

Analysis of the Impact of the European Social Fund on the SME Sector in Poland

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The aim of this article is to assess the impact of the European Social Fund (ESF) on the development of human capital in the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector. The methodology for the preparation of the projects implemented under the Knowledge, Education and Development Programme was analysed. Since 2004, the ESF has directly influenced all the main determinants of Poland's economic development by supporting the pursuit of a high level of employment, improvement of access to the labour market and professional mobility of employees. It facilitates adaptation to the changes taking place in industry, enables the organisation of training for professional activity and supports the transition of young people from education to employment. It is also one of the main factors strengthening the process of the incubation of new business activities.

In the article, the author highlights the problems related to the functioning of the SME sector and, above all, the unacceptably low level of involvement from employers and employees in the education process. This low level of involvement produces low quality human capital which is unable to face the challenges and changes currently taking place on the labour market.

Keywords: European Social Fund, projects, labour market, operational programmes

Analiza wpływu Europejskiego Funduszu Społecznego na sektor MSP w Polsce

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Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba oceny wpływu Europejskiego Funduszu Społecznego (EFS) na rozwój kapitału ludzkiego w sektorze MSP. Analizie poddano metodologię przygotowania projektów realizowanych w ramach Programu Operacyjnego Wiedza Edukacja Rozwój (PO WER).

Od 2004 roku EFS wpływa bezpośrednio na wszystkie główne determinanty rozwoju gospodarczego Polski, wspierając dążenie do wysokiego poziomu zatrudnienia, poprawę dostępu do rynku pracy oraz mobilność zawodową pracowników. Ułatwia dostosowanie się do zmian zachodzących w przemyśle, umożliwia organizację szkoleń na rzecz aktywności zawodowej oraz wspiera przechodzenie młodych ludzi z etapów kształcenia do zatrudnienia. Jest także jednym z głównych czynników wzmacniających proces inkubacji nowych działalności gospodarczych.

W artykule wskazano na problemy związane z funkcjonowaniem sektora MSP, a przede wszystkim zbyt niski stopień zaangażowania pracodawców i pracowników w procesie kształcenia. To z kolei wpływa na

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niską jakość kapitału ludzkiego, który nie jest w stanie sprostać wyzwaniom i zmianom zachodzącym obecnie na rynku pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: Europejski Fundusz Społeczny, projekty, rynek pracy, programy operacyjne.

JEL: D22, L26, M21

1. Introduction

The oldest European structural fund is the European Social Fund (ESF), which co-finances employment and human resource development policies. Similarly to the other structural funds, its specific tasks and functioning have evolved. The reforms concerned two main directions. First, like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the ESF has increasingly become an instrument of the Community employment policy. Secondly, it has evolved from an independent fund separate from other structural funds to an integral financial instrument based on coordination and cooperation with other instruments of the European Union's regional policy (Głąbicka and Grewiński, 2003).

As a financial instrument of regional development policy, the ESF is now primarily a dynamic instrument of employment policy and is used to combat unemployment in a specific area with the aim of implementing tasks under the European Employment Strategy¹. The fundamental tasks of the fund focus on co-financing activities oriented towards the labour market and development of human resource potential (Domiter and Marciszewska, 2013). As regards human resource development, ESF interventions include, inter alia: the development and promotion of active labour market policies aimed at counteracting and preventing unemployment, counteracting long-term unemployment; facilitating the reintegration of the unemployed and supporting vocational integration of young people entering the labour market and of people re-entering the labour market; supporting vocational training, education and career guidance – understood as elements of the lifelong learning system – in order to facilitate and improve access to the labour market, maintain and raise qualifications of employees and increase their professional mobility; enhancing the potential of qualified and adaptable staff; supporting innovation and adaptation potential in the area of work organisation; developing entrepreneurship and conditions conducive to job creation and improvement of qualifications.

As regards the forms of support, the ESF is also aimed at improving the efficiency of employment services, developing links between the world of work and education, training and research institutions, and developing mechanisms for anticipating changes in demand for labour and relevant qualifications. Since Member States and their regions have different employment systems and structures and diverse problems on the labour market,

the European Union leaves the choice of concepts and areas of support so that money is best used (Kubisz, 2001).

In addition, the activities co-financed by the ESF include Community innovative actions and technical assistance. In this context, the ESF finances innovative, research and pilot projects aimed at identifying and analysing regional development problems and solutions that can contribute to harmonious and sustainable socio-economic development, including the support for the development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) as one of the main areas of concentration of actions under the Strategy for Responsible Development² (Nowak, 2017).

The goal of this article is to present the European Social Fund as the main factor that has been affecting the Polish labour market since 2004 and to outline the results of quantitative research on the impact of EU funds on identified determinants.

The research problem is: which of the identified determinants are the most important in the process of changes on the labour market for people participating in projects co-financed from the ESF, not only leading to an increase in economic activity but also raising employment rates?

The research hypothesis is: the development of professional skills/competences is the most vital element within the set of defined factors affecting the shape of the labour market.

2. Operational Programmes and Their Impact on the Functioning of the Labour Market

In the first programming period 2004–2006, the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resource Development (SOP HRD) was the measure for creating conditions for obtaining employment, supporting entrepreneurship, improving human resources in the economy and actively promoting equality on the labour market. The objective of this programme was to build an open knowledge-based society by ensuring conditions for the development of human resources through education, training and work. As part of the Community Support Framework and based on the general objective, specific objectives were defined in relation to human resource development, namely to improve employability by developing the quality of human resources and promoting entrepreneurial attitudes, to increase educational attainments of the Polish society, to improve the adaptability of enterprises and their employees, to strengthen the policy of equal opportunities on the labour market, including equal opportunities for men and women (Tkaczyński, Willa and Świstak, 2009).

The improvement of employability and professional qualifications of the population is one of the most important objectives of socio-economic policy, shaping the landscape of the country's regional policy in 2004–2006. Individual employability was primarily determined by professional qualifica-

tions, mental and socio-demographic characteristics, which were influenced by: education, access to education, planning of intellectual, professional and social development.

Under the SOP HRD, projects supporting structures and systems were implemented. This concerned the development and refinement of training and education and the improvement of professional qualifications, including training for teachers, trainers and employees. Moreover, the programme supported modernisation and improvement of the efficiency of the labour market, creation of links between the world of work and science, and development of mechanisms for anticipating changes in employment and demand for professional qualifications.

Two main priorities were defined to achieve the objectives: the first one was an active policy for the labour market and professional and social integration, the second priority was the development of a knowledge-based society. When observing the changes on the labour market and analysing implemented projects, it can be stated that it was the implementation of the first priority that enabled the strengthening of the potential of institutional customer service provided by employment services and the support for the development of active forms of employment for all job seekers and the unemployed (MGiP, 2004). The enhancement of the institutional system led to its modernisation, creation of new mechanisms and conditions enabling the use of new work methods and techniques. The planned actions required the application of separate instruments taking into account various aspects of unemployment, including psychological, social and family problems (MGiP, 2004).

The long-term effect is a change in the attitudes of both employers and people at risk of social exclusion and an increase in the number of business starters. In addition, the implemented actions contributed to greater participation of women in the labour market and the promotion of sensitivity to equal opportunities for women and men in employment³.

As regards support for social institutions and partners, the effects of the implemented programme included greater efficiency of these actors, a broader offer of services delivered by them and better coordination of activities, greater openness to problems resulting from social exclusion, and dissemination of solutions for professional and social integration (MRR, 2008).

Summing up the implementation of the SOP HRD, the implemented actions had a direct bearing on the improvement of the potential and competitiveness of human capital and the development of micro-enterprises, among others by supporting the development of alternative forms of employment. Nearly a quarter of the funds, around EUR 500 million, helped support an active labour market policy, including the elimination of unemployment and assistance for young people in finding a job. A substantial part, approximately EUR 400 million, was allocated to the enhancement of the

innovation potential and the development of entrepreneurship for the creation of new jobs in small and medium-sized enterprises. Among the implemented projects, the largest group comprised 1289 projects (47%) regarding “Vocational Training Development” with a total value of PLN 470.8 million. The second position was taken by 739 projects (27%) concerning labour market policy with a value of PLN 709.6 million. The third, significant group of 404 projects (15%) with a value of PLN 216.6 million included actions strengthening the adaptation potential of employees, entrepreneurship, innovation, communication and information technologies. Other projects worth almost PLN 221 million specifically concerned the activation of socially excluded and long-term unemployed people (<https://www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl/strony/o-funduszach/raporty/raporty-sprawozdania/stan-wdrazenia-funduszy-europejskich-w-polsce-w-latach-2014-2020-wnioski-o-platnosc-do-certyfikacji-wedlug-celu-tematycznego-i-kategorii-interwencji/>).

The operational programme for 2007–2014, which was a continuation of the actions under the SOP HRD, was the Human Capital Operational Programme. The improvement of employability and professional qualifications of the population was one of major objectives of socio-economic policy in 2007–2013. Under the HC OP, projects supporting employment and social integration, development of human resources, regional human resources, and development of education and competences in the regions were implemented (Dubel, 2015).

The implementation of the HC OP involved, on the one hand, support for improving the qualifications of employees and, on the other, an impact on the labour market, which was characterised (in 2007–2013) by a high unemployment rate (the average for this period is about 11.8%) (GUS, access: 4 June 2019) resulting from, among others, structural factors including the mismatch between labour supply and the needs of a modernising economy. Therefore, greater employment was one of the main priorities of the HC OP and the support focused on lines of action, i.e. on increasing the efficiency and quality of services provided by labour market institutions, while boosting the employment potential and professional activity of those unemployed and professionally inactive. At the same time, the specificity of the Polish labour market required, on the one hand, the creation of uniform standards of services provided to the unemployed throughout the country and, on the other, a reduction of interregional and local differences in access to employment and in the level of human capital development (MRR, 2007).

Increased adaptability of employees and entrepreneurs was one of the key challenges for the Polish economy, in particular for the labour market. This was because the socio-economic diagnosis and SWOT analysis contained in the National Cohesion Strategy revealed that the fundamental problems occurring in Poland in the area of adaptability and knowledge transfer were primarily: a low level of professional activity, insufficient use

of flexible forms of employment and work organisation; low participation of people of working age in lifelong learning processes; and a lack of sufficient support for employees of restructured industries and enterprises. The key issue in the area of adaptability was and still is the adjustment of qualifications of the professionally active population to the needs of the labour market and the promotion of the idea of lifelong learning in line with the objectives set out in the European Employment Strategy.

The financial envelope for HC OP was EUR 9.7 billion, of which the most, 19.8% (EUR 1.9 billion), was allocated to the development of an open labour market for all. The next two largest parts were actions implemented under: development of education and competences in the regions (14.9%, EUR 1.4 billion) and development of regional human resources (13.9%, EUR 1.3 billion) (<https://www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl/en/>).

The presented percentage distribution of HC OP allocations among individual support areas reflects the importance of human resource development challenges in Poland, taking into account the experience gained during the implementation of the SOP HRD. The implemented actions also reflect the objectives of human capital development adopted under the National Cohesion Strategy for 2007–2013 and the European Union's policy aimed at boosting professional activity and employability, reducing areas of social exclusion, increasing the potential of public administration and enhancing territorial cohesion (Schwabe, 2015).

Summing up the implementation of HC OP under the main priority addressed to the labour market, *employment and social integration*, 88% of the planned allocation was settled, i.e. approximately PLN 1.6 billion. Such a good result was achieved not only due to efficient implementation of the HC OP. A positive impact of HC OP interventions for the labour market contributed to the achievement of the objective of maintaining the employment rate (64% for the 20–64 age group) (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=t2020_10&plugin=1) although the general situation on the labour market, especially in 2009–2012, was influenced by the global economic crisis. Thus, we can positively assess the impact of the HC OP on, among others, reducing the distance between Poland and the EU-28 in terms of the situation on the labour market, regarding its contribution to both lowering unemployment and increasing the competitiveness of employees.

The central objective of the current so-called third programming period for 2014–2020 in the area of human capital building and labour market support is to improve the quality of labour market institutions and the labour market competitiveness. This objective is implemented through actions under the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development (OP KED).

Shorter unemployment, higher professional qualifications and improved employability are among the most significant objectives of socio-economic

policy by 2020. Currently, employability is primarily determined by high professional qualifications influenced by: education, access to education, planning of intellectual, professional and social development. Therefore, the main areas of financial support under OP KED for 2014–2020 include, apart from typical employment, geographical and professional mobility of employees, lifelong learning ability, changes in industry and production systems necessary for sustainable development (MIiR, 2018).

In order to achieve these goals, instead of defining one general objective, several objectives have been set and harmonised directly with the adopted priority axes. These encompass reduced social exclusion (especially in regions with the lowest GDP per capita), support for transnational mobility and support for young people (up to 29 years of age) on their path to employment under the so-called *Youth Employment Initiative*. This initiative is addressed to people who are not in education, employment or training (so-called NEETs), including the long-term unemployed or those who have not registered as jobseekers. The initiative finances actions such as apprenticeships, internships, job placement and education leading to qualifications.

In order to ensure the attainment of the OP KED objectives, four main priority axes and the fifth axis concerning technical assistance have been created, with the latter financing actions necessary for the correct preparation, operation, implementation and settlement of the programme. The value of allocations and sources of funding are presented in Table 1.

No.	Priority axis	Source of funding	EU co-financing in EUR billion
1	Young people on the labour market + Youth initiative	ESF	1.7
2	Efficient public policies for the labour market, economy and education	ESF	0.7
3	Higher education for the economy and development	ESF	1.1
4	Social innovation and transnational cooperation	ESF	0.6
5	Technical assistance	ESF	0.3
		Total	4.4

Tab. 1. Sources of funding for OP KED and value of allocations for priority axes. Source: Prepared by the author based on: <https://www.power.gov.pl> (access: 2 June 2019).

Pursuant to the Partnership Agreement⁴ adopted for 2014–2020, the allocation from the European Social Fund for OP KED amounts to around EUR 4.4 billion and around EUR 0.3 billion under the *Youth Employment Initiative*. The total financial envelope for the implementation of the objectives by 2020 is approximately EUR 4.7 billion. Allocated funds will be

used at two levels: regional and national, and have been divided into 66% and 34%, respectively. Greater allocation of funds at the regional level not only increases the efficiency and sustainability of implemented projects but, above all, solves the most severe employment problems in individual regions.

An analysis of tasks adopted for individual OP KED axes and documents implementing EU funds under the ESF for 2014–2020 indicates that two programme axes are particularly important for the labour market in achieving the expected results. These are: *Young people on the labour market* with the component of the *Youth initiative* and *Efficient public policies for the labour market, economy and education*. The total envelope for interventions carried out under them is approximately EUR 2.4 billion out of the total OP KED allocation (MiR, 2018).

The first axis assumes increased activity of young people without employment through gaining or supplementing professional experience, competences and qualifications necessary on the labour market. Important forms of support are actions raising the number of newly established businesses and enhancing intersectoral mobility, among others, by organising high-quality training in accordance with the European and Polish Quality Frameworks for Apprenticeships and Internships⁵.

Under the second axis, namely *Efficient public policies for the labour market, economy and education*, actions are implemented to enhance employment sustainability, ensure high quality and professional mobility, raise the competences of the staff of public institutions, support the incubation and development of the micro and small enterprise sector by preparing such enterprises for the efficient use of the funds for services and by determining employment needs. Selected projects focus on improving the quality of human capital, thus shortening the time spent looking for a job. A significant element is the involvement of employers in the planning and implementation of active forms of employment.

Summing up the current level of spending of allocated funds under the presented OP KED priority axes at the end of 2018, the implementation rate is approximately 25% (Funduszeuropejskie, access: 6 June 2019). Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the entire implementation of the programme can be evaluated after the current programming period is closed, i.e. in 2021 at the earliest, and a full evaluation will be made in 2022.

3. Research

Statistical Description of the Research Sample and Respondents

277 people took part in the survey ($N = 277$). 32.9% of the respondents were men ($N = 91$) and 67.1% of those surveyed were women ($N = 186$). Among the respondents, people who had completed graduate university studies ($N = 234$) predominated, constituting 84.5% of the respondents.

13% of those surveyed were people with undergraduate university education ($N = 36$), while 2.5% of them had completed vocational and secondary education ($N = 7$).

Most respondents work in the public administration sector ($N = 162$), which is more than half of those surveyed – 58.5%, and 12.3% of them work in large enterprises ($N = 34$). A comparable number of respondents ($N = 36$) work in the medium-sized enterprise sector and in the micro and small enterprise sector ($N = 25$). In the group surveyed, there were only two entrepreneurs ($N = 2$), and the remaining group ($N = 18$) consisted of employees of non-governmental organisations.

Description of the Research Tool

In the quantitative research, a pen and pencil survey tool was used to determine the impact of EU funds on the labour market for five identified items: *impact on the development of professional competences*, *impact on the increase in the quality of life*, *impact on the enhancement of competitiveness on the labour market*, *impact on the lowering of poverty level*, *impact on gender equality in access to the labour market*. The selection of items was based on the analysis of evaluation studies and reports published by Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies as well as the author's own observations from the perspective of over 15 years of developing and managing implemented EU projects.

The respondents' task was to answer, on a four-point scale, how strong the impact of EU funds was on the indicated determinants. Answers were given on a scale from 0 to 3 points (0 – no effect, 1 – weak, 2 – moderate, 3 – strong).

Results

Figure 1 presents graphically the results of the answers given by the respondents.

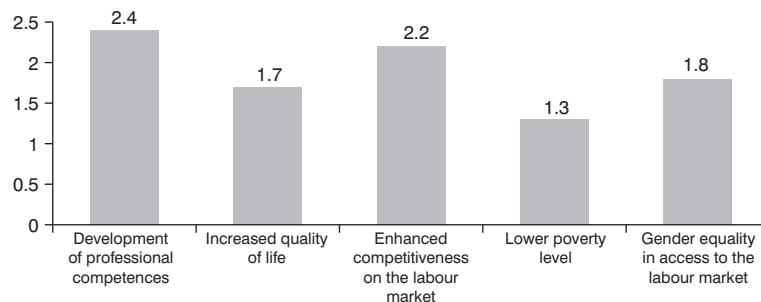


Fig. 1. Average values for individual determinants. Source: Prepared by the author.

As we can see, the respondents think that EU funds from the ESF have the strongest impact on the development of professional competences and the enhancement of competitiveness on the labour market, which is directly related to acquired competences. The obtained result is consistent, among others, with the results contained in the final report on the implementation of the HC OP. Most participants benefited from support under the regional component (66.2%, i.e. 6.5 million people) while slightly more than 3 million people participated in projects under the central component (33.8%, i.e. 3.3 million people). Almost 9.5 million people completed participation in HC OP projects. They represent 96% of those starting their participation. The majority of people, 4.2 million, benefited from support precisely under the priorities leading to the development of professional competences, i.e. the priority addressing *development of education and competences in the regions* and the priority of *labour market for all* (MR, 2017). It can therefore be concluded that the adopted research hypothesis that the development of professional skills/competences is the most vital element within the set of defined determinants affecting the shape of the labour market has been confirmed.

When analysing the assessment of the impact of EU funds on the other determinants, it was found that there were differences between the answers given by women and men regarding the strength of impact on the indicated factors (Table 2).

Gender		Development of professional competences	Increased quality of life	Enhanced competitiveness on the labour market	Lower poverty level	Gender equality in access to the labour market
Man	N	91	91	91	91	91
	Mean (M)	2.46	1.70	2.19	1.20	1.71
	Standard deviation (SD)	0.66	0.78	0.66	0.77	0.92
Woman	N	186	186	186	186	186
	Mean (M)	2.35	1.70	2.16	1.36	1.85
	Standard deviation (SD)	0.72	0.78	0.68	0.82	0.93

Tab. 2. Statistics for assessing the impact of EU funds by gender. Source: Prepared by the author.

A non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was performed comparing the groups of men and women. It turned out that women assess the impact of EU funds on reducing poverty (M = 1.36, SD = 0.82) as significantly stronger

(the level of statistical tendency) compared to men (1.20, SD = 0.77). $U(127.59, 144.58) = 7425.00; p=0,075$. There were no significant differences in means between men and women as regards the assessment of the impact of EU funds on: development of professional competences, increased quality of life, enhanced competitiveness on the labour market, and gender equality in access to the labour market.

4. Conclusion

The accession of 10 new countries escalated the disparities in the development of regions due to income inequalities and their significant increase. However, from the perspective of 15 years of EU membership, we can unequivocally state that we have seized the opportunity offered by EU accession. We were and are the largest net recipient of EU support at the level of over EUR 11 billion (at the end of 2018) (MF, access: 6 June 2019).

The analysis of the European Social Fund as one of the main determinants shaping the Polish labour market from the perspective of selected operational programmes and the conducted research process confirm the adopted hypothesis regarding the development of professional skills/competences as the most vital element within the set of defined determinants affecting the shape of the labour market. It directly boosts professional activity and reduces unemployment. I was inspired to put forward such a hypothesis by observations of projects implemented since 2004 in which I was a manager or leader. People completing various types of ESF-funded support improve their qualifications, competitiveness and increase their professional activity. However, the following question arises: how do the acquired knowledge and skills currently translate into permanent employment and is the current labour market not actually shaped by alternative forms of employment combined with the flexicurity principle? This will be the next stage of my research.

Endnotes

- ¹ In November 1997, during the Luxembourg Summit, the Treaty of Amsterdam was adopted, providing the basis for the principles of the European Employment Strategy (EES). The strategy defines the scale of Member States' tasks and actions aimed at reducing unemployment, poverty and social marginalisation. The European Employment Strategy is based on four pillars: employability – endeavours to ensure that the unemployed have the opportunity to be re-employed; entrepreneurship – strives to make it easier for EU citizens to start their own business; adaptability of employees and employers – promotes modernisation of work organisation and flexibility of working time; equal opportunities – looks for ways to reconcile work and family life.
- ² The Strategy for Responsible Development is a comprehensive response to both hitherto transformation errors and new challenges faced by broadly defined socio-economic policy of the Polish state. It aims to unleash entrepreneurship, inventiveness and productivity. The document presents the challenges faced by the Polish economy

(so-called development traps) and outlines examples of economic, financial and institutional instruments.

- ³ Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 of the EP and of the Council... The ESF supports activities aimed at improving access to employment, increasing the sustainable participation and progress of women in employment, and reducing gender-based segregation in the labour market by addressing the root causes, direct and indirect, of gender pay gaps (...).
- ⁴ The Partnership Agreement for 2014–2020 defines the directions of intervention under Cohesion Policy, the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy.
- ⁵ The Polish Quality Framework for Internships and Apprenticeships is an initiative that aims to set the highest standards for internships and apprenticeships in enterprises. It contains norms and standards for the implementation of high-quality internship and apprenticeship programmes in enterprises.

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