



Lot 1: Implementation evaluation of the European Social Fund 2014-2020



Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur



Executive summary

24/04/2018

Cette évaluation est cofinancée au titre d'une opération du programme opérationnel FEDER – FSE Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur

Implementation evaluation of the European Social Fund for the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur Region

For the first time since the European economic, social and territorial cohesion policy began, **the Provence Alpes Côtes d'Azur regional council is responsible for the management of a regional operational programme** within the « Investment for growth and jobs » objective, and acts as a managing authority (MA).

With 877 million euros in total cost, this operational programme receives support from the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund for more than 433 million euros.

The European Social Fund (except for technical assistance targeting the MA) represents 33% of the total ERDF and ESF available funds, with 143,5 million euros allocated, making the priority axis n°5 financed by the ESF the first in terms of available funding overall.

Halfway through the programming period, the Regional Council decided to ask for an external evaluation of the programme to be conducted specifically on this priority axis financed solely by the **European social fund**, which aims at investing in skills, education and vocational training.

The study covers the following aspects:

- Exploring whether the management of the ESF has been effective and efficient
- Identifying best practice as well as major flaws in the management of the programme both at MA and beneficiary level
- Looking for options that would allow for a better management of the programme

This evaluation study has **three final goals**:

- It helps improve the overall performance of the Regional Programme in order to release the funds under the performance reserve,
- It provides the managing authority with reasons to consider a mid-term overhaul of the programme,
- It contributes to a more robust, secure and transparent functioning of the Regional operational programme

Questions covered in this evaluation study

Q0 : what are the direct results of the programme since its launch ?

Q1 : how can the Regional Council better attract potential project beneficiaries to bid for a grant from the Programme, but also how can the programme better cover other public policies managed at regional-level ?

Q2 : what would be the best way for the managing authority to provide ESF beneficiaries with the assistance needed to maximize the amount of total certified expenditure by addressing and preventing the problems they face along the audit trail ?

Q3 : to what extent is the monitoring system capable of measuring the outcomes and impacts of the OP in a reliable way ?

1) Programming rate follows a rather optimistic trend

As of March 31st 2017, 44 projects have been selected for financial support by the European social fund: more than 48 million euros have already been awarded, i.e. 33,55% of the total ESF funding made available under priority axis n°5 has already been granted to beneficiaries. This means over 97 million euros in total project expenditure contribute to the regional strategy which promotes access for all people to quality vocational training, which in turn plays a significant role in the accession rate to the job market and social inclusion of the participants.

This offers an optimistic outlook for a high consumption rate of ESF funding, all of which was made possible thanks to the effort put into improving the reputation of the European social fund which still suffers today from major flaws and failures in the management of the programme by the State authorities back in the 2007-2013 programming period when the Regional council was not a managing authority yet.

For instance, the Regional Council has implemented **a wide multi-channel communication strategy** comprising a website, info sessions at local level and workshops aimed at specific groups of stakeholders which represent potential ESF beneficiaries.

Projects are selected through **permanent annual calls for proposals with several cut-off dates**, a choice made by the MA to raise the potential for more numerous proposals to be made and a way to schedule the number of proposals to be assessed by its staff all year-round.

Implementation evaluation of the European Social Fund for the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur Region

The MA has chosen a **highly selective approach when assessing applications**, which is balanced by the high quality of assistance services provided to applicants, including a toolkit aimed at improving their understanding of the rules and obligations derived from EU-funding and specific ESF rules.

2) Approved projects do offer a significant contribution to the expected changes set in the programme

The priority axis n°5 of the PACA-region operational programme is made of several specific objectives aiming at offering better answers and higher leverage to address the challenges in lifelong learning and employment.

The first set of projects comprises career advice and training that offer a better and clearer range of responses, including new methods and services, to tackle the needs of jobs seekers and people retraining for different jobs or in professional mobility.

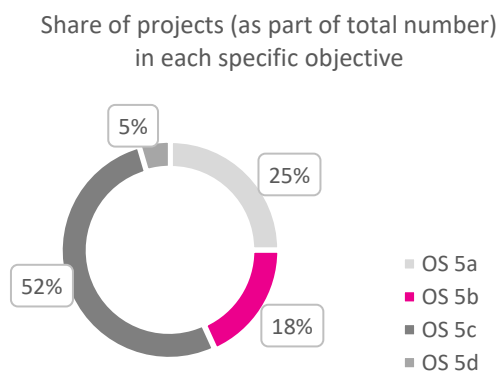
To date, 11 projects have been selected for implementation under the specific objective « Raising the quality and diversity of the services offered to people of all ages aimed at training, support and career-advice professionals ». These projects mainly contribute to improving the availability and quality of the information regarding the job market and lifelong

training services, such as the Métafor project by the *Observatoire régional des métiers* (regional office for statistics on vocational training). Such projects help improve the availability of information on career-choices and the range of options in vocational training: for instance, one of the projects provides a first-level of approach via a digital service aimed at better advising career and professional mobility. New services are also being developed especially for the most disadvantaged persons. For example, the *centre de ressource de lutte contre l'illettrisme* (a regional-level centre on illiteracy) carries out projects which help make the information more accessible to those who have trouble speaking or understanding the language, a project which also aims at improving the skills of the involved social professionals and career advisers.

Projects carried out under the specific objective « Raising the number of people who achieve their first qualifications and raising the level of skills reached by the most disadvantaged persons on the job market » are fully in line with the goals of the priority axis. The MA chose to select **only proposals which offer a structural improvement to address the issues, which is often reflected by the high number of participants in those actions and their total cost**. Two projects carried out by the Regional Council itself account for 87% of the total ESF awarded funding under this specific objective, mostly to cover public procurement spending in vocational training services the Regional Council is responsible for (an efficient way to improve skills and qualifications for the active population and the most disadvantaged inactive people).

More than 2,3 million euros in ESF have been awarded under the specific objective « Improving access of the most disadvantaged young people and people under criminal justice control, to support, career and training-advice measures », which covers a specific target group whose conditions imply putting in place specifically-tailored measures for them to get back on a better track in terms of personal and professional situation, which in turn makes their individual paths more stable. 23 projects have been approved. The target population comprises minors, young persons under criminal justice control, under childhood services as well as unaccompanied minors. Projects offer a wide range of solutions needed to address the vast array of difficulties and obstacles the youth can be faced with, and highlight the need for constant innovation to find new efficient solutions: social enterprises, specific measures, new forms of support based on digital services etc.

Only two projects have been approved under the specific objective « Improving the access to jobs for young unemployed graduates », which is due to the difficulties faced to raise attention of potential project beneficiaries, in spite of the communication strategy put into place.



Implementation evaluation of the European Social Fund for the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur Region

Overall the rate of programming follows a positive trend, even though it can mainly be accounted for by the projects carried out by the Regional Council itself. Current efforts to promote opportunities for financing with this programme must continue and should be boosted.

3) Management processes are in place, but effort is needed on payment claims verifications

A MULTI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY THAT STILL NEEDS TO IMPROVE THE IMAGE OF THE ESF

An ambitious communication strategy has been implemented since the beginning of the programme, yet it has not yet fully given satisfaction since the number of project proposals received remains low. When analysing the programming data and talking to applicants and beneficiaries, some explanation is given as to this situation: the majority of organisations submitting proposals are non-profits and associations with limited financial resources, therefore they tend to be wary when considering ESF as a potential source of financing. During the previous programming period, many organisations had to face the consequences of a bad management of the ESF by the State, and many of them are still potential applicants today, so the majority of stakeholders which could bid for ESF funding stay away from the programme fearing the difficulties might occur again. Therefore, communication challenges go beyond the mere necessity to make the programme known but also include the more complex need for a « restored image » of ESF funding to erase the bad reputation it has gained in the Region.

ASSISTANCE PROVIDED TO APPLICANTS AND BENEFICIARIES IS CONSIDERED USEFUL AND SWIFT

The assistance provided is deemed useful and appropriate by the interviewed organisations. It truly helps improve the quality of the projects to be submitted against ESF standards and regulation. A toolkit is also made available to share the information and useful material, including tools to help beneficiaries comply with common and specific programme indicators to measure results and outputs. Beneficiaries considered the help they received as tailored to their needs and the team was swift in responding to their enquiries.

PROJECT PROPOSALS ARE ASSESSED IN DETAIL

Project proposals are selected on rather selective criteria and assessed following a structured set of procedures. The depth of analysis is high, and all steps are logged in a specific document as well as requests sent to applicants to better assess project proposals. Each project gets a « log fiche », a system put in place to compensate the delay taken by national authorities to provide regional MAs with a fully functional information system; indeed, in the PACA region, like most French regional authorities did, the MA has chosen to stick with the national internet platform Synergie. The main issue is that this platform is still not open to applicants and beneficiaries. However, assessment of project proposals is detailed and covers technical and financial aspects, as well as performance framework indicators and their monitoring.

All in all, management processes covering all steps until the grant agreement is signed are working as expected.

VERIFICATION OF PAYMENT CLAIMS IS A HIGH-RANKING PRIORITY FOR THE PROGRAMME TO FULLY PERFORM

Based on June 2017 data, 21 approved projects cover the year 2015, out of which only 7 have had their payment claims verified. For this specific year, only a third of projects has had the payment claims checked. As of November 2017, only 10 ESF projects had their payment claims verified, of which 9 were submitted to the certifying authority. Members of the programme management team are fairly busy with in-depth project proposal assessment; the fact that they are required to key-in information into the system in lieu of the applicants and beneficiaries (since it is not yet open to them) also explains the heavy workload. Last but not least, the process for checking indicators and securing reporting tasks and reviewing the performance framework, which entails some level of difficulty, also increases the total of time needed to manage a grant agreement at MA level. Overall, interviews with beneficiaries highlight some difficulty to understand all programme requirements, including how to fully comply with indicators and reporting rules.

How this evaluation was conducted

In-depth analysis of technical, financial programming and performance framework data
 Interviews with other directions in the Regional Council and external stakeholders involved in programming
 Survey of 23 potential applicants and approved beneficiaries
 Workshops and meetings with programme management staff

4) Suggested action plan

Questions asked	Suggestions
<p>Q1: how can the Regional Council better attract potential project beneficiaries to bid for a grant from the Programme, but also how can the programme better cover other public policies managed at regional-level ?</p>	<p>1 - Achieving a denser and formalised dialogue amongst the Regional Council's Directions, services and offices involved in the implementation of the programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In each Direction involved, nominate key technical advisers on the programme • Clarify the responsibilities and role of office managers regarding this programme within each operational Direction and foster higher coordination with them • Conduct another survey in each office and Direction involved in order to identify new potential regional-level policies which could benefit from the Operational programme's financial support within the 2018-2020 time period <p>2- Implementing a more focused communication strategy and getting a clearer agenda for new calls for proposals in the mid-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication should be more targeted and follow a thematic approach • Calls for proposals should be forecast based on a clarified schedule • Using digital services could act as a lever to better reaching project applicants • Consider the possibility of projects based on partnerships with a project leader and associate beneficiaries
<p>Q2: what would be the best way for the managing authority to provide ESF beneficiaries with the assistance needed to maximize the amount of total certified expenditure by addressing and preventing the problems they face along the audit trail ?</p>	<p>3- Making adjustments to the beneficiaries' toolkit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reference guide for beneficiaries should be adjusted to better cover the specifics of ESF funding regulations • The complete toolkit should be readily available on the Region's EU funding website • The one-on-one assistance already offered should be completed with training sessions and workshops when call for proposals are opened • Better preparation and assistance to anticipate the transition to a fully operational online platform to be open to applicants and beneficiaries <p>4- Improving management processes and strengthening resources dedicated to the task</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme management documentation and reference must be stabilised (work in progress) at all stages of the audit trail • Increasing the (human) resources would help achieving a slightly better level of expenditure verified and ready to be sent to the certifying authority • In general, reinforce the assistance offered to beneficiaries <p>5- More assistance offered to beneficiaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers at MA level should be able to better monitor the approved projects • Assistance and advice should be offered to beneficiaries when they start drafting their payment claims and project reports • The number of on-the-spot management verifications, within the first three months following the project's start date, should be increased

<p>Q3 : to what extent is the monitoring system capable of measuring the outcomes and impacts of the OP in a reliable way ?</p>	<p>6- Improving the indicators monitoring system, especially regarding performance framework indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring of mandatory indicators should be better implemented and taken into account at all stages • Professionals responsible for the monitoring and strategic planning on indicators should be more clearly identified and given more resources • A cross-Directions task force within the Regional Council should be created to help monitor the quality and the reliability of programme indicators • A review on the reliability and quality of the data, and all processes for aggregating the data, should be implemented, which could include a testing on the indicators' management system and a test sample on specific projects • Since some indicators' definition or implementation fails to perform or is flawed, the performance framework on indicators should undergo an overhaul of these
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