



POLICY UPDATE AND ADVOCACY GUIDELINES

European Social Fund and civil society: don't miss the boat!

The European Social Fund (ESF) 2014-2020 belongs to the EU Structural Funds that are financial tools to implement European regional cohesion policy. The ESF is very important for education and training as it financially supports thousands of projects linked to crucial stakes for the sector such as tackling early-school leaving or implementing validation systems. The European Social Fund along with the full Cohesion Policy package has been adopted last week by the European Parliament in plenary session. You can find below a policy update and some tools to associate educational stakeholders to the next ESF implementation and enhance lifelong learning as a key priority for 2014-2020. See also EUCIS-LLL information note on the "[ESF and cohesion funds 2014-2020](#)" and [position paper](#) (September 2012).

EU policy background and update

Two legislative documents are important to understand what the next ESF will look like:

- **The Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)** (see EP [provisional version](#) voted on 20.11.13) establishing a common framework of rules for the implementation of European Structural and Investment Funds, for instance the partnership principle with stakeholders (see below) as well as the thematic objectives (including one on education) or the content of Partnership Agreements that Member States have to conclude with the Commission.
- **The European Social Fund Regulation** (see EP [provisional version](#) voted on 20.11.2013) developing three investment priorities under the CPR thematic objective on education and training, defining the scope of support, earmarking 20% of total ESF resources to social inclusion, binding Member States to invest in at least 5 investment priorities out of 19, etc.

The two Commission proposals have been amended and negotiated independently. The **Committee for Regional Development** was in charge of the CPR while the **Committee on Employment and Social Affairs** has taken care of the ESF Regulation, which led sometimes to internal disagreements (such as on whether or not allocating **25% of the total cohesion budget to the ESF**) and hindered the decision-process, already slowed down by triologue discussions (almost 30 for the ESF and the Parliament team has even left the negotiations table once in Spring!).

The ESF negotiations have been mainly focused on keeping the Commission's proposed **earmarking of 20% of ESF budget for social inclusion** (see Staff Working Document on "[Social Investment through the European Social Fund](#)" in the recent [Social Investment Package](#)). According to this document, the ESF will be the most important instrument to achieve the SIP and the Commission shall provide guidelines to Member States on how to do so by mid-2013.

The negotiations have also tackled the **Youth Employment Initiative**, for which €3bn of the ESF budget have been frontloaded for 2014-2015 (1.8bn in commitments and 400 million in payments) (and another €3bn under the Youth Employment budget line) in regions with the highest rate of youth unemployment.

Why is education at threat in the next ESF?

This autumn, each Member State prepared and submitted to the Commission a **Partnership Agreement**, assessing regional economic and social development and defining funding priorities accordingly.

One of the **thematic objectives** common to all Structural and Investment funds is:

- *“investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning”*

The 3 **investment priorities** developed under this objective in the ESF Regulation are:

- *Reducing and preventing early school-leaving and promoting equal access to good quality early-childhood, primary and secondary education including (formal, non-formal and informal) learning pathways for reintegrating into education and training;*
- *Improving the quality, efficiency and access to tertiary and equivalent education with a view to increasing participation and attainment levels, especially for disadvantaged groups;*
- *Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings, upgrading the knowledge, skills and competences of the workforce, and promoting flexible learning pathways including through career guidance and validation of acquired competences;*

Each Member State shall invest different amounts (according to the level of development of their regions) in **5 of those investment priorities** out of 19 in total, listed under other thematic objectives (“**thematic concentration**”). The choice of objectives and priorities shall be aligned with the European Semester’s [Country-Specific Recommendations](#) made to each Member State, and be ready by January 2014. All Member States have been addressed Country-Specific Recommendations on education in 2013 (except NL) so it may still be the case in 2014, but **the focus of educational investment priorities remains unsure, especially since Member States only have to select only 5 priorities out of 19.**

Education and inclusion priorities are also threatened due to budgetary issues. Indeed, the **global envelope for structural funds budget** after MFF negotiations have been **reduced of approx. 10%** compared to 2007-2013 and many regional allocations will change due to the creation of a new “transition regions” category. If countries like France more or less maintain their budget, Germany loses 35% of its budget and fragile Member States are also heavily touched (i.e. Greece or Spain). Only Poland, Slovakia and Romania will see their structural funds increase. Besides budget cuts, some countries also complain that **funds are not properly allocated** and especially in education and training. Only 8% of structural funds would go directly to Slovakian educational institutions while the Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat has called for a better focus on EU funds in the field.

How can you make your voice heard?

It is therefore the right time to act in order to defend several points, for example the need to:

- Promote a **holistic vision of lifelong learning** in your government's priorities choice
- Support **the focus on social inclusion** impulsed by the Commission and the Parliament
- Ease **access** to the ESF for small and medium beneficiaries – technical assistance

There is one easy way to make sure the right focus is made on education and training in the ESF 2014-2020. We especially insist on defending a **Partnership approach** as defined in Article 5 of the Common Provisions Regulations which stipulates that:

*“For the Partnership Agreement and each programme respectively, a Member State shall in accordance with their institutional and legal framework organise a partnership with the competent regional and local authorities. The partnership shall also include the following partners: (a) competent urban and other public authorities; (b) economic and social partners; and (c) relevant bodies representing **civil society**, including environmental partners, non-governmental organisations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination.”*

The problem is that **even though this partnership principle is legally binding** for Member States, **its modalities** (as established in the [European Code of Conduct on Partnerships](#) that should now enter into force after the ESF adoption) **are not**, and there is no retroactivity while the elaboration of Partnership Agreements has already taken place. The Commission is trying to push Member States to better involve stakeholders and monitors progress (DG REGIO geographical desks) but in reality the political will is little.

[ENNA](#) (the European Network of National Civil Society Associations) has conducted a very interesting report on the implementation of the Partnership Principle by governments (available in December on their website – see already [first results](#) and [DG REGIO input](#)). The study concludes that the involvement of stakeholders remain very different from one Member State to another, leading to much frustration. **More transparency and capacity-building is critically needed.**

An [open letter](#) was sent by EUCIS-LLL along with other NGOs and [answered](#) by the Commission (January 2013) on this important issue. **This is your role to step into the process**, claim your right to be involved in the programming cycle (elaboration, implementation and evaluation) and ask your public authorities how they intend to make this partnership concrete with education and training NGOs.

New policy toolbox!

On the ESF and the CPR

- The [European Social Fund](#)
- The [ESF in your country](#)
- Your [ESF managing authority](#)
- [Key aspects of ESF reforms](#)

- The Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) (EP [provisional version](#) voted on 20.11.13)
- The European Social Fund Regulation (see EP [provisional version](#) voted on 20.11.2013)

- European Economic and Social Committee [opinion](#) on the ESF 2014-2020, February 2012
- Committee of the Regions [opinion](#) of the ESF 2014-2020, May 2012

- [Commission infonote](#) on Education and Training in Cohesion Policy 2014-2020

On the Partnership Principle

- EESC Publication "[It takes two to tango: Developing the Partnership Principle in EU Cohesion Policy](#)"

On the Code of Conduct on Partnerships

- European Commission [Staff Working Document](#) "The partnership principle in the implementation of the Common Strategic Framework Funds – elements for a European Code of Conduct on Partnerships", April 2012

- European Economic and Social Committee [opinion](#) on a European Code of Conduct on Partnerships
- Committee of Regions [opinion](#) on a European Code of Conduct on Partnerships

On the Cohesion Policy 2014-2020

- [Policy updates](#)
- [eligibility and allocations](#)
- [Commission's recommendations](#) for each Member State for programming
- [Infographic on new cohesion policy](#)
- [Total allocation table 2014-2020](#)

On Erasmus+ and the ESF

- Erasmus+ Regulation (art. 25) (see EP [provisional version](#) p.167 voted on 19.11.2013): "*the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, shall ensure the overall consistency and complementarity of the Programme with: [...] (b) the other Union relevant sources of funding for education, training, youth and sport, in particular the **European Social Fund***".

EUCIS-LLL and the ESF

- EUCIS-LLL information note on the "[ESF and cohesion funds 2014-2020](#)"
- EUCIS-LLL [position paper](#) (September 2012)
- [EUCIS-LLL advocacy toolkit](#) (September 2012)