1 Summary

1.1 What did we study?

This report presents the results of a study **Impact of the Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 on the education and training system** commissioned by the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy and carried out by a consortium of Piotr Fuchs Smart Research, IDEA Institute Ltd., Pracownia Rozwoju Przemysław Kozak.

**Main objective of the study**: to assess the impact of the interventions implemented under the UP 2014- 2020 in the field of education and training on improving the quality of human capital and increasing access to high quality educational services.

**Date of implementation:** the study was an ex-post evaluation carried out in the period July 2023 - February 2024.

**Scope:** the evaluation covered all cohesion policy programmes of the 2014-2020 perspective that implemented interventions related to education and training. In particular, all activities implemented under thematic objective 10 (CT10) and selected activities under objectives CT9, CT8 and CT2 were covered by the study.

1.2 What questions were we seeking to answer?

As part of the study, the contractor sought answers to 17 evaluation questions. They concerned, among others: the financial resources spent on selected areas of education and training, effects of support and their reference to the objectives of the Partnership Agreement, the impact of interventions, occurring problems in implementation (including those related to the COVID pandemic) and complementarity of support. The results of the study were also intended to provide conclusions and recommendations for currently implemented as well as future cohesion policy interventions in the area of education and training.

1.3 What data did we use?

The study used qualitative and quantitative data. In terms of quantitative data, it used:

* monitoring data collected in the SL2014 IT system,
* data from the Central Statistical Office,
* data on examination results obtained from eight District Examination Boards,
* data obtained through a quantitative CAWI/CATI survey with project beneficiaries and local government units.

The main source of qualitative data where information obtained through interviews and case studies. Extensive use was also made of available previous research and analysis in the area of evaluation.

1.4 What methods did we use?

The study was carried out using **theory-based evaluation and a complementary counterfactual impact evaluation**.

At the structuring stage of the study, it was decided to prepare **separate intervention logics for the different stages of education**:

* pre-school education,
* general education,
* vocational education,
* higher education,
* adult learning.

A range of methods were used to implement the study, ensuring triangulation of the research process:

* **Desk research** - strategic and programme documents, available studies and analyses concerning the area of evaluation and monitoring data from the SL2014 system.
* **Surveys among territorial self-government units** were carried out using CAWI and CATI techniques. The survey was addressed to 2765 territorial self-government units and 745 effective questionnaires were obtained, which translates into a return rate of 27%.
* **Surveys with beneficiaries of support** were carried out using the CAWI technique and, complementarily, CATI. 3095 completed questionnaires were obtained.
* **Individual interviews (IDI)** - 46 IDIs were conducted with representatives of MAs/IPs of individual programmes included in the scope of the study, beneficiaries of key projects in education and representatives of universities.
* **Case studies** - 9 case studies of projects in the field of education were completed.
* **Counterfactual and statistical analyses** - in the case of kindergartens, a quasi-experimental scheme was used in which supported municipalities were matched with similar municipalities that did not benefit from support. The *propensity score matching* (PSM) technique was used for matching. With regard to general education, econometric modelling was used and a multiple regression model and a logistic regression model were applied in parallel**.**
* **workshops/expert panel** - two workshops (focused on structuring the research process and second focused on recommendations) and one expert panel were conducted.

1.5 What did we learn?

* **The total value of interventions in the field of education and training in the studied period amounted to approximately PLN 43 billion**, which represents approximately 7% of the total value of cohesion policy interventions in Poland. Most funds were spent in the area of adult learning (approximately PLN 19.9 billion). In total, nearly conducted 28 000 projects were co-financed. Despite the high value in absolute numbers in fact EU support constituted only a small share (a few percent) of the total outlays on education in Poland.
* **The intervention can be regarded as well targeted** and properly addressing the needs and challenges in the area of education and training. The recipients of the support were accurately selected, and the instruments planned within individual areas resulted logically from the needs and challenges identified at the diagnostic stage. The overall positive assessment of the relevance of the support is confirmed by the results of the survey, where, in fact, all beneficiaries declare that the support from the EU programmes was rather (62%) or definitely (36%) adequately tailored to their needs. The highest relevance of support to needs is declared by beneficiaries implementing projects in the area of vocational training and pre-school education.
* **In the area of pre-school education**, 76,600 new pre-school education places were created under ESF projects, the vast majority of which are permanent and effectively used (especially in the case of projects implemented by municipalities). Counterfactual analysis showed a significant impact of the intervention on increasing access to pre-school education. The pre-school education services offered in supported kindergartens are adjusted to the needs of citizens. The analysis confirms the significant impact of cohesion policy on improving the quality of pre-school education.
* **The intervention in the area of general education** allowed for the improvement of infrastructure and equipment in schools, although the scale of this type of intervention, in relation to the very high needs, was definitely insufficient. Thanks to the investments, the quality and accessibility (for people with disabilities) of general education improved. The total number of pupils supported in the development of key competences during extra-curricular activities was approximately 1.6 million. The quality of these classes was satisfactory and the classes themselves were assessed as effective in terms of developing key competences and universal skills. The sustainability of extra-curricular activities, understood as their continued implementation in schools after the end of the projects, should be assessed as rather low. There is no evidence of the effectiveness of the scholarships in increasing the motivation of students to achieve high educational results. Approx. 145,000 teachers participated in in-service training thanks to projects implemented under the ROP. This type of intervention should be considered effective in improving teachers' competences/qualifications. Nevertheless, about one third of the supported teachers do not use them in their teaching practice (in the conditions of an over-developed core curriculum, the practical application by teachers of the acquired competences is difficult). Statistical analysis showed moderate positive impact of cohesion policy interventions on the quality of general education reflected by the results of external examinations in mathematics.
* Of all the areas of education supported under the ROP, **vocational education** was given priority by most MAs. The infrastructure and equipment of vocational schools was improved, although the scale of this type of intervention, in relation to the very large needs, was definitely insufficient. The effectiveness of ESF projects within the ROP in improving the labour market situation of graduates can be assessed positively. Projects implemented under the ROP have not significantly contributed to the implementation of sustainable changes in the vocational education offer in individual schools/schools covered by the support. In particular, they did not contribute to the extinction of education in surplus/non-perspective professions. Changes in the form of launching education in new professions as a result of project implementation are slightly more frequent. Actions taken from the national level may have a greater impact on adjusting the educational offer to the labour market needs. In particular, this concerns activities within the framework of the OP KED: diversification of the level of financing of vocational education, as well as the development of vocational counselling and activities such as the creation of a system for monitoring the careers of graduates of post-primary schools. The projects under the ROP contributed to the improvement of the quality of vocational education most often within the professions/qualifications that were already offered by the supported vocational schools even before they joined the projects. The intervention contributed to the moderate extent to strengthening of cooperation between vocational schools and employers, both at the national (OP KED) and regional level. So far, cooperation between schools providing vocational education and universities is very rarely practised.
* **In the area of higher education,** support was provided mainly under the OP KED (93% of the intervention value). The support contributed to an increase in the number of students and university staff participating in competence enhancement programmes. Thanks to ESF support, over 400 000 students improved their competences. Particular added value was provided by the practical components of the implemented projects, such as internships, courses and classes carried out in cooperation with employers. The intervention accurately addressed the needs of HEIs (in particular thanks to the possibility to implement integrated projects) and accurately complemented the standard activities financed from their budgets. The intervention contributes to a better adjustment of the educational offer of HEIs to the needs of the labour market. However, due to the fact that interventions in the area of higher education were implemented in the period of favourable economic situation with high demand for labour ("employee market"), the professional situation of graduates of higher education institutions not participating in the projects is similar to the professional situation of project participants. The only noticeable difference is observed in terms of how quickly graduates find a job. Participants of the EU projects took up work on average about 2-3 months faster than graduates not participating in the projects. Beneficiaries in the area of tertiary education more often than other beneficiaries experienced difficulties in the implementation of projects (31% of universities declare experiencing difficulties, while for all beneficiaries of educational projects the percentage is 18%).
* **The intervention in the area of adult learning** was coherent and logically structured focusing on two main aspects: 1) the design and implementation of solutions leading to greater educational activity of adults, 2) the financing of educational and training activities and solutions supporting the quality of educational services. An additional element of the intervention was the financing of various forms of adult learning supporting the achievement of objectives in other areas remains significant, nevertheless it should be noted that a precise assessment in this respect remains difficult (among others due to the divergence in the manner of measurement and value of key EUROSTAT and BKL indicators). The effectiveness of the measures should be assessed as relatively high, although the evaluation at the level of implementation of detailed solutions and the direct effects achieved remains highly variable. On the other hand, usability, understood as the assessment of the overall real effects and the degree to which the educational needs of adults have been met, remains at a moderate level. To the greatest extent, this is due to the low usability of the ZSK/ZRK system to date and the funding of the development of language and ICT competences under the ROPs poorly matched to the needs of the final recipients. Finally, the sustainability of interventions should be considered rather low potentially - for many activities there is a serious risk that without the support of EU funds these activities will not be implemented, or at best will be severely curtailed. The interventions implemented under the 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy in the area of adult learning have been extremely important to lunch new actions that would probably not have been implemented without EU funding.
* An important barrier to the implementation of interventions in the field of education and training was the **COVID-19 pandemic** (2020-2021). The pandemic temporarily delayed project implementation. The negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly varied by area of education. The results of the survey indicate that the greatest negative impact of the pandemic was recorded for projects implemented in the area of higher education (45% of beneficiaries indicate a significant negative impact of the pandemic on project implementation). The smallest was in the case of pre-school education (16%). However, it should be emphasised that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was of a temporary nature and did not negatively affect the final effectiveness of the intervention (understood as the achievement of the assumed objectives and indicators).
* The vast majority of beneficiaries (70%) implemented other **complementary projects in the field of** education and training. The highest share of complementary projects was recorded in the area of higher education (86% of HEIs declared implementation of such projects). The results of the survey indicate that the complementarity of EU projects implemented in the field of education occurred mainly between projects co-financed by the ESF under national (POWER) and regional (ROP) programmes.

1.6 What are the implications for public policies?

Selected recommendations in relation to specific areas of support:

* In the area of pre-school upbringing, it is recommended to focus on increasing the quality of pre-school upbringing. At the same time maintaining a form of support in the form of creating new pre-school education places. However, the creation of new places for pre-school education should be preceded by a reliable diagnosis of local needs.
* In the area of general education, it is recommended to apply more extensive/alternative forms of support for municipalities which have problems to obtain EU financing by their own and at the same time have high educational needs. It is also advisable to launch support for municipalities in the field of education management in organisational and financial terms.
* In the area of vocational education, the area of vocational counselling should be strengthened, especially in the final years of primary school, as a method of reducing the demand for education in surplus/unpromising occupations.
* In the area of higher education, it is advisable to continue support for the implementation of “comprehensive projects” while making the rules and procedures for introducing changes to such projects in more flexible and simpler way.
* In the area of adult learning, it is advisable to identify a coordinator/leader of activities concerning the development of adult learning in Poland and to develop a participatory model of coordination, as well as to implement solutions to ensure greater usability of the ZSK and ZRK systems.

At the same time, the whole education system should be better prepared for the increased influx of immigrant children/youth from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to schools and institutions in Poland. Improving the mental condition of children and young people and the large number of children/young people with special educational needs (including children with disabilities) in schools, will also be a key challenge in the area of education for the coming years.