



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Contact

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE EDUCATION OF
ADULTS (EAEA)

Transparency register no.
3334854676-12

Regina Ebner
Secretary General
gina.ebner@eaea.org

Raffaella Kihrer
Deputy Secretary General
and Head of Policy
raffaella.kihrer@eaea.org

Davide Muraro
Policy and Projects
Coordinator
davide.muraro@eaea.org

ESF+: Make it more inclusive, accessible, and put the learners at the centre!

EAEA's feedback

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In 2023, EAEA surveyed its members on their experiences with ESF+-funded projects and collected recommendations for improving the ESF+ based on their responses. The responses from our members show that many of the challenges and problems identified remain the same as in previous surveys: the application and reporting process is too complex for smaller organisations, the administrative effort and the required co-financing rates are too high, and the sustainability of actions is often not guaranteed.

We are calling for the programme to become more inclusive and to be based on the needs of learners.

The European Social Fund+ (ESF+) is a key funding instrument for non-formal adult learning and education (ALE) in Europe. ALE contributes to supporting the objectives of the ESF+ by providing transversal competences and life skills. These competences and skills lead to improved access to employment and also to the creation of better employment opportunities and new ways of working.

ALE can also improve workers' adaptability to new work environments and needs and contribute to better overall well-being. It promotes social inclusion and reaches those furthest away from learning. It creates links between people, communities and the labour market and promotes the continuous development of personal and professional skills as well as long-term and quality employment.

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ESF+-funded projects in ALE have contributed significantly to promoting regional development and better social cohesion through a wide range of learning programmes, from basic education and inclusion measures for migrants to digital education and prison education.

In 2017, we surveyed our members for the first time on ESF+ funding for ALE, and we conducted further surveys in 2020 and 2023. Although the name of the programme has changed from ESF to ESF+, most of the challenges and issues seem to have remained the same.

Challenges and issues

- **Complex application procedures:** These were already highlighted as a key challenge for new applicants in the first survey in 2017. Providers say that it is still difficult to win projects and perhaps even more so for non-formal ALE, especially for smaller organisations and those who do not belong to the established partners of the funding authorities. This indicates a lack of accessibility in the application process.
- **Influence of certain stakeholders and limited eligibility for funding:** Feedback from EAEA's members indicates that ESF+ programmes are co-developed with pre-selected stakeholders. This significantly limits the opportunities for new organisations and other stakeholders to have a say. At the same time, EAEA members report that the scope for advocacy to be included in the programme design is very limited and requires considerable effort, which many organisations cannot afford.
- **Delayed approval deadlines:** Very lengthy approval periods leading to late payments are a major problem. Organisations report that learning programmes start before they know whether they will receive ESF+ funding because they still have to meet the start dates specified in the application. This leads to great financial uncertainty for the implementing organisations, some of which have to take out loans to pay salaries.
- **Delayed payment of the final instalments:** EAEA members report that in some projects from the previous funding period up to 2020, the last payments only came 5 to 7 years later, i.e. only after the audit. This can result in tens of thousands of euros missing from the accounts and balance sheet, which can lead to organisations having to stop their activities completely.
- **High administrative burden and costs:** The very high administrative burden and complex cost calculations as well as reporting requirements also remain a major problem. EAEA's members also say that the proportion of funding for operating costs – i.e. rent, heating/air conditioning of course rooms, digital infrastructure, etc. – is not sufficient to cover the actual costs. This affects the efficient implementation of projects and even leads to organisations deciding not to continue with ESF+ funding and ending these areas of activity.



- **Financial sustainability and successor funding issues:** Concerns were already raised in 2017 about the low level of regional public funding for ALE, which has an impact on the sustainability of programmes and actions once the ESF+ project ends. This has not changed; on the contrary, EAEA's members report that regional funding remains low and in some cases has even been cut completely. As a result, programmes that have been funded by the ESF+ for many years and have led to the development of structures and know-how remain without successor funding and, therefore, stop completely. At the same time, co-financing requirements from the project coordinators and partners are very high in some regions, which makes it very difficult for smaller organisations to participate in ESF+ actions.
- **Insufficient funding for target groups and narrow definition of eligible beneficiaries:** While ESF+ aims to target specific groups, especially those with fewer opportunities, funding remains inadequate and even hinders these target groups from participating in learning. Some EAEA members even report that the target groups have been further narrowed down so that it is very difficult to find participants for the programmes that are eligible for funding.
- **Outsourcing of actual project activities, especially with very large providers:** EAEA's members report that funding is frequently given to public employment services and their training agencies, which then outsource the actual training courses to other, smaller ALE providers. These providers are not consulted on the training programmes and have to deliver standardised training programmes. This is a loss for innovation and new pedagogical approaches.
- **Transparency problems with audits and budget cuts:** Feedback from EAEA's members points to ongoing problems with a lack of transparency in audits and budget cuts without any explanation and justification. The selection of audit companies that carry out audits for the ESF+ authorities is also criticised: EAEA members say that audits tend to ignore the financial and personnel reality of non-profit organisations and make demands for evidence that are disproportionate to the type of funding and the organisations.
- **Concerns about privacy and data protection:** Privacy concerns, particularly concerning the protection of participants' data, remain a major issue. ALE providers work with vulnerable groups; however, ESF+ requires learning providers to keep participant lists with a very high level of detail. For this reason, some people decide not to participate in learning programmes after all, because they do not want to reveal that much personal information about themselves and because they do not want to be stigmatised as “low-skilled” or similar by a public authority that receives these lists. There are fears that the data will be passed on to other authorities at regional and national levels and could lead to problems. Members also reported that learners from long-completed programmes were called by the European Anti-Fraud Office to check whether the ESF+ learning programmes were being used for fraud. Learners were very worried and frightened by these calls and did not understand why they were being called in the context of anti-fraud measures.



Key recommendations

IMPROVE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF ALE ORGANISATIONS TO ESF+ AND PREVENT OUT-SOURCING OF THE ACTUAL PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The complex application procedures for ESF+ projects make it difficult for new applicants to gain access to this funding instrument. ALE organisations also say that funding authorities often have a predefined group of beneficiaries in mind when designing projects, which is an obstacle for organisations that do not belong to this pool of “chosen ones”. This situation means that the largest and best-known players are usually awarded the project, but later, they often outsource their project implementation to smaller providers, e.g. for courses for the labour market. These small service contracts tend to be precarious and do not guarantee any predictability in terms of future funding.

To reach more target groups, the ESF+ should be opened up to new organisations. Strategies need to be developed at European, national and regional level to ensure transparency in the development of ESF programmes and prevent undue influence by certain interest groups. Furthermore, these strategies should actively facilitate access for new organisations and reduce administrative barriers. It is an economy of scale – an adjustment of the programme for smaller providers is key!

GIVE PROVIDERS A SAY IN THE DESIGN OF PROJECTS

Not always and not everywhere are providers consulted in the planning phase of projects. Instead, they are asked to apply for pre-formulated projects that need to be filled with activities. ALE organisations regret that this leaves little room for innovation in content and learning methods. ALE providers often have many years of experience in working with specific target groups and in pursuing specific goals. Their contribution to the design of projects could be a win-win situation for all involved: for the learners, the providers and also for the authorities that want to implement certain measures.

SUPPORT STRUCTURAL CHANGES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

ESF+ programmes help build up organisational structures and promote know-how and professionalisation of the sector, which also play an important role for regional development. However, this requires regional strategies to support structural change and the provision of appropriate regional financial support for organisations involved in ESF+ projects. This structural and financial support is also needed to enable organisations to participate in ESF+ calls.



ENSURE ADEQUATE FUNDING AND SUCCESSOR FUNDING OF ACTIONS

ESF+ applications, once submitted, are often evaluated and approved or rejected after a long delay. As a result, organisations have to start with the actions mentioned in the application even though they do not yet know whether they will be funded at all, with all the organisational and personnel costs that this entails. Guidelines are needed to speed up the approval process for ESF+ projects to ensure that programmes can start on time and that financial difficulties for organisations are minimised. Funding allocations must be fair and appropriate for different sectors and target groups. Policymakers should also put in place measures to eliminate inequalities in regional co-financing, and, in general, reduce co-financing requirements, particularly in ALE, as these are key to enabling smaller providers to participate in projects.

In addition, successor funding for ESF+-funded programmes must be guaranteed by the implementing region or country so that structures and expertise that have been built up over many years do not suddenly come to an end when the project closes. This requires more monitoring of successor funding structures, but also pressure on regional and national authorities to provide successor funding. This can also prevent funding responsibilities for some areas of learning education being completely shifted to European instruments and regional and national structures being dismantled.

FACILITATE AND SIMPLIFY THE ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT OF ESF+ PROJECTS

ESF+ projects require a great deal of administration and reporting. This is particularly challenging for smaller organisations with only a few employees. In addition, the rules for reporting and accounting obligations differ from country to country and sometimes even from project to project. ESF beneficiaries also report changes in reporting rules during the lifetime of the projects, which have to be implemented retrospectively. This takes valuable staff time - and project funds - away from the actual activities. To realise the objectives of the ESF+, the focus should be less on application and reporting and more on the needs of learners.

PROMOTE INCLUSION, DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

ESF+ programmes are very strongly geared towards the labour market in the current funding period. However, ALE providers note that a stronger focus on transversal competences and life skills that promote inclusion, diversity and sustainability should take centre stage. These not only strengthen employability, but also promote flexibility, resilience, critical thinking, creativity and many other abilities and competences that not only benefit today's labour market, but also anticipate future developments.



AVOID TOO NARROWLY-DEFINED TARGET GROUPS

While it is important to tailor educational offers to specific target groups to attract them to learning, the offers should not be too exclusive, otherwise, it will be difficult to attract enough participants to the programmes, but also to ensure diversity in the groups of learners. In addition, access to programmes for a narrowly defined target group can lead to stigmatisation of this group.

However, ESF+-funded programmes could focus on specific needs shared by different target groups. This would create a stronger sense of community and understanding of common challenges and promote cross-cultural and intergenerational learning.

PUT LEARNERS AT THE CENTRE AND PROTECT PRIVATE DATA

One size does not fit all: target groups have different needs - e.g. childcare during course times, flexible course attendance, evening courses instead of day courses, etc. Many ESF+-funded programmes do not allow this kind of flexibility, especially if they have to follow standardised course models e.g. for the labour market authorities. When working with target groups with fewer opportunities, their needs need to be considered to engage them in learning and achieve high retention rates. In addition, reporting on ESF+ projects requires a variety of data on participants' profiles as well as indicators of their learning success.

The ESF+ must ensure that all private data of participants collected during the programme is protected and not shared with other authorities. The European Union must develop and enforce policies to protect the privacy of learners and establish clear guidelines for the collection, storage and use of private data to protect the rights of participants.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 122 member organisations in 42 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.



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