

## EDUCATION AS AN AREA OF ESF SUPPORT IN POLAND IN 2004-2020

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**Purpose:** Problematic areas in the field of education in Poland have been mentioned in strategic documents, necessary for the implementation of the cohesion policy, in all three previous financial perspectives of the European Union. In the face of changes in the socio-economic reality of the EU countries, education has become more and more present in the areas of intervention of the European Social Fund. The aim of the article is to evaluate the current Polish experience in the system of supporting education and lifelong learning under the ESF in the years 2004-2020. It is also a summary of nearly 20 years of involvement of this company in Poland.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article analyses the literature relating to both the Structural Funds in Poland, with particular emphasis on the ESF, as well as problem areas in the field of education, constituting the potential scope of the Fund's intervention. The article also includes an analysis of programming documents, as well as operational programmes at the national level, containing instruments to support education and lifelong learning in Poland from the ESF funds in the years 2004-2020.

**Findings:** For nearly twenty years, Poland, as a beneficiary of the social policy, has benefited from support instruments within the competence of the ESF, also in the area of education and lifelong learning. For nearly two decades, in successive EU financial perspectives, a system of support for education and the idea of lifelong learning has been created, responding to the greatest needs of this area of human activity. It included further priorities and areas of support, which corresponded to increasing financial resources. Studies have shown the effectiveness of ESF financial intervention in many areas, but there are still deficits that will be supported in the coming perspectives.

**Originality/value:** The article contains one of the first summaries of the functioning of the system of support for education and lifelong learning from the European Social Fund in Poland, mainly in the context of nationwide operational programmes.

**Keywords:** Structural Funds, European Social Fund, education, lifelong learning.

**Category of the paper:** research paper, viewpoint.

## 1. Introduction

The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the oldest structural policy instruments of the European Union. Established in 1957, at the beginning of its operation, the fund was mainly responsible for supporting the sphere related to the employment of labour and its mobility. However, along with the changing socio-economic reality of the countries and regions of the Community, the scope of ESF intervention has changed and expanded. Nowadays, it is identified with broadly understood human capital, and here also with education policy and the idea of lifelong learning.

Polish problem areas in the field of education in Poland have been mentioned in all structural policy programming documents since the beginning of Poland's presence in the European Union. Along with the evolution of the ESF areas of intervention, the areas of support from this fund in Poland were expanded in the years 2004-2006, then 2007-2013 and 2014-2020.

The nearly 20-year period of Polish's presence in the EU is the time when the system of using structural funds, including the ESF, was created and improved. The availability of these funds has always been conditioned by the creation of a number of strategic documents, which subsequently gave rise to operational programmes, both national and regional. All of them were the subject of negotiations between the Polish and EU parties.

The article is an attempt to summarize the Polish experience in formulating areas of support for education and lifelong learning, as well as building support instruments in the form of operational programs co-financed by the ESF: the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SPO RZL), the Human Capital Operational Programme (PO KL) and the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development (POWER).

## 2. Education in the EU's structural policy and as an area of ESF support

Polish's accession to the European Union in 2004 was a breakthrough moment for the socio-economic reality of both the whole country and its individual regions. One of the most important means of increasing the cohesion of Polish regions with the regions of the Community have become the Structural Funds, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (Poteralski, 2023, p. 127).

One of the most important EU policies is cohesion policy. Its aim is to promote the harmonious development of the entire territory of the European Union through measures leading to the reduction of disparities in the levels of development of its regions, and thus to the strengthening of the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the Community. Thanks to

the appropriate targeting of activities implemented under the cohesion policy with the financial support of the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund, regions characterized by a lower level of development have a chance to catch up with the development backlog and significantly accelerate the processes aimed at achieving convergence with other regions and countries of the Community (Poteralski, 2011, p. 346).

Education policy has become one of the important elements of state policy, which after Polish's accession to the EU has been subject to changes. The reforms implemented in this area resulted, on the one hand, from Polish's membership in the EU, but to a large extent they were also the result of the need to adapt education to the contemporary realities of social and economic life. Nowadays, education is of fundamental importance for the development of society, the growth of prosperity and competitiveness. Economic and social changes force a redefinition of education policy, both in terms of its subjects, objectives, as well as the content of teaching and addressees. More and more often there is talk of "education policy" in the context of not only the activities of the state, but also various activities of local governments and the EU. In this sense, the EU can be treated as a subject of education policy (Maj-Waśniowska, 2016, pp. 151-152).

Education policy is not mentioned among the main issues of interest to the EU, but usually includes areas such as the common agricultural policy, regional policy or monetary policy. This is due to the conditions of the EU's common economic and monetary policy (Maj-Waśniowska, 2016, p. 152).

Education policy is one of the spheres of social life of the Member States, guaranteed by the Association Treaties, which is independently shaped by the authorities at national level. The educational priorities of individual EU Member States result from strategic, planning and implementation documents at the national level (Rudowska, 2021, pp. 359-360).

In the light of the definitions quoted in the studies, education policy focuses on the principles of organizing education systems, providing them with appropriate financial foundations, and finally defining the principles of education management. The scope of education policy also includes the need to determine the shape and content of teaching. Rather, the EU's actions in the field of education seem to be a set of objectives and tools in the field of education undertaken by the Union in order to carry out certain tasks with a broader socio-economic context (Maj-Waśniowska, 2016, p. 152).

The European Social Fund (ESF), along with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), is one of the two most important structural funds of the European Union. The main areas to be supported by the fund are the labour market, the fight against poverty and the quality of human capital. In the era of intensive struggle with the problem of unemployment, such issues as raising managerial qualifications and ensuring high quality of management in both public institutions and business entities were pushed into the background (Poteralski, 2021, pp. 89-90).

The European Social Fund was created to improve the employability of workers in the internal market and thus contribute to raising the standard of living, which in turn is one of the fundamental objectives of the European Union's cohesion policy. One of the objectives of ESF-funded support and programmes is to adapt workers to changes in industry and production systems, in particular through vocational training and retraining. (Jarmołowicz, Knapieńska, 2005, pp. 226-232).

The main pillars of ESF activity are the improvement of employment opportunities, the development of entrepreneurship, the improvement of the adaptability of enterprises and their employees, and the promotion of equal opportunities. The ESF is intended to support the Member States of the European Union in introducing modern, active employment policies and systems aimed at providing financial support for the improvement of the professional skills of workers. The ESF is therefore the basic tool of the European Union's structural policy, which is to serve the implementation of employment policy and the development of human resources (Zarębski, 2010, p. 113).

The European Social Fund was created in 1957 and, at the time of its creation, had only two types of assistance: facilitating the employment of workers and promoting the occupational and spatial mobility of the workforce within the Communities.

Between 1994 and 1999, due to changing socio-economic conditions, attention was drawn to other important priorities for ESF support. These included helping to increase human potential in research, science and technology, improving education and training systems towards labour market compliance, economic and technological development, and promoting equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market. Between 2007 and 2013, the ESF areas of intervention mentioned included strengthening human capital through reforms of education and training systems so that they contribute to developing employability, better aligning education with labour market needs, and responding to the needs of the knowledge-based society (including the development of human potential in research and innovation). In the last budget period covered by this study, the ESF envisaged the implementation of 4 main thematic objectives. One of them is "Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning". This was aimed at reducing and preventing early school leaving and ensuring equal access to quality early childhood education, primary and secondary education, improving the quality, effectiveness and accessibility of higher education, as well as equalising access to lifelong learning for all age groups (Harasimowicz, 2022, pp. 62-63).

When analysing the areas of support for the ESF over its long history, it should therefore be noted that the ESF has evolved and undergone numerous reforms in order to respond to the changing realities of the labour market and the social sphere of the Community's functioning. Areas related to education were also gaining in importance.

Until 2020, the fund operated under the name of the European Social Fund, while at the threshold of the next financial perspective (2021-2027) there is talk of its new version, namely the European Social Fund "Plus" (ESF+) programme.

### 3. Education – problem areas in Poland in the years 2004-2020

The use of funds from the EU Structural Funds in subsequent budget perspectives required the creation and agreement with the European Commission of a number of strategic and programme documents, both at the Community level as well as at the national and regional level. It can be assumed, however, that in the Polish context, the most important strategic documents at the national level were:

- 2004-2006: National Development Plan 2004-2006;
- 2007-2013: National Strategic Reference Framework (National Cohesion Strategy);
- 2014-2020: Partnership Agreement.

These documents constituted m.in. A synthetic approach to problem areas, defined priorities and areas of support, indicated operational programmes, tools and institutions that were responsible for planning, implementing and managing these programmes. In each of these documents, the main objective and specific objectives are formulated to support the achievement of the objectives of cohesion policy support for the forecast budget period. These assumptions were the result of other strategic documents, setting out the directions and priorities of development for the coming years, both at the Community, as well as at the national and regional level. They were also the subject of negotiations between the Polish authorities and the European Commission (Poteralski, 2023a, pp. 172-173).

The strategic documents then revealed the basic tools for the implementation of structural policy in the form of operational programmes. Education, as one of the important areas of ESF support, was also the subject of analyses and subsequently support under operational programmes in all three financial perspectives referred to in this study (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Problem areas in the field of education indicated in the programming documents in the years 2004-2020*

<b>Financial perspective 2004-2006</b>	
<b>Main problem areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the percentage of the population aged 25-29 with tertiary education is twice lower than the EU average (11.7% in 2001);</li> <li>• highly insufficient participation of rural youth in the student structure;</li> <li>• the reform of secondary education is being implemented, favouring general education, limiting narrowly specialised fields of study, especially for non-developing sectors and sectors of the economy.</li> </ul>

Cont. table 1.

<p><b>Challenges to the ESF</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shaping the education system, as well as continuous improvement of human resources, and to provide all Polish residents, in particular young people, with real opportunities to improve their qualifications in order to compete effectively on labor markets;</li> <li>• concentrating socio-economic policy on the labour market and the system of education and lifelong learning, which are the basis for the comprehensive development of human resources, and thus increasing the chances of finding employment on the European labour market;</li> <li>• a clear improvement in the quality of the functioning of the labour market and education system and an increase in financial resources allocated to the beneficiaries in the following areas: a) increasing the level of education and professional qualifications by young people and adults, b) increasing the efficiency and quality of the education and lifelong learning system;</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial perspective 2007-2013</b></p>
<p><b>Main problem areas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• insufficient link between the education system and the labour market;</li> <li>• relatively low investment and underinvestment in the education system, especially in rural areas;</li> <li>• low secondary education in rural areas;</li> <li>• low rate of lifelong learning;</li> <li>• unequal access to educational services based on material status and place of residence;</li> <li>• insufficient link between the promotion of entrepreneurship among citizens and the education system;</li> <li>• lack of the habit of lifelong learning;</li> </ul>
<p><b>Challenges to the ESF</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increasing investment in human capital;</li> <li>• improving the level and quality of education, contributing to increasing the chances of finding and taking up employment and to increasing the mobility of individuals in the labour market;</li> <li>• providing pupils, learners and students with high-quality education through appropriate institutional and organisational solutions in the education system;</li> <li>• in view of the needs of the knowledge-based economy, it is particularly important to create conditions that will increase the number of students interested in science and, consequently, the number of students choosing this educational path;</li> <li>• reducing the number of people for whom the main obstacle to entering or staying in the labour market is a lack of adequate education;</li> <li>• increasing the availability of education at all levels of education, linking it to the requirements of the labour market, improving the quality of educational services offered and the effectiveness of education;</li> <li>• undertaking activities focused on improving the management of processes and institutions constituting the education system in Poland;</li> <li>• creating a framework for the effective functioning and improvement of competences of teaching staff (including academic staff) and administrative staff managing the education system;</li> <li>• building a system and culture of lifelong learning through the implementation of projects conducive to the learning process in all forms and manifestations of human activity;</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial perspective 2014-2020</b></p>
<p><b>Main problem areas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low (compared to the EU average) level of employment of young people, women and the elderly, as a result of, m.in, the inadequacy of the education system and the acquisition of competences to the needs of the labour market;</li> <li>• failure to adapt the education system and staff competences to the needs of the labour market;</li> <li>• Despite the positive results of the reforms in the Polish education system so far, the educational activity of adults is still low;</li> <li>• lack of a system for controlling the quality and effectiveness of training addressed to teachers;</li> <li>• low percentage (12%) of teachers using organised forms of professional development, at the same time low popularity of those forms of professional development which are indicated in the literature as the most effective (e.g. participation in teacher cooperation networks, or the use of mentoring or coaching);</li> </ul>

Cont. table 1.

<b>Challenges to the ESF</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an active policy to promote increased participation in lifelong learning, addressed not only to workers and adults, but also to entrepreneurs in the MSME sector;</li> <li>• reducing the share of early school leavers to 4.5% and increasing the share of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary education to 45%;</li> <li>• Achieving sustainable results of education reforms requires enriching and fine-tuning the competences of graduates of the formal education system at all stages of teaching and learning;</li> <li>• ensuring the highest possible quality of teaching at primary and lower secondary levels;</li> <li>• implementation of development programmes to equalise the level of social competences and universal skills necessary to start the next stage of education or enter the labour market;</li> <li>• higher education in Poland, as in the rest of Europe, must face the need for internationalization, increasing the employability of graduates, strengthening ties with the socio-economic environment or the effects of demographic processes;</li> <li>• treating higher education policy as an integral part of a broader set of policies aimed at increasing the innovation capacity of the economy;</li> <li>• effective cooperation between the university and the environment and systematic monitoring of graduates' careers;</li> <li>• With a decentralised management system in education, systemic actions are necessary to strengthen the coherence of education at the national level, m.in through the development of a school evaluation system, monitoring of students' educational achievements, or tracking the fate of graduates;</li> <li>• continuation of competence development activities in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching all subjects;</li> <li>• developing pupils' competences to prepare them for life in the information society;</li> <li>• raising awareness of the key importance of ICT for the development of non-formal forms of education and self-learning for students and teachers and for preparing them to participate in the lifelong learning process.</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration based on: Poland. National Development Plan 2004-2006, Document adopted by the Council of Ministers on 14 January 2003, Warsaw: January 2003; Half. National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013 supporting economic growth and employment, Ministry of Regional Development, Warsaw 2007; Programming of the Financial Perspective 2014-2020. Partnership Agreement, Ministry of Development, Warsaw 2015.

As can be seen from the table, in each of the analysed EU financial perspectives, education was a problem area with specific, defined needs. In the first period of using the Structural Funds in Poland, the most important challenges in the field of education include access to education in order to acquire and improve qualifications, and the focus of socio-economic policies on the education and lifelong learning system. Requirements for improving the quality of the education system were also pointed out.

In the 2007-2013 perspective, the emphasis on linking both the education system and lifelong learning with the needs of the labour market, unequal access to educational services and the related unequal level of education, especially in the urban-rural system, was dominant and even more emphasized, as well as the lack of a habit or culture of lifelong learning in the Polish society. The main challenges for education and lifelong learning include, among others: the need to increase investment in human capital in general, to improve the level and quality of education also through appropriate institutional and organizational solutions in the education system. The years 2007-2013 were also a period in which education was promoted in selected areas, including science. Much more evident in this period was the need to undertake systemic activities supporting the process of planning and management in the area of education and training.

On the one hand, the problem areas and challenges for the ESF in the last analysed period were a certain continuation of the two previous perspectives, but the need to develop quality control systems for the educational offer and the constant need to influence the improvement of the educational activity of the Polish society, especially in the adult period, with a strong emphasis also on informal and non-formal education, was emphasized. The period 2014-2020 is also a time of significant promotion of information and communication technologies accompanying and supporting the education process.

#### 4. Support for education in operational programmes in Poland in the years 2004-2020

Since Polish's accession to the EU in 2004, structural policy in the area of ESF has been implemented both thanks to operational programmes covering the entire area of the country and those addressed to individual voivodships. On the basis of the experience from the first two budget periods of the Polish presence in the EU, it was only in the 2014-2020 perspective that a model was created, under which regional operational programmes were of a two-fund nature and provided for support under both the ERDF and the ESF (Poteralski, 2021, pp. 54-55). This constituted a significant change in both the methodology of programming and the management of programmes at the regional level, because in the perspective of 2004-2006 a similar role was played by the Integrated Operational Programme for Regional Development, but it had a nationwide character. Regional Operational Programmes were created only in the context of planning activities in the 2007-2013 perspective, but they were single-fund in nature, with the involvement of ERDF funds (Poteralski, 2022, p. 367) (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Involvement of the ESF in operational programmes 2004-2020*

<b>Financial perspective 2004-2006</b>	
<b>Operational programme</b>	<b>Nature of the program</b>
SPO RZL (Sectoral Operational Programme Development of Human Resources)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a single-fund programme (ESF) of a nationwide nature</li> </ul>
ZPORR (Integrated Regional Development Operational Programme)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nationwide, but partially implemented at the level of regions (voivodships)</li> <li>• the two-fund programme (ERDF and ESF);</li> <li>• in certain areas of intervention, the ESF, complementary to the SPO RZL</li> </ul>
<b>Financial perspective 2007-2013</b>	
<b>Operational programme</b>	<b>Nature of the program</b>
PO KL (Human Capital Operational Programme)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• single fund programme (ESF)</li> <li>• the only operational programme with ESF involvement in the period 2007-2013</li> <li>• a programme containing both the so-called nationwide priorities (national component) and regional priorities (regional component)</li> </ul>



Cont. table 2.

<b>Financial perspective 2014-2020</b>	
<b>Operational programme</b>	<b>Nature of the program</b>
PO WER (Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• single fund programme (ESF)</li> <li>• A nationwide program</li> </ul>
RPO (Regional Operational Programmes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 16 dual-fund programmes (ERDF and ESF), in the area of ESF complementary to POWER</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2 presents the structure and characteristics of the operational programmes that in the years 2004-2020 were the tools for ESF involvement in cohesion policy in Poland. The system of use of the funds has evolved over this period and has shown a high degree of complementarity between the development of national and regional tools, including in the areas of ESF intervention.

The needs related to the sphere of education and lifelong learning in Poland, defined in the strategic documents, were reflected in the structure of operational programmes, and more precisely in the formulated priorities (priority axes) and actions. The operational programmes also contained specific objectives, together with the expected indicators of their achievement, as well as potential tools for achieving these objectives. An important element of the programming of activities for the following years was also the planning of financial resources for them. (Table 3).

**Table 3.***Education support instruments in operational programmes in 2004-2020*

<b>Financial perspective 2004-2006</b>	<b>Total allocation [million euro]</b>
<b>Sectoral Operational Programme "Human Resources Development"</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority 2: Developing a knowledge-based society: 2.1. Increasing access to education – promoting lifelong learning; 2.2. Improving the quality of education in relation to the needs of the labour market; 2.3. Development of human resources in the modern economy; 2.4. Strengthening adaptability.</li> <li>• The main objectives of priority 2: preparing the society to function in the system of a global market economy by increasing access to education, with particular emphasis on equal opportunities, by raising the level of education of the society; increasing and broadening the participation of an increasing adult population in high-quality lifelong learning, which will ultimately contribute to improving employment in a changing labour market; development of the skills base and adaptability of the employed workforce of enterprises, in particular SMEs; facilitate knowledge transfer and cooperation between universities and businesses in order to disseminate innovation and contribute to adaptability and competitiveness.</li> </ul>	988,57

Cont. table 3.

<b>Financial perspective 2007-2013</b>	
<b>Operational Programme "Human Capital"</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority II: Development of human resources and adaptive potential of enterprises and improvement of the health of working people (national component)</li> <li>• Priority III: High quality of the school education system (national component)</li> <li>• Priority IV: Higher education and science (national strand)</li> <li>• Priority VIII: Regional economic staff (regional component)</li> <li>• Priority IX: Development of education and competences in the regions (regional component)</li> <li>• The main objectives of the programme in relation to education and training: to contribute to the strengthening of enterprises and their employees in terms of their ability to adapt to socio-economic changes related to globalisation and restructuring processes; strengthening human capital by increasing the level of education of the society, increasing the availability of educational services at all levels of education and improving the quality of education and training, the dissemination of education must be accompanied by an increase in its effectiveness; It is therefore necessary to ensure the quality of education that meets the standards of a knowledge-based society, while at the same time aligning the fields of education with the requirements of the labour market.</li> </ul>	778,01  1 006,24 960,37 1 588,48 1 703,42
<b>Financial perspective 2014-2020</b>	
<b>Operational Programme "Knowledge Education Development"</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority axis I: Young people in the labour market</li> <li>• Priority axis II: Effective public policies for the labour market, economy and education</li> <li>• Priority axis III: Higher education for the economy and development</li> <li>• The main objectives of the programme relate to education and training: to ensure equal access to quality education tailored to the individual needs of pupils; better prepare students for their future employment; increasing the use of innovative methods supporting the teaching process by schools and educational institutions; strengthening cooperation between schools and entrepreneurs, universities and social partners; equalising access to lifelong learning for adults, including those with low competences; support for cooperation between universities and business and strengthening the pro-employment role of higher education; increasing the quality of educational services offered and developing competences that are key to the economy (applies to universities); internationalisation of Polish universities; improving the quality of doctoral studies; management support and staff development at universities.</li> </ul>	2 035,18 877,65 1 253,29

Source: own elaboration based on: Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2004-2006, Annex to the Regulation of the Minister of Economy and Labour of 1 July 2004, Journal of Laws 166, item 1743; Human Capital Operational Programme. National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013, Ministry of Regional Development, Warsaw 2007; Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development 2014-2020, Ministry of Infrastructure and Development, Warsaw 2014.

As shown in the table, the most important problem areas in education were reflected in the operational programmes and the priorities defined in them. The level of their funding has also increased, both at the level of priorities and programmes. Taking into account the impact at the national level, the allocation of funds has increased from €988 million in the first budget period to €4.16 billion in the period 2014-2020. Per year, this gives an allocation of €329 million for the period 2004-2006 and €596 million for the period 2014-2020, respectively.

## 5. Effects of ESF instruments supporting education in Poland

The areas of ESF support for education in Poland, mentioned in the programming documents, conditioned the use of the Fund's financial resources by the institutions authorised to do so within the framework of specific projects. It was their implementation that was to contribute to the achievement of the objectives set at the beginning of the next financial perspectives. The process of monitoring and evaluation of the implemented projects and entire programmes was used to assess the degree of achievement of the objectives. Due to the complexity of this issue, this study will attempt to indicate only the most important achievements in the implementation of the ESF objectives in the field of education in Poland in the years 2004-2020.

EU funds, in particular the European Social Fund, have made it possible to undertake a number of activities to facilitate access to education at all levels of education, with particular emphasis on pre-school education, lifelong learning of adults, education in rural areas and improving the qualifications of people from disadvantaged social groups. Qualitative changes in the labour market – the dissemination of various forms of lifelong learning, e-learning or professional development – should be considered as an additional benefit of the support. (Mnisterstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego, 2010, s. 40)

Already after the first two budget perspectives, it could be stated that Poland has achieved indicators close to the EU average in many areas. Poland had one of the lowest rates of early school leavers and low achievers in basic skills. There has also been progress in higher education and increased participation in early childhood education. Between 2007 and 2013, the Polish education and training system underwent a number of significant changes in terms of structure, organisation, management and core curricula in the face of society's growing aspirations for higher education. The most important actions in the areas of education include, m.in a new core curriculum, improvement of the external examination system, significant dissemination of pre-school education, development of teachers' competences and updating teaching evaluation methods, improvement of the quality of vocational education and meeting special educational needs and their modernisation in line with the lifelong learning programme, development of strategic documents of a long-term nature concerning Polish education system. (Maj-Waśniowska, 2016, pp. 161-162).

Summarizing the 2014-2020 perspective, based on the analysis of the results of evaluation studies, it can be stated that in this period there was a growing level of education of Poles and an increase in the percentage of people with higher education. There has also been a reversal of the unfavourable trend in the proportion of young people who have at most lower secondary education and do not continue their education. Other positive effects of education support include a systematic increase in the educational achievements of Polish students, also in the field of mathematics and natural sciences, a systematic increase in the quality of education,

and changes in the standards of teacher education (Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, 2020, pp. 59-69).

Unfortunately, at the threshold of the current EU budget perspective, envisaged for the years 2021-2027, Polish education is still characterized by deficits and areas that require planning and implementation of support programs. These include, but are not limited to:

- inadequacies in the use of methods based on active learning by pupils and individualisation of education,
- a key social problem in the area of general education, which is not foreseen to be covered by the ESF intervention, is the current content of the core curriculum for general education,
- still relatively low level of skills of adults in Poland,
- still low levels of digital competence, especially in the oldest age groups,
- the problem of mismatching competences with the needs of the labour market, which is still present on the Polish labour market and has existed for a long time,
- shortage of staff in sectoral vocational education and secondary schools providing vocational education,
- a large distance between Poland and the EU in the case of non-formal adult education, despite the ever-growing participation of Poles in it,
- still insufficient involvement of employers in supporting adult learning,
- a systematic decline in the number of students in Poland (Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, 2020, pp. 59- 81).

## 6. Conclusion

Education and lifelong learning have been systematically gaining in importance as areas of intervention of the European Social Fund in Poland in successive EU budget perspectives. It can be seen that some of the problem areas, as well as the subsequent areas of support under the operational programmes, have generally remained unchanged. Others, on the other hand, emerged along with the changing socio-economic reality and needs directly resulting from the specificity of the ESF, which include issues such as the quality of human capital and the degree of its involvement in the processes taking place in the economy and on the labour market.

Education, and especially lifelong learning, have become an inseparable and absolutely essential element shaping the quality and situation of the human factor in both the social and economic spheres.

Polish experience related to the presence of the ESF in Poland since 2004 shows that a system of monitoring and supporting areas related to human capital has been created and constantly improved, both at the national and regional level. In this respect, the main tool for

the implementation of the policy of supporting human capital in Poland in the analysed period were successive operational programmes, thanks to which it was possible to implement specific projects not only in education, but also in support of the education and lifelong learning system of Poles regardless of their age, place of residence and social status.

A separate issue related to the ESF's support for education in the 2004-2020 period should be the issue of its effectiveness. The presentation of the most important problem areas and their evolution in the subsequent years of Polish's presence in the European Union showed how the needs and directions of interventions in the field of education have changed. In the documents concerning the successive financial perspectives, ex-post evaluations of the operational programmes already implemented were carried out. It was the result of numerous evaluation studies, carried out from the level of individual projects and beneficiaries, project implementation organisations, to the level of institutions implementing and managing the use of ESF funds in Poland. According to the research, despite the positive effects of ESF support on education in Poland, there are still problem areas that require intervention. These include, among others, the low level of adult participation in education, especially non-formal education, staff shortages, especially in sectoral and vocational education, and the mismatch between competences and the needs of the labour market.

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