

## THE ESF SUPPORT FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF WORKERS' QUALIFICATIONS AT A REGIONAL LEVEL

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**Purpose:** The last EU Financial Perspective for 2014-2020 as well as the approaching 20th anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union create an opportunity for recapitulation of Poland's use of structural funds in both of these periods.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The objective of the paper involves a preliminary analysis and assessment of the areas of assistance as well as the instruments supporting the improvement of personnel qualifications in a regional economy on the example of the West Pomeranian Province. The assessment concerns the implementation of the Regional Operational Programme for the West Pomeranian Province in the period of 2014-2020 (ROP WP). The paper is one of a series of papers, constituting a recapitulation of the experience that Poland and its regions have had so far in benefiting from the EU structural funds.

**Findings:** The article presents an analysis of the contents of strategic and programme documents of national and regional scope, and in particular of the Partnership Agreement and the ROP WP for 2014-2020. The evaluation of the aid granted for the improvement of qualifications of the West Pomeranian Province personnel was based on an analysis of competition documentation as well as the results of project evaluations conducted by the Managing Authority of the ROP WP 2014-2020.

**Originality/value:** The article contains a preliminary analysis and assessment of the main areas of support and instruments supporting the development of human resources in the regional economy on the example of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in 2014-2020. It is addressed to entities and scientists dealing with programming and management, supporting the improvement of the quality of human resources in the economy.

**Keywords:** workers' qualifications, the European Social Fund, structural funds.

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

### 1. Introduction

The accession to the European Union constituted a crucial moment in the history of Poland on account of the opportunities it offered to benefit from the support provided by the structural funds, one of which is the European Social Fund. Since 2004 the support from the fund has

been accorded in subsequent financial perspectives for the following periods: 2004-2006, 2007-2013, 2014-2020. The approaching 20th anniversary of Poland's membership in the EU most certainly constitutes an excellent chance for undertaking a series of studies and papers with the objective of summarising and evaluating Poland's use of the EU funds in that period.

The improvement of personnel quality, both at a level of the national and regional economy, is one of the major goals of the EU structural policy, and the area in which the ESF offers particular support.

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## **2. Workers' qualifications as the objective of the European Social Fund in the years of 2014-2020**

Cohesion policy constitutes one of the most significant EU policies. Its goal is to promote harmonious development of the entire territory of the European Union through actions leading to the reduction of disproportions in the degree of development of its regions, thereby strengthening the Community's economic, social and territorial cohesion. Thanks to the proper direction of the activities realised within the scope of the cohesion policy with the financial support of the structural funds and the Cohesion Fund, the regions experiencing lower growth have a chance to catch up and to substantially accelerate the processes in order to achieve

convergence with other regions and nations of the European Community (Poteralski, 2001, p. 346).

The European Social Fund, next to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), is one of the two most important EU structural funds.

The ESF is particularly involved in the redistribution of income on the labour market, therefore it can be said to finance the support of social integration, including the facilitation of access to employment for people who are in a difficult situation on the labour market, as well as reducing the disproportion in employment at national, regional and local levels (Drela, Malkowska, Zieziula, 2020, p. 18).

The chief areas supported by the ESF include implementing an active labour market policy, counteracting social exclusion, lifelong learning, workers' training, developing entrepreneurship as well as increasing the access and participation of women on the labour market (Brzychcy, 2013, pp. 9-10).

The European Social Fund was established with the aim of improving employment opportunities for workers within the internal market and thus contributing to raising the standard of living, which, in turn, constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of the cohesion policy. The support and financial programmes financed by the ESF are intended to facilitate employment of workers and to increase their geographic and professional mobility, as well as to enable them to adapt to changes occurring in the industry and production systems, especially through professional training and retraining. (Jarmolowicz, Knapińska, 2005, pp. 226-232).

Since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, the structural policy within the framework of the ESF has been realised through operational programmes covering the territory of the entire country as well as through programmes addressed to individual provinces. Through the experience acquired in the first two financial perspectives of Polish EU membership, it was only in the perspective of 2014-2020 that a model was created under which regional operational programmes were of a two-fund nature and they provided assistance both within the framework of the ERDF and the ESF (Poteralski, 2021, pp. 54-55). It was a significant change of the methodology of programming and of programme management at a regional level, since the Integrated Regional Operational Programme fulfilled a similar role in 2004-2006 perspective, but it was a programme covering all of Poland. Regional Operational Programmes were not established until 2007-2013 financial perspective was being planned, however, they were of one-fund character and the ERDF funds were involved as well.

The Partnership Agreement was one of the most consequential documents of strategic nature designating the areas to were to receive assistance from the structural funds in Poland over the years of 2014-2020. It further defined major priorities to be supported by the ESF. The instruments for the implementation of the Partnership Agreement included national and regional operational programmes, which together with the Partnership Agreement created one cohesive system of strategic and programme documents for a new financial perspective, while

on the other hand, they created a system of concrete instruments of support for major problem areas.

The Partnership Agreement specified, on the one hand, a strategic context within the thematic and territorial dimensions, while on the other hand, it stipulated the expected outcomes. The Partnership Agreement constituted a point of reference for stipulating detailed contents of operational programmes, which in turn provided details of specific areas to be granted support and instruments of its implementation in line with the programme provisions. The Partnership Agreement along with operational programmes was negotiated with the European Commission and it served as the basis for implementing the approaching the financial perspective in Poland (Programming the Financial Perspective. Partnership Agreement, 2014, p. 5).

From the provisions of the Partnership Agreement it arises that the ESF was to play a major role in achieving the results set out in thematic objectives Nos. 8, 9, 10 through the realisation of “soft” undertakings, aimed at improving the effectiveness of the use of labour market resources, reducing the scale of poverty and social exclusion as well as raising workers’ competences. Additionally, it was provided that it will fully co-fund an intervention of thematic objective No. 11, involving a reform of administrative and legal conditions for the economy growth (Programming the Financial Perspective. Partnership Agreement, 2014, p. 73).

On account of the objective of this paper and the focus on the matters of supporting personnel quality, table 1 features only selected thematic objectives and the priorities distinguished in them, while at the same time it stipulates which ones of them are designated for implementation at the level of regional operational programmes.

**Table 1.**

*Selective thematic objectives in the ESF competence included in the Partnership Agreement*

Number and name of a thematic objective	Priorities regarding personnel quality	To be realized in the ROP
Thematic objective 8  Promoting permanent and high quality employment and supporting workers’ mobility	Priority 8i: Ensuring access to employment to work-seeking and economically inactive individuals, including undertaking local initiatives for employment	YES
	Priority 8ii: Permanent integration of young people on the labour market, in particular those who do not work, study or undergo training.	NO
	<b>Priority 8v:</b> Adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to changes	YES

Cont. table 1.

Thematic objective 10  Investing in education, skills and lifelong learning	Priority 10i: Limiting and preventing premature school leaving and ensuring equal access to good quality (...) education (...), including formal, informal and non-school based education pathways	YES
	Priority 10ii: Improvement of the quality, effectiveness and availability of higher education and education at an equivalent level in order to increase the share and level of achievements	NO
	<b>Priority 10 iii:</b> Equalising access to lifelong learning of formal, informal and non-school based nature to all age groups, expanding knowledge, raising skills and competences of the workforce and promoting flexible education pathways, including through vocational consultancy and confirmation of acquired competences	YES
	Priority 10iv: Better adaptation of the system of education and training to the needs of the labour market, facilitation of transfer from education to employment and strengthening systems of education and vocational training as well as their quality, including through mechanisms of predicting skills, adapting curricula as well as creating and developing systems of learning through practical vocational education realised in strict cooperation with employers	YES

Source: own elaboration on the basis of Programming the Financial Perspective 2014-2020. Partnership Agreement, Minister of Infrastructure and Development, Warsaw 2014, pp. 83-87.

On the grounds of the data presented in the table, one may conclude that the references to personnel quality, including workers' qualifications, can be found in thematic objectives Nos. 8 and 10. In thematic objective No. 8 priority 8v deserves special attention, while in thematic objective No. 10 – priority 10iii.

In the analysis included in the document ex-ante of the ESF support for the approaching period it was established that the ESF will play “a major role in achieving the assumed results set out in the above-listed thematic objectives thanks to the implementation of leading “soft” undertakings intended, inter alia, to improve the effectiveness of the use of labour market resources and to raise personnel competences (Programming the Financial Perspective. Partnership Agreement, 2014, p. 73).

### 3. Programme documents at a regional level in the years of 2014- 2020

The EU financial perspective for 2014-2020 is a period during which the all-Poland Operational Programme “Knowledge Education Development” and selected measures within the scope of 16 regional operational programmes were being implemented in Poland with the use of the ESF funds. In regional programmes beneficiaries and the intensity of aid resulted chiefly from the specificity of a particular province and the current situation on a regional labour market.

In the practice of the use and management of the ESF funds in Poland, in 2014-2020 perspective the priorities from the ESF sphere of competences were for the first time “included” in the programmes created at regional levels. It was a significant step in decentralising the management of the undertakings supported from that fund.

The implementation of projects related to improving the quality of regional economy personnel and the degree of matching workers’ qualifications to the needs of a regional job market was also reflected in the West Pomeranian Province, where the Regional Operational Program of the West Pomeranian Province was adopted for implementation.

An analysis of the most important areas of assistance obtained from the ESF was conducted in the document. The analysis referred to strategic documents of both national and regional level. Furthermore, significant details of the issues arising from the specificity of the region were described in detail. Owing to the interest of this paper, which focuses on the thematic objectives number 8 and 10, their detailed characteristics in the context of the West Pomeranian region were presented in Table No. 2.

**Table 2.**

*Specification of thematic objectives numbers 8 and 10 in the ROP WP*

Number and name of thematic objective	Selected properties characteristic for the West Pomeranian Province
Thematic objective 8	<p>The West Pomeranian Province is one of the regions with the highest unemployment rate and the lowest degree of professional activity. Qualifications and competences of economically inactive and unemployed individuals are frequently unmatched to employers’ needs. Furthermore, lack of suitable professional experience constitutes a substantial barrier to finding employment.</p> <p>The SME sector – which is sensitive to any changes and unfavourable trends in the economy – is particularly well developed in the West Pomeranian Province, which has a direct impact on the situation of workers. The aspect that is particularly important is the effective management of change in enterprises, i.e. raising entrepreneurs’ and their workers’ qualifications. Employed individuals who are subject to the process of outplacement, which assumes the form of a change in qualifications, need to be assisted in choosing the direction of regional specialisations. It is extremely important in the context of adapting to the changes occurring on the regional job market and improvement of workers’ competences.</p>

Cont. table 2.

Thematic objective 10	Raising the qualifications and competences of adults is of crucial significance for the improvement of the region's competitiveness and the prevention of social exclusion. In the West Pomeranian Province this process shows insufficient dynamics. A very low percentage of learning and training individuals between the ages of 25-64 can be observed out of the total population in that age group in Poland in relation to the EU countries.
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Source: own elaboration on the basis of Programming the financial perspective 2014-2020. Partnership Agreement, Minister of Infrastructure and Development, West Pomerania 2015, pp. 16-20.

#### **4. Assistance in improving workers' qualification in the West Pomeranian Province in the years 2014-2020**

10 priority axes were distinguished within the framework of the ROP WP, out of which Axis VIII, called: "Education", deserves particular attention, since it is within the scope of that axis that the support was provided for undertakings aimed at improving staff quality in the province economy. Each of the Priority Axes was divided into the so-called measures. On account of the objective of this paper, the conducted analysis will encompass the competitions of calls for applications and their results, which took place under measure 8.6.: "Support to schools and facilities providing vocational training, to students participating in vocational training and adults participating in non-school based forms of vocational training".

As arises from the first version of the Detailed Description of Priority Axes of the ROP WP 2014-2020, the following undertakings were included as projects to be granted assistance under measure 8.6., which were designed to help in "skills improvement and acquisition of vocational qualifications by students and auditing students of schools and education system institutions providing vocational instruction as well as adults interested of their own initiative in acquiring, supplementing or raising their vocational qualifications through, inter alia:

- practical training organized at employers' or entrepreneurs' facilities for basic vocational school students,
- practical job placements comprising practical vocational education in cooperation with employers and entrepreneurs or going beyond the scope of practical vocational education,
- implementation of new, innovative forms of vocational education,
- additional specialist training organised in cooperation with entities from the socio-economic environment of schools and education system institutions providing vocational education enabling students and auditing students to acquire and supplement their knowledge, skills and vocational qualifications,
- organization of preparatory courses for university in cooperation with higher education institutions as well as organization of courses and preparatory courses for journeyman and master examinations,

- assistance offered to students and auditing students in acquiring additional qualifications improving their opportunities on the job market,
- organization of non-school based forms of lifelong learning.

The undertakings listed above belonged to the so-called Type 1 projects, comprising, inter alia, the organization of training for regional economies personnel (Detailed Description of Priority Axes of the ROP WP 2014-2020, West Pomerania 2020, 2015, pp. 426-427).

A very broad description of the target group for measure 8.6 deserves special attention, i.e. the categories of final beneficiaries. Final beneficiaries included, inter alia: students and auditing students of schools and vocation training facilities, young workers, individuals over 18 years of age, schools and facilities (institutions and teaching staff) providing vocational education (with the exclusion of schools for adults), socio-geographic partners and employers (Detailed Description of Priority Axes of the ROP WP 2014-2020, West Pomerania 2020, 2015, p. 430).

In reality, the category of individuals over 18 years of age opened access to participation in the projects to every interested adult who of their own initiative, or of an employer's initiative, would be keen to improve or acquire new qualifications.

When analysing the possibilities of using EU funds within the framework of projected undertakings implemented by the entities authorised to apply for co-funding, one needs to take into account how the institutions involved in the management of operational programmes plan individual competitions, what allocations they make for particular competition editions and whether funds are sufficient for all the entities that successfully undergo verification.

From the perspective of the institutions participating in competitions as project initiators, apart from the above-listed factors, the effectiveness of applying for funding is of no small importance, as is the fact of how soon from the commencement of a new perspective the first competitions are announced, how long is the waiting time for competition results, what is the possible regularity in their organization and certainty that funds will be equally distributed throughout all the years of a current financial perspective.

The data in Table 3 will be used for a preliminary evaluation of the course of competitions and of investment of funds within the scope of measure 8.6 of the ROP WP 2014-2020.

**Table 3.**

*Results of calls for applications for co-funding within the scope of Measure 8.6 in the years of 2016-2020*

Criterion	2016	2017		2018	2019	2020
		Competition I	Competition II			
Date of announcing a call for applications	22.12.15	12.01.17	31.03.17	02.03.18	02.04.19	17.01.20
Allocation (m PLN)	30	35,5	13,5	27	31,3	35,1
End date for submitting applications	08.04.16	27.03.17	05.06.17	08.05.18	10.06.19	24.04.20



Cont. table 3.

Date of announcing the results of a competition	05.10.16	25.07.17	04.09.17	06.08.18	20.09.19	23.07.20
Number of formally correct projects	60	62	37	73	40	30
Number of projects in the II stage of evaluation	19	49	26	54	20	b.d.
Number of projects to be co-funded	19*	49	26	55*	21*	21
Reference of the calls for applications	RPZP.08.06.00-IP.02-32-K02/16, K18/17, K 35/18, K48/19, K61/20					
TYPE I	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Maximum project co-funding [PLN]	2 234 775	4 464 328	1 868 164	6 498 458	5 660 576	2 720 585
Minimum project co-funding [PLN]	148 537	205 850	165 790	177 415	324 119	647 345

\* number of projects includes also the ones accepted for implementation after an appeal procedure has been completed.

Source: own elaboration on the basis of: List of selected projects for co-funding under Measure 8.6. (2016), (2017), (2018), (2019), (2020).

There were 6 calls for applications under Measure 8.6. in 2014-2020 financial perspective. The first competition was announced in December 2015, but its results were only known in October 2016. That is a fairly frequent situation, when in subsequent, new competition perspectives, the first applications submitted under individual measures of operational programmes were resolved only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a given budgetary period. Typically it meant that there was a certain “gap” between the end of a preceding and an actual start of a new period. However, in subsequent years next calls for applications were taking place on a regular basis, with the exclusion of 2017, when two calls for applications were held. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the allocations of funds for next years were close to one another. This, in turn, is a highly positive phenomenon, since it enables entities that consider applying for subsidies to plan their actions and to decide when they are going to prepare and implement projects funded from the ESF. It would be extremely desirable if it became a regular practice in the management of the funds financed by the Managing Authorities and Implementing Bodies.

The analysis of the course of subsequent competitions within the framework of Measure 8.6 demonstrates that there are still projects, which, owing to insufficient number of points scored, do not proceed to the next stage of a substantive evaluation, or which do not receive funding. It is particularly evident in the difference between the number of projects that are formally correct, and the number of projects that proceed to the last stage of substantive evaluation. The first call for applications in the analysed period was characteristic in that respect, where out of 60 formally correct projects only 19 proceeded to the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of substantive evaluation:

to be evaluated by the Project Evaluation Committee. As it turns out, however, basically all the projects evaluated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage received funding, and in that stage the number of points scored was not the only determining factor, but so was the fact that an assumed allocation for a subsequent call for applications was sufficient to place all the projects satisfying the criteria on a ranking list. As arises from the list published by the Provincial Employment Agency in Szczecin and the Office of the Marshal in Szczecin, only in 2019, 18 projects were designated for funding in the first version of the ranking list, whereas 2 projects ended up on a reserve list. Once the allocation has been increased and one of the protests has been recognised under an appeals procedure, all 21 projects satisfying the funding admission criteria were designated for funding. A further fact that is notable is that all of the calls for applications concerned Type 1 projects, which created an opportunity to fund training projects, including also the ones addressed to adults who of their own initiative, or of an employer's initiative wanted to change, complete or raise their qualifications.

The analysis of the volume of projects funding leads to interesting conclusions, demonstrating that projects whose value exceeded PLN 6 m were approved for implementation, but the co-funding was sought also by entities that were planning to complete relatively small projects, where the amount of co-financing was approx. PLN 150 thou.

## **5. Conclusion**

Beneficiaries of aid from the structural funds, both at a national and regional level, have already had nearly 20-year experience in applying for funding or co-funding of their undertakings. The last fully completed period of 2014-2020 was the third one in their experience.

The paper features an analysis and evaluation of the possibilities for financing undertakings oriented towards improving the quality of regional economy personnel on the example of the West Pomeranian Province. Regional operational programmes constituted one of the most important tools for implementing the structural policy in the years of 2014-2020. During that timeframe the regional operational programmes were of a two-fund nature for the first time, making it possible to finance the projects falling under the ESF and to the ERDF spheres of competences. It needs to be recognised as a significant step in decentralising the management of undertakings supported by the ESF and their better adaptation to the needs and specificity of individual regions.

At the stage when the ROP WP provisions were being created, two specific problems were determined that are characteristic to the West Pomeranian region regarding the regional economy personnel, which resulted in a better adjustment of suitable corrective tools. The problems specified chiefly referred to insufficient match of the qualifications and

competences of professionally inactive and unemployed individuals to the needs of the job market, their lack of professional experience, ineffective management of change in businesses of the SME sector as well as low effectiveness of the improvement of entrepreneurs' and workers' qualifications.

On the example of a particular measure (8.6) of the ROP WP, it can be concluded that in the analysed period the number of the types of implementable undertakings, similarly to the types and kinds of potential applicants and final beneficiaries, was very large. It provided huge flexibility in planning projects whose goal was to improve the quality of regional economy personnel. Furthermore, a highly even distribution of funds by the institutions involved in the ROP WP implementation must be perceived as an advantage. Unfortunately, an alarming phenomenon has been observed since the moment of Poland's accession to the EU, involving delays in launching the first competitions, and consequently funds, within the framework of new financial perspectives.

The degree of applicants' effectiveness and their ability to satisfy criteria set out in competition guidelines and documents, as well as still nominally small number of projects obtaining such co-funding within the scope of the entire regions and the financial perspective is a cause for further concern.

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