

# ADULT EDUCATION NEEDS ESF FUNDING

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EAEA STATEMENT  
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The European Social Fund (ESF) is a central funding tool for non-formal adult education in Europe. Adult education contributes to supporting the objectives of the ESF, and in turn, the ESF supports adult education in a number of ways.

Adult education supports and promotes the implementation of the objectives of the ESF by providing transversal and generic skills. These skills lead to an improved access to employment, and what is more, to the creation of better employment opportunities and new ways of working. Adult education can also improve the adaptability of workers to new work environments and needs. It promotes social inclusion and reaches out to those who are furthest away from learning. It creates links between people, communities and the labour market and fosters the ongoing development of human resources and long-term employment. This helps to make the EU 2020 strategy for “generating smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU” a reality.

The mutual benefits of ESF and adult education are outlined in this statement. While adult education and the ESF mutually reinforce each other, the ESF does have room for improvement. EAEA consulted its members to ask them about their experience with ESF-funded projects, and based on their responses collected recommendations on how to improve the ESF.

# FIVE REASONS WHY THE ESF IS IMPORTANT FOR ADULT EDUCATION

1

## ESF PROMOTES POLICY REFORM AT NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL

- It allows providers to implement projects that tackle policy structures at a national and regional level.
- It supports the implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning by focusing on increasing participation of low-skilled individuals or people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- It can help to give greater visibility to European strategies such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and Upskilling Pathways in the EU Member States.
- In countries where adult education is still "young", the ESF helps to establish or improve national structures for adult education.

2

## ESF MAKES INNOVATION IN ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION POSSIBLE

- Without it, many adult education programmes could not be implemented due to a lack of funding. Increasingly, adult education providers in Europe need to diversify their funding as public programmes or core funding are being reduced.
- It gives the possibility to develop new programmes and implement new methodologies to reach out to new groups of learners and improve learning offers.
- It helps to innovate vocational education and training, making individuals more flexible on and more adaptable to the labour market. Innovation is key to increase participation in lifelong learning.

3

## ESF ENABLES TAILORED PROGRAMMES FOR SPECIFIC TARGET GROUPS

- It enables tailored programmes for specific target groups, such as migrants and refugees, health and care workers, the unemployed, single mothers, etc. While non-formal adult educators have a long tradition of reaching out to these groups, the ESF is crucial for sustaining such programmes. The wide variety of target groups and sizes of projects makes it possible to create suitable learning programmes for different groups of learners.
- The recognition and validation of informal learning and non-formal adult education gives visibility to learning outcomes and allows learners to move more easily between formal and non-formal education. Individuals' prior learning can also be recognised/validated.

4

## ESF FOSTERS CROSS-SECTORIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

- Through the particularities of the ESF in some regions, the funding tool fosters cross-sectoral cooperation. It helps adult education organisations to develop projects together with other stakeholders in the social or employment sector, such as social housing associations, health providers, labour market services, etc.
- ESF projects can stimulate peer learning by promoting cooperation with other European partners from the same sector. This is not only an added value for the learners, but also for the organisations which build new networks and strengthen their cooperation even beyond the scope of the project.

5

## ESF PROMOTES THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STAFF

- Through ESF projects, adult education staff gains experience crucial for their professional development, and consequently also for enhancing the work of providers. But it is not only through hands-on methods that adult education professionals are learning: some projects have a dedicated part of the budget for training of staff. Organisational development ensures the sustainability of the project activities and gives adult education staff the tools to create new programmes and projects.
- ESF funding can be fundamental for the continuity of organisations and institutions, and in particular of non-governmental organisations that do not receive any public grants.

# FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE ESF

1

## IMPROVE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF ADULT EDUCATION ORGANISATIONS TO ESF

The complex application procedures for ESF projects make it difficult for new applicants to access this funding tool. Adult education organisations also say that funding authorities often have a pre-defined group of beneficiaries of project calls in mind when designing the projects, which is a barrier for organisations who are not in this pool of the “selected few”. To reach out to more target groups, ESF should be opened to new organisations.

2

## AVOID TOO NARROWLY-DEFINED TARGET GROUPS

While tailoring educational offers to specific target groups is vital to engage them in learning, offers should not be too exclusive either as this makes it difficult to get enough participants into programmes. Moreover, giving only one narrowly-defined target group access to programmes can lead to stigmatisation of this group. ESF-funded programmes could focus on specific needs shared by various target groups. This would create a stronger sense of community and an understanding of common challenges, and it would promote learning across cultures and generations.

3

## TAKE THE NEEDS OF THE TARGET GROUPS INTO ACCOUNT AND PROTECT PRIVATE DATA

One size doesn't fit all: Target groups have different needs – such as childcare during course times, flexible course attendance, evening courses instead of day-time classes, etc. Sometimes ESF-funded programmes do not allow this kind of flexibility. When working with target groups from disadvantaged backgrounds, their needs have to be taken into account to bring them into learning and achieve high retention rates. Furthermore, reporting on ESF projects requires a large set of data about the profiles of the participants as well as indicators on their learning success. ESF needs to ensure that all private data of participants that is collected throughout the programme is protected.

4

## MAKE THE ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT OF ESF PROJECTS EASIER

ESF projects require a high amount of administration and reporting. This is a challenge particularly for smaller organisations with only a few staff members. Moreover, the reporting rules differ from country to country, and sometimes even from project to project. While some governments require paper proof of all activities, others only accept digital proof. ESF beneficiaries also report changes in the reporting rules during the lifetime of projects that need to be implemented retro-actively. This takes valuable staff time – and project money – away from the actual activities. In order to make the objectives of the ESF a reality, less emphasis should be put on reporting and more on the learners' needs.

5

## GIVE THE PROVIDERS A SAY IN THE DESIGN OF PROJECTS

Providers are not always consulted in the design-phase of projects. Instead, they are invited to contend for pre-formulated projects that need to be filled with activities, which leaves little space for ideas from the provider's side. Providers often have long experience with working with certain target groups and towards certain objectives, and their contribution during the design of projects could be a win-win situation for all stakeholders: the learners, the providers, as well as the authorities that want to see certain measures put into place.