

The Experiences of Participants in ESF Funded Training Programmes: A Summary of Findings from the 2013 ESF Leavers Survey

Introduction

This report presents findings from a detailed investigation of the experiences of people who participated in training programmes in Wales during 2013 that were supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). The two ESF Operational Programmes (referred to as the Convergence and Competitiveness Programmes) benefiting Wales for the programming period 2007 – 2013 provided a little over £1.4 billion¹ of investment, with approximately 85% of this channelled through the West Wales and the Valleys Convergence Programme². The interventions supported by the Programmes were wide-ranging, though all relate to investment in human capital. At the time of writing it is forecasted that approved projects will reach over 600,000 participants by the end of this programming period.

The 2013 ESF Leavers Survey was commissioned by the Welsh European Funding Office and conducted by an inter-disciplinary research team headed by IFF Research Limited. The aim of the 2013 ESF Leavers Survey was to assist in assessing the effectiveness of labour market interventions delivered under the ESF Convergence and Competitiveness Programmes. The over-arching objective of the survey is to understand the characteristics and outcomes of those participating in ESF

projects. To achieve this, a telephone survey was conducted during the autumn of 2014 among a group of people who were identified as having left an ESF project during 2013. Interviews were achieved with 1,966 ESF participants from 20 different projects.

The interventions covered by the ESF survey fall under two broad categories; those aimed at improving employment which primarily support those not in work (Convergence Priority 2; Competitiveness Priority 1) and those aimed at improving skills among those in work (Convergence Priority 3; Competitiveness Priority 2). Given the scale of the investment, it is clearly essential to evaluate the impact of measures supported by the Programmes. Key areas include evaluation of increasing access to employment for those currently unemployed or economically inactive, of raising skills levels, and of increasing the capacity of those in work to add value to their economic contribution.

The survey collected information on: the pre-entry characteristics of ESF participants; their motivations for participating in an ESF project; the skills acquired as a result of the intervention and details of the careers of respondents since completing the project. Employment outcomes, 'softer' benefits from learning (such as increased confidence) and entry into further learning was also identified. The interviews included questions to explore participants' levels of satisfaction with their courses and their perceptions of the benefits they

¹ See Reports to PMC, June 2013 – Papers PMC (13) 229 and PMC (13) 230 available at: <http://wefo.wales.gov.uk/programmes/allwales/pmc/130621pmcpapers/?lang=en>

² Convergence Programme - £1,242 million, Competitiveness £173 million

experienced as a result of participating in an ESF project.

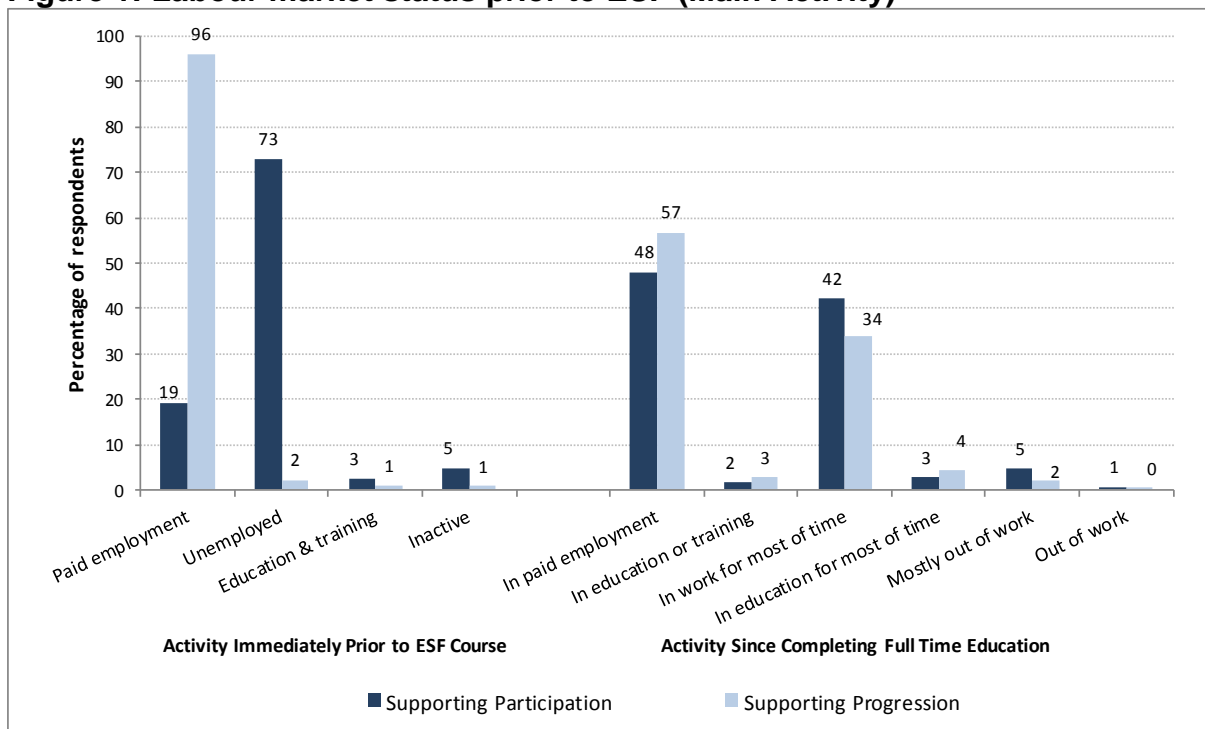
What were participants doing at the time they started their ESF course?

The labour market circumstances of ESF respondents prior to their interventions are presented in the left-hand side of Figure 1. Among those interventions aimed at improving participation in the labour market, approximately 7 out of 10 respondents (73%) were unemployed immediately prior to ESF, with a further 5% classed as economically inactive. By contrast, 96% of respondents participating in interventions aimed at supporting progression in employment were employed prior to ESF. Such

interventions generally take place at the workplace during working hours.

To provide a more accurate understanding of their career histories, respondents were asked to provide an overview of their working lives since completing full time education (see right-hand side of Figure 1). Approximately 90% of respondents report that they had either been continuously in paid employment or had been in paid work for most of their time since completing full time education. It is interesting to note that this is observed in respondents from both those projects aimed at improving participation and those projects aimed at improving skills.

Figure 1: Labour market status prior to ESF (Main Activity)



The findings presented in Figure 1 could suggest that the intended targeting of the ESF interventions aimed at improving participation in the labour market on those who face the greatest difficulties in finding work has not occurred. However, as with

previous surveys, there may be several reasons why vulnerable groups may be under-represented in the survey population, including difficulties in gaining contact details for certain hard to reach groups and the deliberate exclusion of some projects

aimed at vulnerable groups from the survey. It is noted that almost three-quarters of respondents to the survey from projects aimed at supporting employment were individuals who had participated in redundancy training; a group who are by definition close to the labour market. The results derived from the survey should be considered in this context.

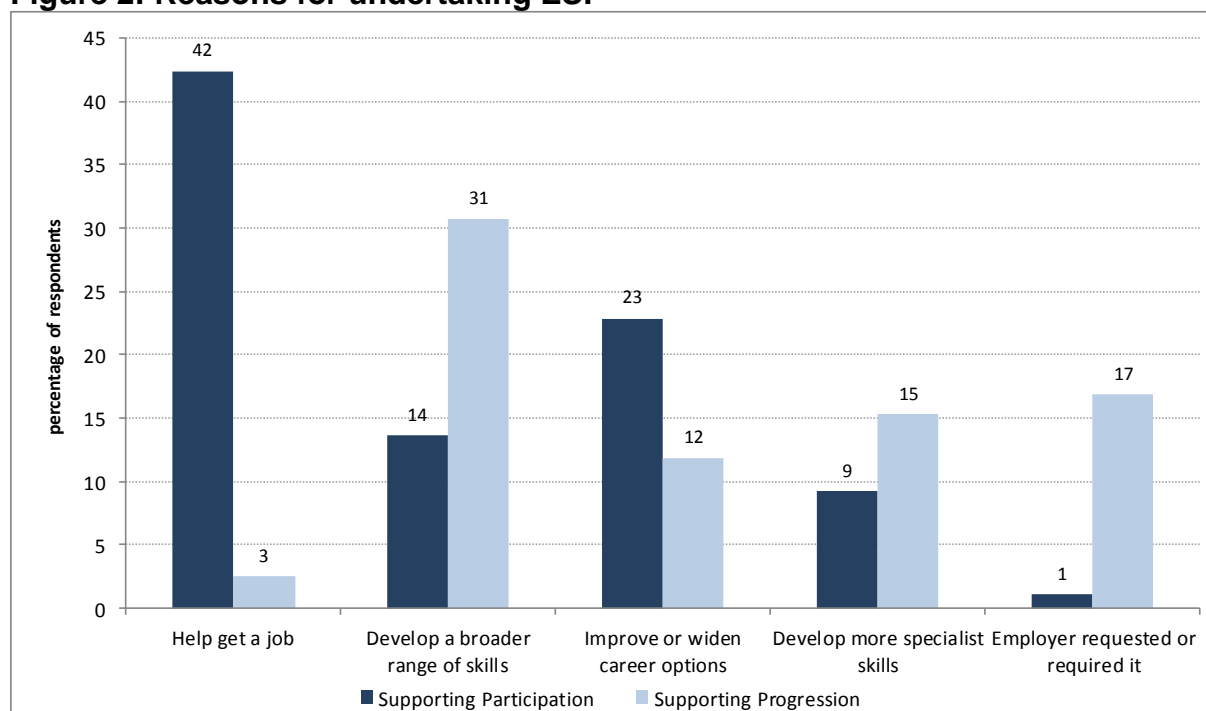
Why do people undertake ESF supported training?

The reasons given for undertaking an ESF course are presented in Figure 2. The reasons provided by respondents naturally reflect the groups targeted by specific types of intervention. More than two-fifths of respondents (42%) participating in projects aimed at

improving participation in the labour market stated that they undertook the course in order to help them find work. Among those who were already in work prior to participation and taking part in interventions aimed at supporting progression in employment, greater emphasis is placed upon the development of broader skills (31%). However, approximately one in six respondents (17%) indicate that their main reason for participating in their ESF project was because their employer had requested or required it.

Some ESF interventions do operate at the level of the workplace and the impetus for training may in some cases arise from the employer rather than the individual.

Figure 2: Reasons for undertaking ESF



What difficulties do people face in finding work?

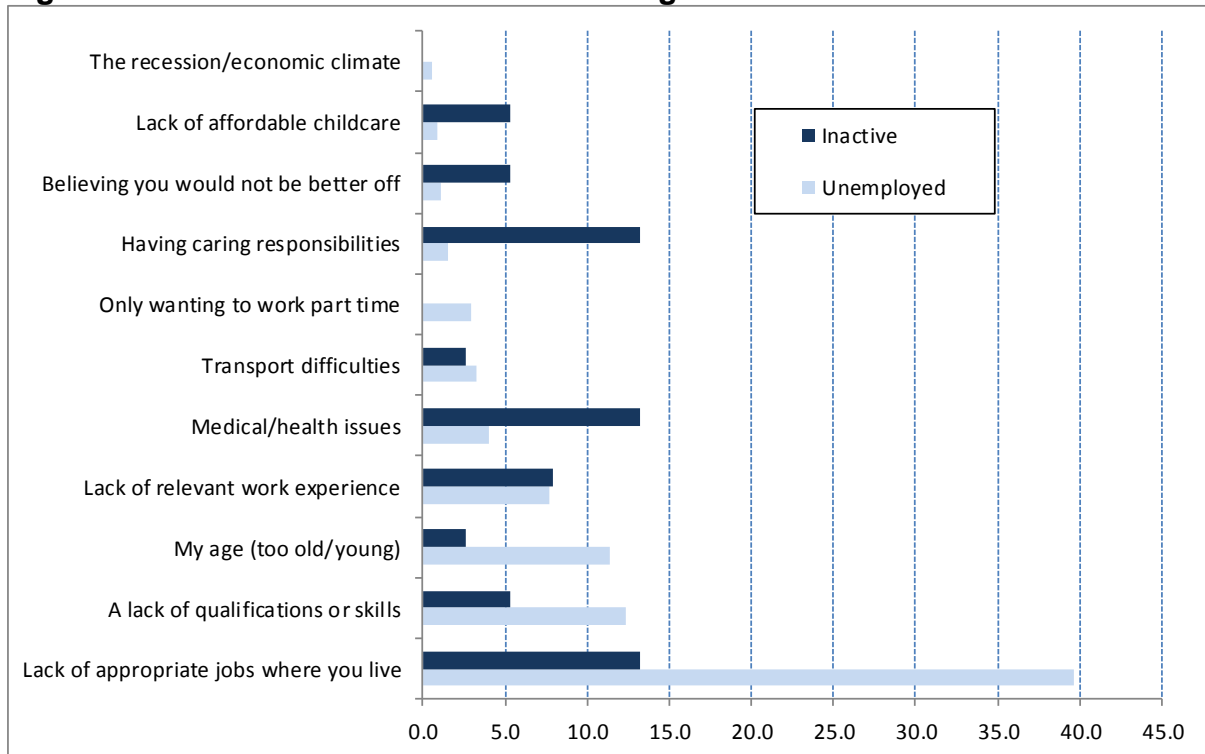
Survey respondents who were out of work prior to their ESF course were asked about the main difficulties that they faced in finding work. The reason

most frequently cited by previously unemployed respondents was a lack of appropriate jobs where they lived (40%) (Figure 3). A lack of qualifications or skills and age were cited by 12% and 11% of previously

unemployed respondents respectively. Among those who were economically inactive prior to ESF, caring responsibilities, health problems or

lack of appropriate jobs were each cited by 13% as the main issue they faced in finding work.

Figure 3: Difficulties associated with finding work



What skills do people gain from ESF supported training?

The most commonly cited skills acquired by participants on ESF training courses were job specific skills (69%). Other commonly cited skills include key skills such as organisational skills, communication skills, team working skills, and problem solving skills. Participants from projects that are aimed at increasing participation in employment were more likely to report improvements in job search skills (45%) and CV writing or interview skills (34%). Over three quarters of respondents (77%) gained

a qualification as a result of their participation in ESF training.

The ESF survey also asked respondents about other perceived benefits of the course. Although often related to skills, many of these benefits point towards how participation in ESF contributed to enhancing the capacity and capabilities of participants. Respondents reported feeling more confident about their capabilities (85%) and feeling better about themselves generally (80%).

What happens to ESF participants following their training?

As the majority of respondents participating in projects supporting progression in employment were already employed, analysis of pre and post provision economic activity shown in Table 1 is based just on respondents from projects aimed at increasing participation in the labour market. Prior to their participation, 19% of these respondents were in employment (although three quarters of these are likely to have been under notice of redundancy via their participation in redundancy training). By the time of the survey, 82% were in employment. This 63 percentage point increase in employment is largely

accounted for by a movement out of unemployment into paid work, (60% of respondents make this transition). Therefore approximately four-fifths of those who were unemployed prior to ESF gain employment by the time of the survey.

Given the high proportion of participants in redundancy training in the 2013 Leavers Survey (74% from projects aiming to improve participation) it is important to understand that 'no transition' can in itself be a positive outcome. In many cases, remaining in / gaining new employment is the goal of participants under notice of redundancy.

Table 1: Prior and Current Economic Activity among leavers from ESF projects aimed at increasing participation in the labour market (%)

Main activity before attending course	Current main activity				Total
	Paid employment	Education and training	Unemployed	Economically inactive	
Paid employment	17.3	0.4	0.7	1.0	19.4
Education and training	1.7	0.3	0.3	0.3	2.6
Unemployed	59.8	0.7	7.6	5.1	73.2
Economically inactive	2.7	0.3	0.4	1.4	4.9
Total	81.5	1.7	9.0	7.9	



Do ESF participants think that their training helped?

The ESF survey included a number of questions that asked respondents about the perceived benefits of participating in ESF projects. Overall, approximately three-quarters of respondents would choose to participate in their ESF project again with the value of hindsight. The responses to more detailed questions targeted at specific groups of respondents are summarized in Figure 4. Respondents who were employed at the time of the survey and who were either not in employment beforehand or were employed in a different job were asked to what extent they thought that the ESF provision helped them get their current job. Among those who participated in projects aimed at improving participation in the labour market and who were unemployed prior to their participation in ESF, 21% reported that ESF had been vital in them gaining their current job.

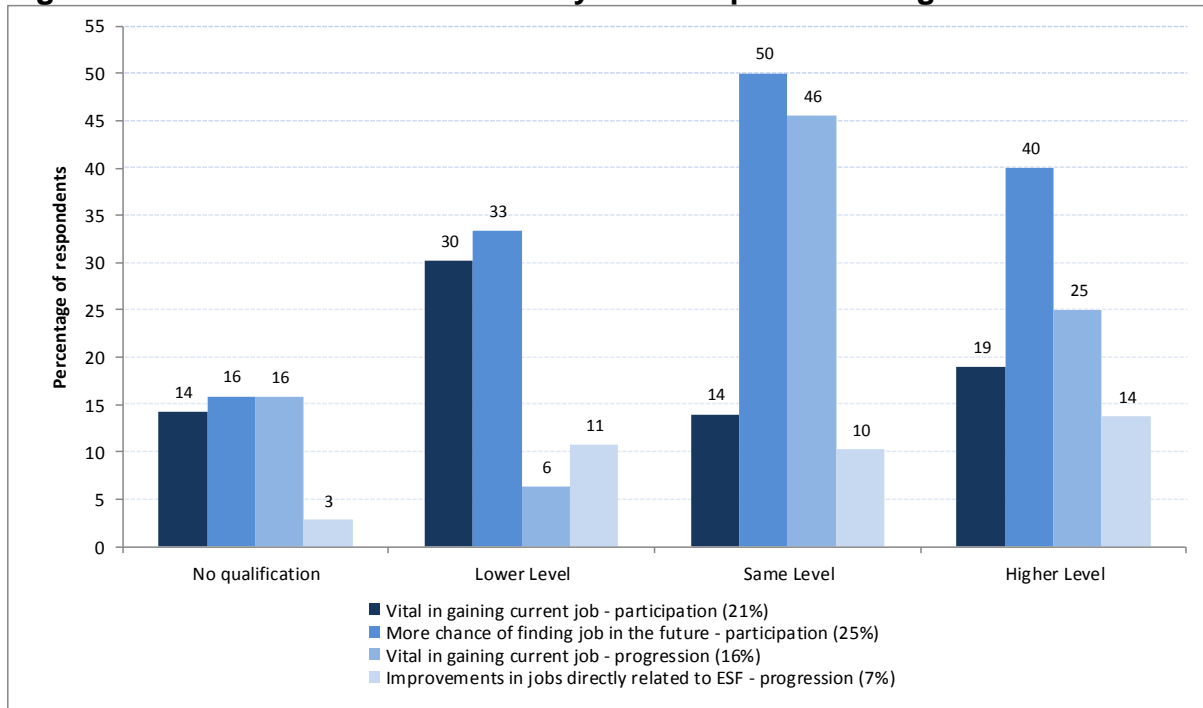
Among those respondents who had participated in projects aimed at improving participation in the labour market but who had not gained employment by the time of the survey, 25% reported that they had more chance of finding a job in the future. Among those who participated in projects aimed at improving

progression in the labour market and who were employed prior to their participation in ESF but who were employed in a different job at the time of the survey, 16% reported that ESF had been vital in them gaining their current job.

Respondents who were employed both prior to ESF and at the time of the survey were also asked to identify whether they had experienced any positive changes in their jobs, whether in the same job or a different job, that could be attributed to their participation in ESF. Among respondents who participated in projects aimed at improving progression in employment, approximately 7% reported experiencing an improvement in their jobs that could be directly attributed to their participation in ESF.

Figure 4 also reveals that respondents who participate in ESF projects that did not result in additional qualifications generally report the lowest level of perceived benefits, while perceived benefits are generally highest among those who gain a qualification at the same level of attainment or at a higher level of attainment than that held prior to their participation. These findings point to the importance that participants place on achieving qualifications as a result of their training course.

Figure 4: Perceived benefits of ESF by level of qualification gained

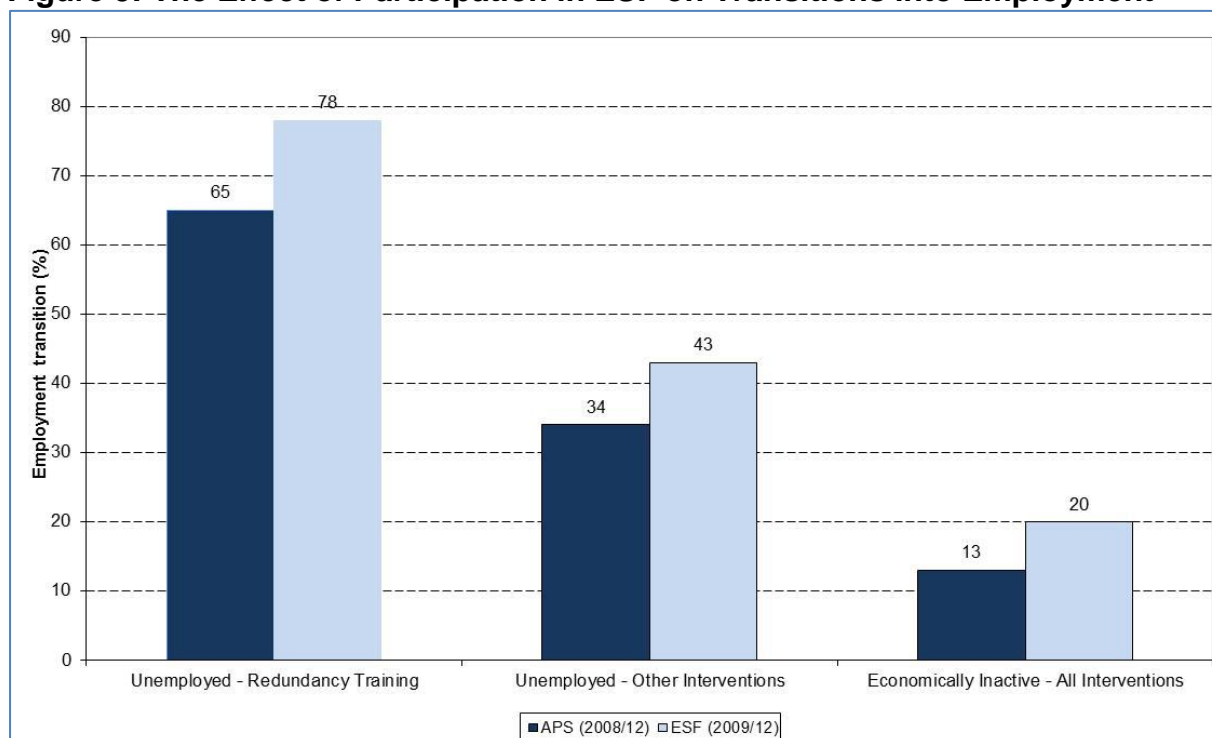


Is participation in ESF associated with higher rates of employment?

Respondents to the ESF survey report high overall levels of satisfaction with ESF. Despite these subjective assessments of the benefits of ESF, it is not possible to determine what would have happened to these people in the absence of ESF. To estimate the ‘effect’ of ESF interventions, the employment transitions made by ESF participants who were not in work prior to ESF have been compared to those

experienced by people in similar circumstances from a large, nationally representative survey of individuals within the UK called the Annual Population Survey (APS). The analysis compares the transitions into employment observed among respondents to the Leavers Surveys with those that we would expect to see among similar groups within the wider labour market. Results of this analysis are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: The Effect of Participation in ESF on Transitions into Employment



Looking first at ESF Redundancy Training projects, among those that had recently been made redundant at the time of starting ESF, 78% were employed 12 months after completing their provision. This compares with 65% who are observed to gain employment in the comparator group from the APS. Participation in ESF-funded Redundancy Training is therefore associated with higher rates of transition into employment.

Participation of the unemployed in other types of ESF project is also associated with higher rates of transition into employment (43% gain work) compared to similar unemployed respondents from the APS (34% gain work).

Participation in ESF is therefore associated with an increase in participation in employment among the unemployed of about a fifth. Proportionately larger effects are estimated among the economically

inactive, where subsequent participation in employment among ESF participants (20% gain work) is just over 50% higher than that observed among the wider population of economically inactive from the APS (13% gain work).

It is important to treat the results derived from these techniques, both for the unemployed and for the economically inactive, with caution. It is possible that the positive effects associated with participation in ESF interventions on movement into employment could simply reflect the relative employability of those people who either chose or who were selected to participate in these interventions or who chose to respond to the survey. Nonetheless, estimated results for both the unemployed and the economically inactive are broadly comparable with results produced by DWP³ in their analysis of the net

³http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/ihr_abstracts/ihr_003.asp

impacts of the 2007-2013 ESF Programme in England.

Concluding Comments

As the 5th survey of people who participated in training programmes supported by the European Social Fund during the programming period 2007-2013, the substantive findings from the 2013 Leavers Survey provide similar messages to those conducted in previous years. The survey highlights the strong satisfaction of ESF participants with the support which they received and their conviction that the provision has enhanced a wide range of skills. In terms of labour market outcomes, there is a continued evidence of positive association between qualifications and the perception of positive effects flowing from the training.

Comparisons of the labour market outcomes of respondents from ESF projects aimed at improving participation in the labour market however suggest that the impact of interventions is relatively modest. However, difficulties in accurately deriving comparator groups among the wider population from available survey sources means that these figures can only be regarded as 'ball park' estimates of the effect of ESF.

Vulnerable groups such as the economically inactive and/or those having a work limited illness had relatively few respondents in the sample, mainly due to the fact that the projects dealing with these participants are low in number. These issues suggest that a review of the methodology of future surveys may be required prior to the next programme period to better capture responses from these cohorts. The factors that

contribute to any under-representation of disadvantaged groups should be assessed. Such a review should also assess whether alternative methods or sources of data may be better placed to assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at those who face the greatest difficulties in the labour market.