introduce new threats to physical health and human well-being. Events such as more frequent and intense floods or extreme heat waves endanger individuals' living and working conditions, disproportionately affecting vulnerable population groups (Fischer & Giuliani, 2025, p. 4). Technological advancements linked to digitalisation, automation, and artificial intelligence, for example, also pose significant challenges regarding workers' skills, the way work is performed, and how social relations are (re)constructed (Pettinger, 2019; Susskind, 2020).

As underscored by Hemerijck et al. (2022), the social investment perspective aims to “enhance people's capabilities and opportunities in knowledge-based labour markets, so as to promote high levels of employment, inclusive social cohesion, individual agency, and overall life satisfaction” (p. 5). Life satisfaction is linked, among other factors, with individuals' connection to the labour market, which remains central to ensuring social integration. Adequate skill levels play a crucial role in determining one's chances of securing employment and accessing a certain level of social protection. The role of programmes that enhance individuals' employability and foster human capital development reflects a broader shift in how the welfare state integrates the social investment approach (Luque Balbona & Guillén, 2021). Over time, the latter came to include a wide range of policies, including family policies, education and life-long learning, training, and ALMPs (Bouget et al., 2015; Hemerijck & Bokhorst, 2025).

After a period of relative stagnation in the development of social investment goals and instruments, the EU's engagement in the social domain has once again shifted towards enhancing individual well-being. The 2017 proclamation of the EPSR is widely regarded as a turning point in the EU's social policy agenda, paving the way for tangible initiatives aimed at ensuring, among other things, access to the labour market, fair working

conditions in the labour market, and adequate social protection for all. Several principles enriched in the EPSR—such as education and life-long learning (Principle 1), active support to employment (Principle 4), and childcare and support to children (Principle 11)—reflect a clear social investment logic. Within the EPSR framework, particular emphasis has been placed on equipping workers for the green and digital transitions. This is evident in specific quantitative targets, including ensuring that 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 is employed by 2030 and that at least 60% of all adults participate in training each year to acquire the skills required for emerging labour market demands.

Beyond these general targets, significant challenges remain in adapting the dynamics of employment to the impact of the digital economy and concerns about environmental protection. These challenges include making large-scale investments in new technology, adequately preparing workers, and reforming welfare systems. In some member states, such as the Nordic countries, capital investment policies “stimulated a shift towards more skilled employment and higher value-added production” contributing to a decline in the supply of less-skilled workers, a rise in skills levels, and the transformation into a knowledge-based economy (Morel, 2013, p. 647). In contrast, several European welfare systems remain heavily pension-oriented and struggle with increasingly inefficient healthcare systems. Balancing the demands of the digital and the energy transitions while addressing persisting social priorities may pose an additional burden—particularly for Southern and Central Eastern European countries—whose welfare and labour market systems face structural weaknesses (Bengtsson et al., 2017; Ronchi, 2018).

Chapter 1 of the EPSR integrates the European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan launched in 2020 to ensure that both workers and businesses are better equipped to navigate ongoing climate and digital transformations. In line with this agenda, specific targets were established for achievement by 2025. Particular emphasis is placed on increasing the participation of low-qualified individuals in learning activities over the previous 12 months, as well as raising the share of adults possessing at least basic digital skills (Taurelli, 2021). Another initiative emanating from EU institutions is the *Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience* (Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020, 2020).

In the context of the green and digital transitions—alongside evolving labour market dynamics across EU member states—the activation of vulnerable groups has received growing policy attention. This includes individuals in precarious employment, older workers, people with very low levels of education, and people with disabilities (European Commission, 2019b). Recent studies highlight significant variation across EU countries in addressing these challenges (Corti & Ruiz de la Ossa, 2023; OECD & European Commission, 2025). This variation reflects the fact that, while EU institutions play a supportive and coordinating role, primary responsibility for (un)employment and social policy primarily remains with the member states. Internal diversity across the EU is well documented, and it has long posed governance challenges—particularly during periods marked by growing risks of social and economic divergence. Such divergence reflects, among other factors, the differing welfare state models and institutional capacities among member states.

3. Historical Institutionalism and the Analysis of National Policy Specificities

Historical institutionalism, like other strands of the “new institutionalism” (Hall & Taylor, 1996), is grounded in the idea that institutions matter—not only because of formal rules and material incentives, but also due to the way past policy decisions shape current choices and constrain future possibilities. This approach highlights how institutional development follows path-dependent trajectories, in which early choices—particularly those made during critical junctures—create self-reinforcing mechanisms that render transformative change difficult (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2000). Organisational routines and governance structures tend to become embedded over time, generating institutional inertia even in the face of new policy agendas or external pressures.

These insights are particularly relevant when analysing labour market policies—both in their design and implementation—as institutional legacies continue to influence how such policies evolve and function. Institutional arrangements such as PES often adapt incrementally, layering new objectives onto existing structures without fundamentally altering their underlying logic. In this context, EU-framed training initiatives, despite their ambitious goals linked to upskilling, social investment, and green and digital transitions, are implemented through national systems shaped by prior decisions, bureaucratic routines, and politically mediated reform paths (Bonoli, 2013; Pierson, 2004).

This article argues that institutional structures, governance routines, and historically embedded trajectories shape both the interpretation and implementation of training programmes in Portugal. From a historical institutionalist perspective, policy is not simply designed in response to current needs but is conditioned by earlier institutional developments, political compromises, and the accumulated weight of past reforms. In this context, PES operate within systems that evolve incrementally, with reforms often reflecting continuity rather than rupture—despite the transformative aspirations of supranational frameworks such as the EPSR and the EGD. Among its thematic agendas are skills enhancement and competitiveness. Within the RRP, specific initiatives and funding were allocated to support the digital transition, including: (a) EUR 521 million for upgrading facilities and technological equipment in vocational education and training institutions and (b) EUR 130 million for modernising science facilities in schools and universities under the Youth Impulse initiative. Increasing the skill levels of the Portuguese population, reducing labour market segmentation, and (re)adjusting adults’ competences to labour market needs have been recurring priorities in the European Commission’s country-specific recommendations over the years. Nonetheless—as in other member states—the implementation of these recommendations has consistently fallen short of expectations. Structural vulnerabilities in the Portuguese labour market persist, including low levels of intermediate skills among the active adult population, pronounced income inequality, and significant social and territorial disparities (Rodrigues, 2019). Further challenges include strong labour market segmentation and low internal mobility, exacerbated by rigid wage structures (Martins, 2021).

Despite growing awareness of the impact of education and training on the risk of unemployment or low-quality jobs—as well as the increasing emphasis on activation, reflected in the allocation of public spending—evidence on the effectiveness of training programmes and other ALMPs remains limited (OECD, 2024, p. 25). Moreover, the persistent mismatch between policy design, the profiles of unemployed jobseekers, and the needs and preferences of employers continues to pose significant challenges. Over the past two decades, considerable efforts have been made to improve the performance of the Portuguese PES.

Nonetheless, major hurdles persist, particularly in terms of data coverage, the systematic assessment of both the positive and negative effects of implemented measures, and the overall weakness of the monitoring system for services and programmes delivered to jobseekers (OECD, 2024, p. 26). These shortcomings can be partly attributed to financial constraints faced by Portuguese public institutions—given that programme evaluations are often costly—as well as to the prioritisation of evaluation procedures for programmes financed by EU structural and social funds. Furthermore, delays in equipping PES staff with the necessary skills and competences hinder the delivery of services in a more effective and citizen-oriented manner. In the case of training programmes specifically, regular monitoring and evaluation could generate more detailed insights into how to better align these interventions with the needs and expectations of unemployed jobseekers.

An enduring trend in Portuguese labour market policy is the limited adoption of a social investment approach (Bonoli, 2013). Historically, the shift from passively compensating unemployment toward actively promoting employability (Van Kersbergen & Hemerijck, 2012) has not been a dominant feature of employment policy. Instead, higher levels of public spending have been allocated to compensatory social policies rather than to ALMPs (Immervoll & Scarpetta, 2012; Ronchi, 2018). While social investment strategies inherently require sustained and substantial financial commitments, such investments are particularly challenging for countries like Portugal, which operate with comparatively low levels of public revenue (see Figure 1). As a result, policy efforts have tended to focus on isolated measures rather than being embedded within a comprehensive strategy that integrates passive and ALMPs in a coherent and mutually reinforcing manner (Valadas, 2022).

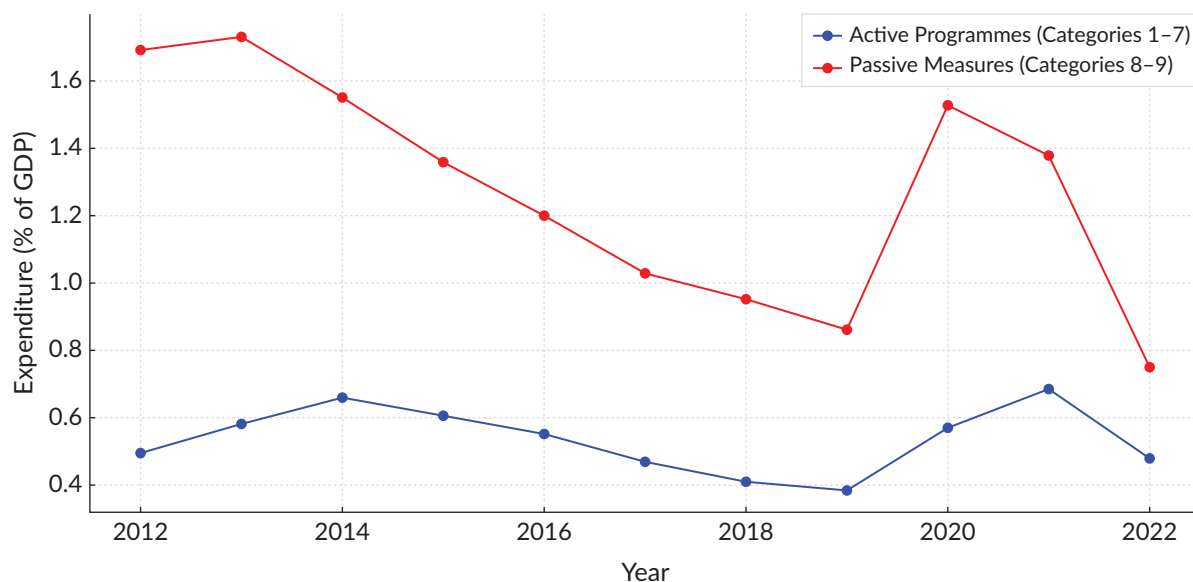


Figure 1. Public expenditure on active and passive programmes in Portugal, 2012–2022. Source: Based on data from OECD Labour market programmes.

As shown in Figure 1, the “social investment welfare budget” in Portugal has not experienced significant growth over the past two decades. On the contrary, similar to patterns observed across many Southern, Central, and Eastern European welfare states, Portugal continues to lag behind in social investment spending (Bengtsson et al., 2017; Luque Balbona & Guillén, 2021). Although investment in adult education and the upskilling of unemployed individuals has received increased policy attention in recent years, these

efforts have largely depended on financial support from European instruments, particularly the European Social Fund.

The following section analyses a range of factors that help explain the shortcomings of training programmes and the institutional barriers hindering the effective inclusion of vulnerable groups in the labour market and broader society. Among the most salient factors are individual characteristics—such as age, gender, skill, and education levels, health status, language proficiency, and household or caregiving responsibilities—and circumstantial elements, including place of residence, access to social networks, and the duration of unemployment. These are further compounded by institutional obstacles related to policy design, administrative capacity, and service delivery. The interplay of these three dimensions—individual, circumstantial, and institutional—is particularly detrimental to the labour market integration of certain groups, reinforcing patterns of exclusion.

3.1. Individuals' (Social) Inabilities and Contextual Features

Various authors have shown that unemployment risks and their effects are unequally distributed across countries, regions, and individuals (Boland & Griffin, 2015; Demazière & Zune, 2019; Didier et al., 2013; Valadas, 2023). Certain groups face specific disadvantages, including women, immigrants, low-skilled individuals, and those from lower-income backgrounds. Most of our interviewees belong to these groups, many having low skill levels and irregular educational paths. They had been unemployed for varying periods: eight for less than twelve months, six between one and two years, five for more than two years, and four did not disclose their unemployment duration. Nearly all (16) had experienced unemployment before, and three had never been employed. Four did not respond. These distinctive aspects can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees by age, gender, education level, and length of unemployment.

Course	Digital literacy + sewing	Industrial maintenance electromechanics	Secretarial/office administration	Mechatronics	TOTAL
Age					
18–24	–	2	–	–	2
25–34	–	–	1	4	5
35–44	1	2	2	1	6
45–54	2	1	1	–	4
55–64	2	–	–	–	2
No answer	3	–	–	1	4
Gender					
Male	8	4	–	5	17
Female	–	1	4	1	6
No answer	–	–	–	–	–

Table 1. (Cont.) Interviewees by age, gender, education level, and length of unemployment.

Course	Digital literacy + sewing	Industrial maintenance electromechanics	Secretarial/office administration	Mechatronics	TOTAL
Family situation					
Single	–	3	1	6	10
In a relationship/ cohabiting	1	–	1	–	2
Married/domestic partnership	5	1	2	–	8
Divorced/separated	1	1	–	–	2
Widowed	1	–	–	–	1
Single mother/single father	–	–	–	–	–
No answer	–	–	–	–	–
With children	7	–	3	–	10
No answer	1	–	–	–	1
Educational levels/years of formal schooling					
Less than 4 years	1	–	–	–	1
4 years	5	–	–	–	5
6 years	1	5	–	–	6
9 years	–	–	–	4	4
12 years	–	–	4	2	6
No answer	1	–	–	–	1
Previous unemployment experiences					
Previously unemployed	7	2	4	3	16
No prior experience of unemployment	–	1	–	2	3
No answer	1	2	–	1	4
Length of unemployment					
Less than one year	1	–	4	3	8
1–2 years	1	2	–	3	6
More than 2 years	3	2	–	–	5
No answer	3	1	–	–	4
(Previous) work experience					
Less than 1 year	–	–	–	–	–
1 to 3 years	–	–	–	–	–
More than 3 years	6	2	3	2	13
No answer	2	3	1	4	10

Table 1. (Cont.) Interviewees by age, gender, education level, and length of unemployment.

Course	Digital literacy + sewing	Industrial maintenance electromechanics	Secretarial/office administration	Mechatronics	TOTAL
Income support/welfare benefit					
Unemployment benefit	3	1	1	4	9
Minimum income scheme	2	–	–	–	2
Old-age/retirement pension	–	–	–	–	–
Disability pension	1	–	–	–	1
Traineeship allowance	2	4	3	2	11
No answer	–	–	–	–	–
Number of trainees interviewed	8	5	4	6	23

Among the employment barriers preventing the unemployed individuals interviewed from (re)entering the labour market are insufficient work-related capabilities, such as a lack of skills and work experience. In addition to unemployment, they encountered other vulnerabilities, including health-related limitations, housing instability, learning disabilities, lack of motivation, and unintended caregiving responsibilities. These challenges further compound their difficulties in securing stable employment.

From the thematic analysis of the interviews, three distinct profiles emerge. The first group—named “educational aspirants”—views training as an opportunity to obtain a higher level of education, though they have little to no expectations of applying the acquired skills in fields such as sewing or welding, for example. The second group—“benefit-dependent programme participants”—consists of individuals receiving social benefits or assistance programmes, such as unemployment insurance or the *rendimiento mínimo garantido*. For these individuals, training is often a mandatory requirement within their benefits contract. In some cases, participation in training presents a more advantageous option—both personally and financially—rather than accepting less desirable job offers they would otherwise be required to take. Finally, a smaller group—“in-transition unemployed”—sees training as a means to enhance their professional qualifications and improve their employment prospects.

For the first two identified groups, the possibility of utilizing the acquired skills—or even achieving eventual (re)integration into the labour market—is, in most cases, not an expected outcome. Instead, the effects that programme participants themselves report from their involvement in training programmes are primarily motivational, emotional, and relational in nature. These outcomes were found in similar studies (Carvajal Muñoz, 2024). Although motivational factors are often linked to the mere fulfilment of obligations—whether related to participation in active labour market measures or meeting minimum educational requirements, for instance—they can serve as incentives for improving individuals’ initial situations (Bredgaard, 2015, p. 439). Emotional and relational factors, on the other hand, are expected to have more indirect effects on individuals’ chances of securing (new) employment. While these seemingly positive aspects are associated with participation in training programmes, one inherent limitation is the relatively short duration of these

initiatives. Moreover, vulnerable unemployed individuals continue to face risks of stigmatization and restricted access to low-quality jobs. Considering the three “profiles” of the unemployed interviewed, they all share low employability attributes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Profiles of interviewed unemployed individuals.

Profiles	Expectations/main goals	Labour market (re)integration prospects	Distinct groups
Educational aspirants	Increase education level Distraction from unemployment Getting out of the house Meeting new people	Low	(Older) labour market inactive women; youth with unstable employment; workers with weak labour market attachment
Benefit-dependent programme participants	Maintain social/unemployment benefits Comply with caseworker's recommendations	Low	Early retirees with weak incentives to work
In-transition unemployed	Finding a job Starting a self-employment business	Moderate	Prime-age unemployed; long-term unemployed youth

All three profiles encompass distinct groups of vulnerable unemployed who face a combination of personal and, in some cases, family-related challenges alongside low work-related capabilities. Many of them encounter multiple barriers and have limited expectations or incentives for finding employment. Moreover, the training programmes they participate in are often tied to sectors with scarce job opportunities, further limiting their prospects.

3.2. Policies' Shortcomings and How Institutions Work

As mentioned above, the designation “active labour market policies” refers to various types of policies (Kluve et al., 2007), including, among others, training programmes, job search assistance, private-sector incentive schemes (like wage subsidies), and temporary job creation programmes in the public sector (Kelly et al., 2011). This article focuses on a specific type of ALMP, training programmes.

Over the past two decades, Portugal has developed a more robust training system for the working-age population, focusing on addressing low education and skill levels among adults. For those struggling to (re)enter the labour market, these initiatives—primarily led by the IEFP, the Portuguese PES—aim to enhance employability through skill development and labour market integration. Like other PES (Csillag & Scharle, 2019), the IEFP functions as a kind of *maestro*, coordinating various employment and vocational training initiatives.

IEFP is the public body responsible for employment and vocational training policies in Portugal, operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, while maintaining administrative and financial autonomy (OECD, 2024, p. 24). The IEFP comprises a range of services and operates through a decentralized structure, with five sub-national directorates covering mainland Portugal. These regional bodies are responsible for delivering a variety of services aimed at implementing ALMPs.

In its support for unemployed individuals, the IEFP acts as an intermediary between jobseekers and potential employers. Its vocational training programmes primarily target groups facing significant labour market disadvantages (Valadas, 2022), including the long-term unemployed, immigrants, low-skilled workers, persons with disabilities, and individuals experiencing severe social exclusion.

Over the years, the IEFP has implemented a wide range of employment and vocational training policies, adapting to increasingly diverse target groups and shifting priorities. While employment-related measures have been a primary focus, vocational training has gained prominence, addressing sector-specific skill needs. Despite these evolving priorities, the IEFP's training offerings have remained relatively stable.

For young people, qualification programmes include: (a) apprenticeship courses (*cursos de aprendizagem para jovens*), which provide both academic and professional certification, focusing on labour market integration; (b) youth education and training courses (CEFJ; *cursos de educação e formação de jovens*), primarily aimed at addressing early school dropout and deficits in academic and/or professional qualifications; and (c) technological specialisation courses (CET; *cursos de especialização tecnológica*), designed to equip students with scientific knowledge and technological skills to help them start a career.

For adults, the training offer includes: (a) adult education and training courses (EFA; *cursos de educação e formação de adultos*), which aim to establish secondary education as the minimum educational standard; (b) courses under the “Vida Ativa” programme; and (c) the Recognition, Validation, and Certification of Competencies measure (RVCC; *reconhecimento e validação e certificação de competências*; see also Dray, 2016, p. 208).

The target groups for most initiatives are young people—particularly those not employed, in education or training (NEET)—the long-term unemployed (particularly those with low levels of qualification), and individuals with disabilities.

In the period following the 2007–2008 financial crisis, when unemployment reached historically high levels (2011–2015), there was a diversification in the profiles of individuals seeking (new) employment amid a labour market with scarce job opportunities. At that time, the IEFP was called upon to adjust the types of programs and measures offered, redefine priority groups, and adapt its own operational model—particularly in response to a shrinking number of staff alongside a growing and exceptionally high number of new registrations. The preferred measures were aimed at quickly integrating individuals into the labour market. The vocational training offered during this period was predominantly short-term and non-certifying, mainly ensuring access to an occupation and/or precarious employment, especially for those in situations of greater social vulnerability, and often in the informal economy. During this time, priority was also given to beneficiaries of social benefits (e.g., unemployment benefits).

As the country's macroeconomic and labour market situation improved (OECD, 2024), it became necessary to readjust policies' goals and priorities. For example, even greater attention was given to individuals who had been excluded from the labour market for an extended period. Additionally, the need to enhance digital skills became more prominent. As the principle of vocational training programmes—particularly those aimed at the re-employment of low-skilled groups—remained strongly linked to increasing individuals' education levels and addressing their lack of skills, the available programmes continued to cover a limited range of

(mostly traditional) occupations. Among the occupations offered—such as hairdressing, metalwork, and machine operation—training follows a highly segmented framework composed mainly of short courses. These programmes frequently substitute for formal schooling among early school leavers or merely occupy older unemployed individuals. Yet, as Bonoli (2013, p. 26) observes, they “do not fundamentally change the type of job a person can do.” Moreover, they seldom provide vulnerable participants with the essential wraparound supports—such as housing assistance or social services—that might improve employability and remove non-work barriers (Sage, 2015).

Our case study confirms these shortcomings. Despite periodic investments in equipment and facilities, course materials, curricula, and learning objectives have not been sufficiently updated. The resulting standardized offerings—ranging from hairdressing and beauty therapy to locksmithing and automotive mechanics—remain limited in scope and less competitive than those in the private sector. Furthermore, local economic and social contexts—such as predominant industries and urgent community needs—are too often overlooked in programme design and delivery.

Interviews with PES caseworkers and officials underscore this occupation-centered approach, revealing a general lack of tailored, integrated strategies to address participants’ complex “wicked” social problems (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2020). Consequently, the programmes under study do not demonstrate sustained, long-term investment in human capital development. These shortcomings are especially critical in an era of automation and technological change, which has reduced opportunities in certain occupations (Susskind, 2020). Providing adequate, context-sensitive training for individuals who are temporarily or long-term out of the labour market is therefore essential. Nevertheless, many existing programmes are poorly designed and fail to address the diverse support needs of those facing multiple labour-market challenges (Greve & Paster, 2022, p. 281).

Even among individuals with prior work experience who are motivated to enhance their skills, as was one of our interview groups, training programmes frequently fail to account for their personal and social challenges, broader employment barriers, and the prevailing economic context. This oversight is critical, as the effectiveness of ALMPs also hinges on factors such as the business cycle, firms’ competitiveness, national income levels, and institutional capacity (Simões & Tosun, 2024).

3.3. Unanticipated or Unintended Consequences of Training Programmes for Vulnerable Unemployed Groups in Portugal

The target audience of the initiatives developed by IEFP—particularly training programmes—includes individuals seeking employment as well as those who, while employed, wish to change jobs. In addition to the formal categorization used to classify the unemployed into four major groups—registered unemployed, employed, occupied, and unavailable—an IEFP official interviewed highlighted two key characteristics of the recipients of IEFP policies: availability and work capacity. The same interviewee also emphasized the special attention that IEFP gives to individuals in situations of greater vulnerability. This concern is reflected in the type of training offered, which includes programmes specifically designed for long-term unemployed individuals and for groups facing difficulties in accessing the labour market.

In the selection and guidance of candidates for different training opportunities, employment, and/or vocational training, officers apply formal criteria defined by regulations that govern each action/measure.

In the case of unemployed individuals, specific criteria such as qualification level, age, and duration of unemployment are considered. Alongside the formal criteria that determine eligibility for participation in a specific programme, other factors influence the selection and integration of unemployed individuals into various programmes. Certain personal characteristics, such as motivation, cognitive abilities, language proficiency, and level/potential for commitment, are valued in the selection and redistribution process. Additionally, it is important to consider factors that impact the functioning of the training programmes themselves: (a) dropout rates from courses and (b) the number of trainees successfully integrated into the labour market. Thus, it becomes evident that the (pre)existence of indicators demonstrating the potential success of these measures is taken into account by employment officers during the (pre)selection of candidates.

This is a recurring topic in various international studies. Referring to the American context, Heckman and Smith (2004) have shown how participation in certain social programmes involves different stages (eligibility, programme awareness, application, acceptance into the programme, and formal enrolment), which can lead to unequal access to programmes among different groups. In a more recent study with a specific focus on labour market policies, Bonoli and Liechti (2018) analyse how the stages and criteria behind a rigorous selection process determine whether the most vulnerable unemployed individuals are included in these programmes. More specifically, the authors distinguish two phases in the candidate selection process: the “eligibility” phase, based on formal criteria that must be met to participate, and the “inclusion” phase, which depends on additional characteristics such as local language proficiency, a certain cognitive level, and motivation. As a result, there is a potential mismatch between eligible candidates and those who participate in the programmes. These analyses align with our own empirical research and lead us to question whether individuals at higher risk of labour market exclusion and with greater integration vulnerabilities ultimately end up being excluded from the selection process or redirected to lower-skilled programmes. In other words, we question whether eligibility criteria themselves might be contributing to exclusion.

The rise of the green economy and the expansion of green jobs signal the need for new skill sets. However, equipping workers who face multiple vulnerabilities remains a significant challenge. Although the Portuguese labour market and qualification levels—especially among young adults—have improved in recent years, adult educational attainment in Portugal continues to lag behind international standards, especially within older age cohorts (OECD, 2024, p. 22). Among the working-age population (25–64 years old), both non-tertiary and tertiary attainment rates remain below the EU average, highlighting the ongoing need to strengthen adult and alternative education pathways. In 2022, Portugal’s adult learning participation rate stood at 44.2%, slightly below the EU average of 46.6%. These persistent gaps underscore how longstanding structural limitations continue to constrain efforts to realign employment policies with the demands of the 21st-century labour market.

Drawing on Merton’s (1936, p. 896) concept of “unanticipated consequences,” it is crucial to examine how formal training policies—designed to promote labour-market (re)insertion—can sometimes fail vulnerable participants or even produce harmful effects. For instance, programme participation may engender stigmatization, especially among the most disadvantaged groups. Our case study reveals that the interaction of individual vulnerabilities and institutional constraints undermines participants’ chances of securing stable, quality employment. Moreover, the very nature of the skills imparted by these training programmes can both shape and, in some instances, constrain jobseekers’ employment prospects (Kelly et al., 2011, p. 15). These

limitations are most pronounced when participants do not match the profile for which the programmes were originally designed (Benda et al., 2019) or when employers remain sceptical about the programmes' quality and the extent of participants' skill development (Martin, 2015).

Our research aligns with existing studies, suggesting that those most in need of new or additional skills are often the least likely to participate in training programmes that provide access to secure and high-quality employment (Bonoli et al., 2017; Bonoli & Liechti, 2018). This phenomenon reflects the “Matthew effect,” whereby social policies disproportionately benefit those with fewer needs—typically the middle class and higher-educated—thereby undermining the equalizing intent of such interventions and, in some cases, exacerbating disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Yerkes et al., 2022, p. 295). Focusing on active employment policies, Bonoli and Liechti (2018) show that even when programmes are explicitly directed at vulnerable groups—such as the long-term unemployed, low-qualified workers, or immigrant populations—it is not necessarily the least advantaged who benefit most from initiatives designed to improve labour-market integration or access to social protection (e.g., health care, education, family support). They attribute this “Matthew effect” in part to two complementary mechanisms. First, participation in training, for example, presumes a baseline level of knowledge (such as language proficiency) and/or existing skills. Second, these programmes often anticipate and reproduce the very selection processes that participants will face in the labour market (Bonoli & Liechti, 2018, p. 897). McKnight (2015) further underscores that low expectations and the limited returns delivered by active policies for “vulnerable unemployed” make it difficult to achieve promising outcomes—particularly in the absence of substantial political commitment and investment. Together, these insights underscore that without substantial political investment, inter-policy coherence, and wraparound support, even well-intentioned active labour market programmes risk reproducing existing inequalities and yielding only limited benefits for those they are designed to help.

4. Conclusion

As the world faces unprecedented environmental challenges that threaten both human society and the physical environment, the social implications of global ecological risks—identified by Beck (1992) several years ago—have become even more evident. In this context, EU institutions have sought to follow a trajectory—albeit an uncertain one—that aims to reconcile social and ecological objectives. Given the rapidly changing economic, social, digital, and demographic landscape, it is crucial to equip workers with training and new sorts of skills to meet evolving labour market demands. Despite the potentialities attributed to the Social Investment approach in facilitating life-course transition and human capital policies, specific interventions targeting unemployed individuals from vulnerable groups do not necessarily increase their chances of (re)entering and succeeding in the labour market.

Considering the experience of Portugal, some of the schemes designed for vulnerable populations—aimed at improving their preparedness through investment in skills and education—continue to show signs of ineffectiveness in promoting their social and labour market participation. While at the ideational level, Portuguese authorities demonstrate a cooperative willingness to advance training policies, several institutional constraints persist. The analysis of specific programmes reveals that they fail to address the complex needs of vulnerable unemployed—not only in terms of employment, but also in granting access to health, education, and other social services—as they lack a tailor-made support and fail to provide a holistic

policy and institutional approach. This creates additional challenges for individuals whose social and labour market conditions are already highly precarious.

Despite the limitations of this study's empirical scope, the findings suggest that the planning and design of vocational training courses in Portugal may restrict jobseekers' ability to improve their employability and secure adequate employment. More effective and inclusive initiatives remain constrained by long-standing institutional arrangements—namely, the structure of labour market governance, inefficient allocation of welfare resources, fragmented policy frameworks, and redistributive mechanisms that reproduce inequality. In this context, the core objectives of social investment—particularly those related to upskilling, inclusion, and the promotion of quality employment—have yet to be fully realised in Southern European countries such as Portugal. This undermines the potential of ALMPs to act as preventive mechanisms against persistent unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion.

From a historical institutionalist perspective, the case of Portugal illustrates how entrenched bureaucratic routines, organisational inertia, and path-dependent policy legacies continue to shape the design and implementation of ALMPs, including EU-framed training programmes. Rather than transformative reform, what can be observed is incremental adjustment—where new goals and priorities, such as those embedded in the EPSR and the EGD, are layered onto existing institutional structures without fundamentally altering their logic or effectiveness. EU-level pressures—whether coercive, normative, or mimetic—often clash with national institutional trajectories and administrative capacities, leading to a selective or partial appropriation of reform agendas. As such, the slow pace of institutional change highlights the enduring influence of historical trajectories in shaping the possibilities and limits of labour market and social policy innovation in Portugal.

Three key themes emerging from this research warrant further examination. First, as technological advances continually transform both the nature of work and how it is carried out, it is essential to acknowledge that many individuals lack the necessary technical skills and possess limited learning capacities and social competencies. This raises the question of whether social integration through employment is the sole—or even the most effective—pathway. Second, territorial specificities must be considered. In Portugal, significant variations exist in how PES agencies operate and collaborate with local and regional stakeholders to address jobseekers' social and economic needs. Moreover, factors such as business dynamics, the availability of employment opportunities, transport infrastructure, housing costs, and access to health and educational services directly influence vulnerable individuals' ability to reintegrate into the labour market. Third, while rising pollution and climate change present significant risks, they also create new employment opportunities and drive policies toward a more sustainable, green economy. This underscores the necessity of training programmes that target emerging skill sets and equip all individuals—including the most vulnerable—to pursue alternative forms of work and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Equipping individuals for the challenges of a green economy and digital industries remains a considerable challenge, as it must be balanced with respect for their complex needs and overall well-being. This is particularly true for those with multiple vulnerabilities enrolled in traditional training programmes, whose prospects for successful integration into 21st-century societies remain significantly constrained. Up until now, structural constraints continue to limit the autonomy of public policies' PES units and their practitioners.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Author



Carla Valadas is an adjunct professor at the School of Education and Social Sciences, Department of Social Sciences, at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (ESECS-IPL), and a Research Fellow at CEIS20, University of Coimbra. Her research focuses on European social policy, the Southern European welfare state regime, unemployment and job insecurity, and labour market policies.