The Operational Programme for 2007-2013 for Belgium’s German-speaking Community is a bold and innovative approach to the challenges the region faces. Its central goals are to maximise employment in order to reinforce its economy and competitiveness in the surrounding region, and taking into account the challenges posed by an ageing population.

The European Social Fund in brief

The European Social Fund, created in 1957, is the European Union’s main financial instrument for investing in people. It supports employment and helps people enhance their education and skills. This improves their job prospects.

Member States and regions devise their own ESF Operational Programmes, in order to respond to the real needs ‘on the ground’. Over the period 2007-2013, the ESF will spend over 10 billion euros per year across all Member States. This represents more than 10% of the European Union’s total budget.

These are the five priorities of ESF funding at EU level:

- Helping workers and enterprises adapt to changing circumstances in the economy
- Enhancing access to employment and participation in the workforce
- Improving training and skills, both for individuals, and through better education and training systems
- Promoting partnerships between actors such as employers, trade unions and non-governmental organisations, for reform in the fields of employment and inclusion in the labour market
- Reinforcing the social inclusion of disadvantaged people and combating discrimination in the labour market

In some Member States and regions, the ESF can also support actions to improve the capacity and effectiveness of public administrations and public services.
The socio-economic and employment situation in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, 2007-2013

The German-speaking community of Belgium is the smallest of the country’s three linguistic communities and enjoys a great deal of institutional autonomy. The region covers an area of just 854 sq km within the province of Liège and has a population of 73,000. The proximity of cultural, linguistic and geographical frontiers is an ever-present challenge. The regional economy is based principally on small or very small businesses, often family-run. The agricultural sector of the economy is shrinking, due to the dwindling number of businesses. The industrial sector is stable and employs about a third of the workforce. It includes a manufacturing industry that is proportionally much larger here than it is in the other Belgian regions. Overall, the services sector, including public services, is the largest employer for the German-speaking community, providing two-thirds of all employment.

Total employment is currently running at a rate of 61.7% in the German-speaking community, while among older workers the rate is 52%. Recent studies indicate that, in ten years’ time, the German-speaking community will be one of the areas in Belgium faced with the oldest population profile. Unemployment is at present at a level of 7.2%. While female unemployment has dropped continuously over the last decade, women still represent 55% of the total unemployed. In total, 9.2% of all women are out of work, compared with 5.7% of men.

The German-speaking Community of Belgium’s ESF priorities

The Belgian German-speaking Community’s Operational Programme is focused on improving the adaptability of workers and businesses, encouraging active employment approaches to work, and the promotion of social integration. The central objective is maximising employment.

Priority 1: Increasing the adaptability of workers and businesses

Promoting adaptability is a primary objective since the job market and, in particular, its SMEs are vulnerable to competition from within Belgium and neighbouring countries. This priority targets workers, employers and businesses, aiming to maintain existing employment while contributing to job creation by developing opportunities. Specific goals are:

- Promoting lifelong learning in small and very small enterprises, keeping abreast of technological developments, and forging links with research institutes and technological centres that offer advanced qualifications and training;
- Supporting employability among elderly people by specific training, recognition of qualifications and, in particular, in-company training schemes. Increasing workers’ mobility and employability by improving language skills;
- Promoting the creation and sustainability of businesses, notably those addressing identified gaps in the market. Providing training or retraining to combat the lack of qualified labour in hard-to-fill jobs.

Priority 2: Investment in active employment

The German-speaking Community is facing a rapid growth in unemployment, so this second priority concentrates on swift integration of job-seekers into stable jobs, accompanied by targeted, permanent assistance. The programme will achieve this by:

- Offering flexible, tailored qualifications to job-seekers. For example, by assisting school leavers, offering skills makeovers for those trying to re-enter the job market, and targeted assistance for the long-term unemployed, with specific training.
Better integrating work and home life, strengthening childcare networks and introducing qualifications specifically for women. Increasing job-seekers’ mobility, notably by improving collaboration between employment offices and training centres, as well as encouraging linguistic and cross-cultural skills.

Priority 3: Promoting social integration

This priority addresses those excluded from the job market. First, conditions will be created where people can find suitable work. Then rapid, staged progress towards improved qualifications is the goal. Measures include:

- Preparation for work by providing baseline social skills or qualifications. Pre-qualification for work with basic language skills and innovative support mechanisms for youngsters struggling with apprenticeships or first jobs.

- Specific measures: for immigrants through language training and cross-cultural communication skills; for people with disabilities through career advice and support for the disabled in the workplace. Also, the creation of opportunities in the social economy, in particular for those excluded from the job market.

Priority 4: Structural measures

The final priority is aimed at the wider public, covering teaching structures and systems, training, work and integration methods. It supports:

- Forward-looking studies on the labour market and measures to raise public awareness about the need for learning, in particular lifelong learning.
  The reform of teaching systems, including improving training and the recognition of diplomas.

- Easing the transition from school to workplace, better coordination between training bodies including teaching and employment offices, and better co-operation between schools and businesses.

The German-speaking Community’s ESF programme will also be underpinned by four horizontal priorities, equal opportunities, sustainable solutions, innovation, and the approaches used in the earlier Equal initiative, namely innovation, partnership and transnational co-operation.

Financial plan for the European Social Fund in German-speaking community of Belgium 2007-2013 (euro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority axis</th>
<th>Community funding</th>
<th>Regional counterpart</th>
<th>Total funding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability of workers and businesses</td>
<td>2 369 300</td>
<td>2 369 300</td>
<td>4 738 600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active employement</td>
<td>4 489 200</td>
<td>4 489 200</td>
<td>8 978 400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
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<td>3 990 400</td>
<td>7 980 800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structural measures</td>
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<td>1 122 300</td>
<td>2 244 600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical assistance</td>
<td>498 800</td>
<td>498 800</td>
<td>997 600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12 470 000</td>
<td>12 470 000</td>
<td>24 940 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some earlier ESF projects in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, 2000-2006

- The Xistence project helped people set up their own companies. Initial information sessions were followed by individual consultations, help with business or financial plans, and assistance with permits, loans and public grants. Support continued for three years once businesses were up and running. Specialist information on traditional banking and alternative forms of finance was also available. Xistence also helped those taking over existing businesses, as well as businesses starting from scratch. In the first six years of the project, 1,843 consultations led to 698 new businesses, or a 37.9% rate of creation for new businesses.

- The Atelier Cardijn project reintegrated young unemployed people facing a range of social difficulties, through collective creative work and individual training in manual printing and model-making techniques. Groups developed new skills, creating and selling handmade cards, then visited other businesses, gaining insight into the benefits of training schemes. Candidates, who initially displayed multiple psychological and communication difficulties, increased enormously in confidence and social integration. Creativity had a stabilising influence and helped participants acquire marketable skills. Each scheme took on 12 candidates between 18-30, around 25% of whom found jobs, while 22% went on to other training.

Eligible regions 2007-2013

- The level of ESF funding differs from one region to another depending on the relative wealth.

- All German-speaking regions are eligible under the regional competitiveness and employment objective with a GDP per head of more than 75% of the EU-25 average.