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Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

European Social Funds Participant Survey: 2015 to 2022 (summary)

The purpose of these surveys was to provide timely and robust information on the outcomes and longer-term impacts of ESF operations across Wales.

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Research aims and objectives

European Structural Funds are financial tools that support the implementation of the regional policy of the European Union. European Structural Funds comprise the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). These funds aim to reduce regional disparities in income, wealth, and opportunity.

The Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) is the designated 'Managing Authority' for European Union Structural Funds Programmes in Wales. WEFO is responsible for the design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of initiatives supported by these funds.

In Wales, actions to tackle poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion were addressed through ESF programmes that supported employment-related operations that were specifically expected to target unemployment, worklessness and barriers to accessing sustainable employment.

WEFO appointed IFF Research Limited to design and deliver surveys of ESF participants during the 2014 to 2020 Programme period. The purpose of these surveys was to provide timely and robust information on the outcomes and longer-term impacts of ESF operations across Wales. This report summarises findings of the 2014 to 2020 ESF Participants Surveys.

Methodology

The 2014-2020 ESF Participants Surveys were undertaken during two rounds of survey fieldwork.

- The first round of fieldwork was conducted between January 2018 and July

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2019. Referred to as the 2015/18 ESF Participants Survey, this study involved interviews with people who had left their ESF course between January 2015 and April 2018.

- The second round of fieldwork was conducted between August 2022 and May 2023. These interviews primarily covered participants who had completed their ESF supported programme between April 2018 (and who were not sampled for the first survey) and May 2022.

The ESF Participants Survey questionnaire used for the first fieldwork window (2018-19) was developed from the earlier ESF Leavers Survey questionnaire (covering the 2007-2013 Programme) to maintain consistency with previously collected data. New questions regarding the situation of participants six months after leaving their ESF project were added to the survey to fulfil European Commission reporting requirements.

The questionnaire used for the second round of fieldwork was largely kept the same as the first so that data from the two rounds could be combined into a single data set. The most notable changes during the second round were the introduction of questions about the impact of COVID-19 upon support received, and whether COVID-19 had any impact on progression since the course.

Participants included in the survey sample were drawn in waves across each fieldwork period to ensure that at least 12 months had elapsed since participants had left their ESF course at the time they were being interviewed. This mirrored the approach of earlier ESF surveys, allowing participant outcomes to be followed up over a longer period.

The primary mode of interview was telephone interviews. However, in the second round of fieldwork these were supplemented with online interviews for participants who did not have a telephone number or preferred to do a shorter online survey. Across both rounds of fieldwork participants could also choose to do a shorter version of the survey covering information required for European Commission reporting requirements. Overall, 23,228 interviews were achieved

across the two rounds of fieldwork.

Data from both rounds of fieldwork were combined into a single data set to cover the entire 2014-2020 Programme. To ensure that analysis was representative of the wider population of ESF participants, a 'programme weight' was calculated using the full population of ESF participants who had left their courses between January 2015 and May 2022.

This combined data set forms that basis of the analysis contained in this report. The analysis often distinguishes between operations that were targeted at supporting the participation of those who were out of work prior to ESF and those that were aimed at supporting the progression of those who were in work at the time they were being supported by ESF.

Main findings

Participating in ESF

The main reason for undertaking an ESF project among participants on operations aimed at supporting participation was to help them get a job (54%). Among those on operations aimed at supporting progression, the main reason given was to develop skills and knowledge (46%).

Duration of support from ESF was longer among those who were assisted by projects aimed at supporting progression (15 months) compared to those on projects aimed at supporting participation (8 months).

59% of participants were aware that their project was funded by ESF, with levels of awareness being higher among those assisted by projects aimed at supporting progression in employment (66%) compared to those aimed at supporting participation (50%).

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7% of ESF participants reported that Welsh was their first language. The delivery of ESF operations was commensurate with this, with 6% reporting that their support was delivered either wholly or partly through the medium of Welsh. 95% reported that their programme was delivered through their preferred language.

17% of participants were recorded as having left their course early. Rates of withdrawal were higher among those aged 16 to 24 (21%), those with work limiting health conditions (23%) and those with levels of educational attainment at or below NQF Level 2 (20%).

Skills and qualifications

Almost three quarters of participants (72%) reported that they had either gained a qualification or units/credits towards a qualification through ESF. This was higher among those assisted by projects aimed at supporting progression in employment (84%) compared to those aimed at supporting participation in the labour market (55%).

ESF contributed to increasing the attainment levels of participants. Prior to ESF, 45% of participants reported that their educational attainment was at or below NQF Level 2. Following ESF, this figure fell to 36%.

Barriers to finding work

Among those out of work prior to ESF, the most often cited barrier to finding employment was a lack of relevant experience (51%). Women, carers, and those with dependent children each placed an increased emphasis on difficulties associated with only wanting to work part time, having caring responsibilities and not being able to afford childcare.

Entering employment following ESF

Amongst those who were unemployed or economically inactive prior to being supported by ESF, just over half (52%) were employed 6 months after they had left their operations. Among those assisted by operations that supported the employability of those at risk of poverty, almost 8 out of 10 (79%) were in employment 6 months after they left their programmes.

Amongst those who were previously out of work, participation in employment at 6 months following ESF was relatively low among those aged over 55 (40%), those with work limiting health conditions (32%) and those with levels of educational attainment at or below NQF Level 2 prior to their participation in ESF (47%).

The perceived impact of projects that support participation

Among those who were previously unemployed or economically inactive but who were in employment by the time of the survey, two thirds (66%) reported either that their ESF course had helped them to get their current job (52%) or that they got their current job directly because of the course (14%). One third of ESF Participants (33%) however reported that their course had 'made no difference'.

Participant's perceptions of the impact of ESF were higher among those who gained qualifications as a result of being supported by ESF. Furthermore, these perceptions increased with respect to the level of qualification that was gained.

The estimated impact of projects that support participation

The impact of projects that supported participation has been estimated by comparing the transitions into employment, education and training made by ESF participants with those made by comparable non-employed people from the wider population who appear within the Annual Population Survey (APS) conducted by the Office for National Statistics.

Based upon statistical matching techniques, operations that supported the employability of the long term unemployed and economically inactive were estimated to be associated with a 7-percentage point increase in employment at 12 months following participation in ESF (29% compared to 22%).

The application of matching techniques to different groups of participants revealed that the impact of operations that supported the employability of the long term unemployed and economically inactive were lower for men (a 4-percentage point improvement in employment outcomes), those with levels of educational attainment at or below NQF Level 2 prior to their participation in ESF (a 4-percentage point improvement), and those with work limiting ill-health conditions (a 3-percentage point improvement).

Among a more employable group of ESF beneficiaries who had recently been made unemployed and/or redundant, participation in operations that supported the employability of those at risk of poverty were estimated to be associated with a 13-percentage point increase in employment outcomes at 12 months following ESF (82% compared to 69%).

Participation in operations that sought to reduce levels of NEET among 16 to 24 year olds were associated with a 16 percentage point increase in the proportion of those in employment, education, or training at 12 months following ESF compared to a matched sample of non ESF participants (59% compared to

43%).

The perceived impact of projects that support progression

At 6 months following ESF, approximately 4 out of 10 (39%) of those assisted by projects that supported progression were working in a different role compared to that held prior to ESF. Almost 3 out of 10 (27%) were working for a different employer following their participation in ESF.

Fifty-four of ESF participants assisted by projects that supported progression reported either that the course had helped them to get their current job (45%) or that they got their current job directly because of the course (9%). The remaining 46% reported that their course 'made no difference'.

Over a third (36%) reported that the jobs that they held at 6 months following the completion of ESF required a higher level of skill and competency to what they were expected to do in their job prior to ESF. A quarter (25%) similarly reported that they were in a role that required a higher level of qualification and 41% reported that their levels of responsibility had increased.

The impact of the pandemic

Among those who were not in work prior to ESF and were assisted by operations that supported participation, almost 6 out of 10 (57%) reported that the COVID pandemic had not affected their subsequent progression. However, over a third (38%) said that the pandemic had made things harder. Half (50%) of this group attributed their response to more difficult conditions in the labour market.

Among those who were previously in work and were assisted by operations that

supported progression, over 7 out of 10 (71%) reported that the COVID pandemic had not had an influence on their subsequent progression. However, over a fifth (21%) said the pandemic had made things harder. Among this group, 24% reported that the industry that they wanted to work in was affected by the pandemic and 22% reported that there were fewer jobs around.

Conclusions and recommendations

This analysis of ESF Participant Survey data has demonstrated that these interventions were targeted at those who experienced relative disadvantage within the labour market. As such, these programmes contributed to tackling poverty and social exclusion and promoted equal opportunities, thereby addressing both principles that guided the operation of Structural Fund Programmes and the goal of “a more equal Wales” as stipulated in the Welsh Government’s Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

Almost three quarters of participants reported that they had either gained a qualification or had gained units/credits towards a qualification and that these are associated with increasing attainment levels among participants. ESF funded operations therefore supported the goal of the Welsh Government’s Wellbeing of Future Generations Act for a more prosperous and resilient Wales through the development of a more educated population that is adaptable in the face of changing skills needs.

The ESF Participants Surveys however also indicated that not all barriers faced by participants in finding work can be addressed at the level of the individual. ESF participants reported that labour market deficiencies contributed to a lack of opportunity. Whilst ESF Programmes can help to improve the capability of participants, the opportunities provided by local labour markets were often perceived by participants to be limited.

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There were also areas where it is arguable that ESF programmes did not have the opportunity to provide support to the degree that might have been expected. Key in this respect was the Welsh language. Whilst the provision of support appeared to cater for low levels of Welsh speaking among ESF Participants, further research is needed to understand why so few people engaged with these programmes through the medium of Welsh.

- Does the lack of engagement through the medium of Welsh reflect the lower levels of Welsh speaking among disadvantaged groups or is there also a reluctance of these groups to engage with public services in Welsh?

Whilst ESF Programmes have been targeted at those who face significant disadvantages in the labour market, the analysis alluded to the challenges of supporting these groups. Rates of early withdrawal from ESF provision were higher amongst those groups who face greater difficulties.

- Whilst withdrawal from ESF does not necessarily represent a poor outcome (participants may have left early to start work), future research should examine the reasons behind early withdrawal.

The estimated impact of ESF projects on employment outcomes are consistent with those derived from the evaluation of labour market programmes. The impact of ESF was however not uniform across the population and employment gains were estimated to be smaller among disadvantaged groups. This may suggest difficulties in supporting those most at need or the complexity of challenges among those who seek support.

Finally, there are increasing difficulties associated with conducting surveys in the light of falling response rates since the pandemic. These difficulties have led ONS to transform the way it conducts the Labour Force Survey, from which the APS is in part derived. These changes to the APS may make it more difficult in the future for ESF and APS data to be combined to examine the impact of such schemes based on the Counterfactual Impact Assessment methods used in this

report.

In the face of these and other difficulties with conducting surveys among hard-to-reach groups such as ESF participants, future evaluations of labour market programmes in Wales should place greater reliance upon the use of administrative data, such as that held by the Department for Work and Pensions.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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