



Study supporting the 2020 evaluation of ESF support to Education and Training (Thematic Objective 10)

Annex 2_Synopsis Consultation Report

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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ANNEX 2: SYNOPSIS CONSULTATION REPORT

1. OUTLINE OF THE CONSULTATION STRATEGY

This document provides a synopsis of the stakeholder consultations conducted for the study supporting the evaluation of the European Social Fund (ESF) support to education and training (Thematic Objective 10). The consultation strategy for the study was developed on the basis of the Evaluation Roadmap.¹ This indicates that the **aim of the consultation activities** is to collect views and evidence from concerned stakeholders such as national/regional/local administrations, education institutions and social partners, participants of ESF actions and the general public, to inform the evaluation work. The consultation activities will address the visibility, outreach, usefulness, relevance and effectiveness of the ESF support.

A wide range of **stakeholders** were included in the consultation process, including individuals that have received ESF support, potential individuals that could benefit from ESF support, beneficiary organisations and potential beneficiary organisations, authorities involved in the management of ESF, organisations relevant to education and training on European, national, regional and local level, and the public in general.

To adequately reach these stakeholders, different consultation **activities and methods** were used: a **public consultation, targeted consultations** (including interviews with stakeholders on the EU and national level, case studies of 20 Operational Programmes in 12 countries² which also included consultations with key stakeholders in the form of in-depth interviews, and a validation process on the draft findings of the evaluation with experts and EU and national level stakeholders) and a **meta-analysis of ESF participant surveys**. The consultation approach was suitable for the scope of the consultation and implemented as foreseen.

2. OVERVIEW OF CONSULTATION ACTIVITIES

The main aim of the **public consultation** was to provide an open channel for all interested stakeholders to provide their input. The consultation took the form of an e-survey with closed and open questions, addressing the key evaluation criteria and tailored to the different stakeholder groups using routing. The public consultation was open for 14 weeks from 18 November 2019 to 24 February 2020.

The targeted consultations aimed to gather more detailed input from stakeholders involved in the ESF in different capacities. The targeted consultations consisted of three main sub-activities as described in the following sections.

Targeted interviews with EU and national level stakeholders focused on two key stakeholder groups: EU level stakeholders directly and indirectly linked to the themes of education and training,; and National level stakeholders involved in the implementation of ESF operations, primarily Managing Authorities and representatives of Education/Labour Ministries, as well as other stakeholders where relevant. The targeted semi-structured interviews were conducted from October 2019 to March 2020.

¹<https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/2043-Evaluation-of-European-Social-Fund-support-to-education>

² Poland, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, France, Czech Republic, Romania, Lithuania, Ireland, Slovenia

Case studies examining 20 Operational Programmes in 12 Member States were conducted as part of the evaluation research. Interviews were conducted as part of the case study research with representatives from the following stakeholder groups: DG EMPL officers in charge of the specific OP; the authority responsible for TO10 operations; major beneficiaries of ESF TO10 operations, and other stakeholders, including evaluators of ESF TO10 measures, or representatives of beneficiaries such as vocational training organisations, agencies to combat illiteracy and early school leaving, universities. The case study interviews were conducted from October 2019 to April 2020.

A **validation process** was planned in the form of workshops as a final consultation activity to validate the findings of the evaluation study. Given developments around COVID-19, these workshops were replaced by online Policy Delphi consultations, one for each Investment Priority, which took place between 27 April and 27 May 2020. Selected consultees were thematic experts, policy experts from DG EMPL and DG EAC, ESF Managing Authorities, ESF TO10 beneficiaries, social partners, and EU level NGOs.

A **meta-analysis of ESF participant surveys** was conducted to ensure the views of ESF participants were captured adequately in the evaluation research.. Surveys that focus on actions under TO10 and/or relating to ESF supported education and training activities were identified and analysed against the key evaluation criteria.

2.1. Summary and reflection on challenges

The consultation methods were implemented as planned, in line with the agreed consultation strategy. There were some challenges in securing all the interviews for the targeted consultation as 6 EU-level stakeholders declined to participate due to limited or no knowledge on ESF. There were also several EU-level stakeholders that were non-responsive despite reminders. The impact of this on the consultation strategy was minimal, however, as the targeted consultations conducted for the case studies allowed the research team to still gather in-depth views of key stakeholders.

3. INFORMATION ON STAKEHOLDER GROUPS CONSULTED

All relevant stakeholders as identified in the Evaluation Roadmap were consulted through the consultation activities, as set out in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of stakeholders consulted in all consultation activities

| Type of stakeholder | Targeted interviews (EU and national level) | Targeted interviews (case studies) | Public consultation | Policy Delphi validation process | Meta-analysis of ESF participant surveys |
|---|---|------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Participants | | | X | | X |
| Potential participants | | | X | | |
| Beneficiaries | X | X | X | X | X |
| Potential beneficiaries | | | X | X | |
| Managing authorities | X | X | X | X | |
| National and regional education ministries and VET institutions | X | X | X | X | |
| National and regional labour and employment ministries and institutions | X | X | X | | |
| European institutions involved in ESF or related education and | X | | | X | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| training policy development | | | | | |
| Other relevant national, regional and European bodies responsible for management / implementation or match funding of education, training or employment funds | X | X | X | X | |
| Social and economic partners at national and EU level | X | | X | X | |
| Associations representing those in education or training | X | | X | X | |
| Research and academic organisations | X | | X | X | X |
| Citizens | | | X | | |

3.1. Public Consultation

The total number of respondents to the public consultation was 817. The data on respondents showed a somewhat **unbalanced geographical distribution**. A total of 153 responses referred to Portugal as their home country, followed by 105 to Spain, 102 to Poland, 86 to Italy and 68 to Croatia. No other single country reached the 60 respondents mark, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1 Breakdown of respondents by country of origin

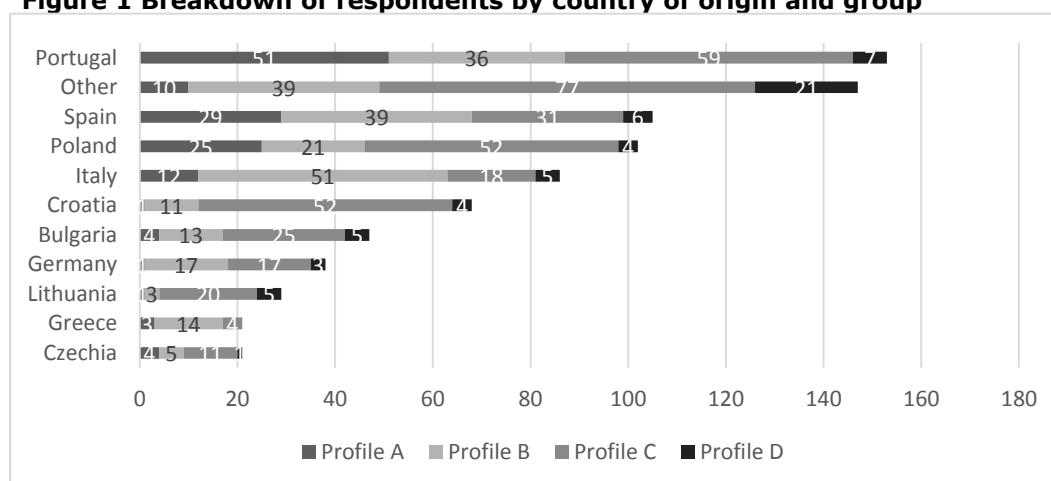
| Country of origin | Number of respondents | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Austria | 7 | 0.9% |
| Belgium | 8 | 1.0% |
| Bulgaria | 47 | 5.8% |
| Croatia | 68 | 8.3% |
| Cyprus | 2 | 0.2% |
| Czechia | 21 | 2.6% |
| Denmark | 2 | 0.2% |
| Estonia | 6 | 0.7% |
| Finland | 6 | 0.7% |
| France | 13 | 1.5% |
| Germany | 38 | 4.7% |
| Greece | 21 | 2.6% |
| Hungary | 11 | 1.3% |
| Ireland | 4 | 0.5% |
| Italy | 86 | 10.5% |
| Latvia | 19 | 2.3% |
| Lithuania | 29 | 3.5% |
| Luxembourg | 3 | 0.4% |
| Malta | 2 | 0.2% |
| Netherlands | 2 | 0.2% |
| Poland | 102 | 12.5% |
| Portugal | 153 | 18.7% |
| Romania | 10 | 1.2% |
| Slovakia | 13 | 1.6% |
| Slovenia | 7 | 0.9% |
| Spain | 105 | 12.9% |
| Sweden | 5 | 0.6% |
| United Kingdom | 17 | 2.1% |
| Non-EU countries | 10 | 1.2% |
| Total | 817 | 100% |

In terms of type of respondent, the public consultation was based on a categorisation of respondents as follows:

- **Group A: ESF participants:** individual EU and non-EU citizens receiving ESF support now or since 2014;
- **Group B: Individual EU and non-EU citizens** who did not take part in the ESF: “the general public”, reporting either having an awareness of the ESF or no direct knowledge of the ESF measures;
- **Group C.1: Managing Authorities/ Intermediate Bodies,** which includes organisations involved in the management of the ESF that supposedly have a direct and detailed knowledge of the ESF support;
- **Group C.2: Beneficiaries:** organisations or entities receiving ESF funding for the implementation of a project;
- **Group C.3: EU Funds Coordinating bodies,** Certifying/Audit authorities, Members of a Monitoring Committee directly involved in the delivery of ESF.
- **Group D: Other organisations:** organisations with no direct role in the management, monitoring and implementation of the ESF including civil society.

Out of all 817 respondents, **the group representing organisations managing/delivering ESF was the one with the highest frequency of respondents**, providing 370 responses (45.3%). This was followed by the general public (244 respondents - 29.9%), ESF participants (141 respondents - 17.3%) and other organisations (62 respondents - 7.6%). Within the group of organisations managing/delivering ESF, ESF beneficiaries provided 227 responses (61.4% amongst this group) followed by Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies (104 responses - 28.1% amongst this group), and EU funds coordinating body, certifying or audit authorities and members of monitoring committees (39 responses - the remaining 10.5%). Figure 1 presents the breakdown of respondents by stakeholder/profile group.

³**Figure 1 Breakdown of respondents by country of origin and group**



3.2. Targeted interviews with EU and national level stakeholders

³ The table includes only countries which had at least 20 responses. The remaining 27 countries with fewer than 20 respondents were grouped together in a new category named 'Other'.

25 interviews were conducted with stakeholders as detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Targeted interviews completed and declined

| EU level | | |
|---|--|---------------|
| Organisation | | Status |
| DG EMPL Unit F1 ESF Coordination | | Completed |
| DG EAC group interview with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unit A2 Policy Strategy and Evaluation - Country analysis Unit C2 Marie Skłodowska Curie actions Unit B4 Erasmus+ Coordination | | Completed |
| DG EMPL Unit E3 Vocational education, apprenticeships and adult learning | | Completed |
| EU Lifelong Learning Platform | | Completed |
| European University Association | | Completed |
| Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) | | Completed |
| European Federation of Education Employers | | Completed |
| European Parliament: EMPL Committee | | Completed |
| European Student's Union | | Completed |
| European Association of Institutions in Higher Education | | Completed |
| European Trade Union Committee for Education | | Completed |
| Business Europe | | Completed |
| SME United | | Completed |
| European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training | | Completed |
| European Vocational Training Association | | Completed |
| Eurochild | | Completed |
| National level | | |
| Country | Organisation | Status |
| Austria | Ministry of Education Science and Research | Completed |
| Luxembourg | ESF Managing Authority | Completed |
| | Ministry of Education Childhood and Youth | Completed |
| Denmark | Danish Business Authority (ESF MA) | Completed |
| Malta | ESF Managing Authority Ministry for European Affairs and Equality | Completed |
| Greece | ESF Managing Authority of OP Human Resource Management, Education and Lifelong Learning | Completed |
| Hungary | ESF Managing Authority | Completed |
| Latvia | Ministry of Education and Science | Completed |
| Sweden | ESF Managing Authority | Completed |

3.3. Case studies

An average of 7 interviews were conducted per case study with stakeholders from the following categories:

- DG EMPL officers in charge of the specific OP
- Authority responsible for TO10 operations
- Major beneficiaries of ESF TO10 operations
- Other stakeholders, including evaluators of ESF T10 measures, vocational training organizations, agencies to combat illiteracy and early school leaving, Universities, etc.

3.4. Validation process

22 responses were received from experts/organisations to the Policy Delphi validation process, from a range of stakeholder groups as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3 Respondents to Policy Delphi validation

| Type of stakeholder | Number of respondents |
|---|-----------------------|
| NGOs | 6 |
| Research and academic experts | 4 |
| National and regional education ministries and VET institutions | 4 |
| European institutions involved in education and training policy development | 3 |
| Social and economic partners at national and EU level | 3 |
| Beneficiaries | 1 |
| Managing authorities | 1 |

3.5. Meta-analysis of ESF participant surveys

Six specific ESF participant and beneficiary surveys covering TO10 from six Member States were identified and mapped, as follows:

Table 4 Overview of ESF participant surveys analysed

| Country | IP | Target sample | Responses |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|--|
| Spain | IP10.ii | Information not available | Information not available |
| France | IP10.i | 26,266 | 4,643 (17.5% response rate) |
| Croatia | IP10.iii | 2,231 teaching assistants / professional communication intermediaries 1,189 parents / guardians | 713 (32% response rate for teaching assistants / professional communication intermediaries) 261 (22% response rate for parents) |
| Italy | IP10.iii | 108 | 47 (44% response rate) |
| Lithuania | Information not available | 19,839 | 2,443 (completed; 12% response rate) 492 (partially completed; response rate; 2.48%) |
| UK | Information not available | Information not available | Information not available |

4. METHODOLOGY FOR DATA PROCESSING

For the public consultation, the analysis of results was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data analysis included analysis of frequency distribution for each of the variables related to the closed-ended questions, and cross-tabulations between specific variables and characteristics of respondents and between specific variables. For the qualitative data analysis, information was classified by related variable (number of question) and analysed to identify additional information and trends.

For the **targeted interviews with EU and national level stakeholders**, the write-ups from the interviews were collected and exported into analytical grids, broken down by the different questions and by the respective evaluation criteria. The core research team used the analytical grids to carry out an in-depth analysis of the data to inform the relevant sections and annexes of the interim and final reports.

Information gathered from the **case studies interviews** was written up into case study templates. The data provided was used to inform the analysis carried out by the core research team for all sections of the interim and final reports.

For the **Policy Delphi validation process**, responses were analysed by the research team, clustered around key themes, and summarised in a synopsis paper per IP. These were circulated to the respondents for final views, which were then incorporated into the synopsis papers before finalisation and integration of findings into the final report.

The **meta-analysis of ESF surveys** was conducted according to the five evaluation criteria. The data provided was used to inform the analysis carried out by the core research team for all sections of the interim and final reports.

5. OVERVIEW OF RESULTS OF CONSULTATION ACTIVITIES

5.1. Relevance

There was strong consensus amongst stakeholders consulted that TO10 Investment Priorities and **planned operations have been and remain relevant to education and training needs**. The majority of respondents to the public consultation (82%) agreed that the ESF should be involved in improving skills and supporting the development of education and training. Only 7% disagreed and would prefer to support education and training on the national or local level (the remaining 11% did not know or did not wish to answer). Respondents to the participant surveys also pointed to the relevance of ESF operations. This is supported by EU and national stakeholders who all held the view that ESF TO10 operations were relevant to the education and training needs in Member States. EU-level stakeholders spoke of the **breadth of the IPs** as a contributing factor to this relevance, as it allowed a range of operations targeting different levels of education and different groups in need to be programmed. National and EU level stakeholders cited this as a reason also for the continued relevance of ESF TO10 operations throughout the programming period.

From the public consultation, actions considered the most relevant included: support for the unemployed to learn new skills to help find work, support to link tertiary education and training institutions with businesses and with local communities, and support for students with fewer opportunities to complete higher education scholarship studies. Consultees from the case studies agreed to a large extent, highlighting in particular the relevance of operations on upskilling and reskilling. EU stakeholders stressed that all IPs, but in particular IP10.iii and IP10.iv are increasingly relevant given the need to ensure the whole population is equipped with the right skills for a changing world of work.

However, stakeholders of IP10.iii and IP10.iv operations pointed out in the Policy Delphi a decrease in partnership involvement, especially in VET, during the programming period, citing this as an obstacle to the relevance of operations. The **need for employers, trades unions and NGOs to be more involved** was stressed, and also emerged strongly in the targeted interviews, particularly from EU level stakeholders. There was consensus across a range of stakeholders that this was necessary to increase relevance of ESF TO10 to the needs of vulnerable groups, in particular.

5.2. Effectiveness

Overall, there was consensus amongst stakeholders that there has been positive progress in ESF TO10 education and training operations, but that there are differences in performance across countries, OPs and IPs. ESF participant views were positive. The majority of ESF participants that responded to the public consultation felt that ESF activities either fully met their initial expectations (79 out of 141 respondents - 56%) or they received even more than they expected (25 out of 141 respondents - 17.7%). 74

out of 141 respondents (52.5% of this group) reported that without EU support there would be less or no opportunities for people in their situation and 62 out of 141 (44% of this group) said that there would not be enough money to pay for such actions without the ESF. Only 5 out of 141 (3.5%) ESF participants responding to the public consultation held the view that the ESF does not make a real difference. However, a notable minority of ESF participants felt that the support only partially met expectations (26 out of 141 respondents - 18.4%), while 2 respondents (1.4%) reported that the support did not meet their expectations.

Five out of the six ESF participant surveys analysed as well as the majority of stakeholders consulted on both EU and national level point to the same generally positive conclusion on the impact of ESF. It is worth noting however, that national stakeholders from Member States with larger ESF allocations were more likely to agree on the volume impact of ESF, with a minority of smaller Member State stakeholders reporting that the volume impact of ESF was minimal given the size of the total allocation under TO10. EU and national level stakeholders consulted in the Policy Delphi also shared the view that ESF TO10 has contributed to structural changes and the development of reforms in education and training systems at all levels. However, there was also agreement amongst these stakeholders that this could still be significantly enhanced through better upscaling of ESF initiatives.

There is some discrepancy in views on the **extent to which ESF was effective in reaching all target groups**. Organisational respondents to the public consultation felt that, overall, ESF operations were 'very' or 'mostly' successful in providing support to a large number of target groups. The proportion of respondents who felt that ESF support was 'mostly' unsuccessful was low for all target groups listed, with one in ten or less in each case. However, stakeholders on EU and national level consulted during targeted interviews and the case study work, highlighted several **challenges in reaching some of these target groups**, pointing in particular to individuals who are most disadvantaged. Older workers, the low-skilled, Roma, refugees and migrants, the long-term unemployed and the disabled were all identified by multiple stakeholders on the EU and national level as insufficiently reached, both in the interviews and the Policy Delphi responses. In the latter, it was noted that **interventions risked focussing on 'low hanging fruit'**, supporting people who need only minimal support anyway and leaving aside the more problematic cases.

By contrast, the **factors increasing effectiveness** of ESF TO10 operations were generally agreed upon by all consulted stakeholders. Operations that bring about systemic change and are strategically planned, strong coordination and the involvement of local and regional stakeholders and non-public partners, and operations that focus on individuals and their specific support needs were factors identified by all stakeholders consulted in the evaluation. Reducing the administrative burden and simplifying the governance structure of the fund was also frequently mentioned by a range of stakeholders across all the consultation activities. Respondents to the Policy Delphi and the targeted interviews also strongly agreed that more effective reach of vulnerable groups could be achieved by improving participation of civil society organisations, NGOs and local stakeholders.

5.3. Efficiency

Overall, there is strong consensus amongst stakeholders that **most of the activities implemented under the ESF are cost-effective**. Out of 17 activities presented in the public consultation survey, 13 activities were felt to be cost-effective with more than

50% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the activities concerned were cost-effective. In all subgroups that were asked about the administrative burden, the majority of respondents judged the arrangements to be appropriate: 65 of 104 (62.3%) of Managing Authority respondents, 135 of 227 (59.5%) of beneficiary organisation respondents and 22 of 39 (56.1%) of certifying, coordination and monitoring body respondents.

However, the **management and control system and reporting and monitoring were judged as the most burdensome arrangements** by more than a third of respondents to the question “How would you qualify the following administrative arrangements for the implementation of operations?” (370 total respondents). This is reflected in views of stakeholders consulted at national and EU level who all mentioned ESF regulatory requirements – with most highlighting the heavy reporting requirements – as posing challenges to efficient implementation. There is strong consensus that these heavy requirements are particularly burdensome for smaller beneficiaries. Stakeholders consulted in the targeted interviews, and through the case study interviews shared the view that voluntary organisations and NGOs involved in activities for TOs relating to social inclusion find it more difficult to deal with the funding and data collection requirements. On the other end of the scale, the most appropriate administrative arrangement across respondents to the above-mentioned question in the public consultation on average was Communication. This was selected by 264 of 370 (71%) of respondents as an appropriate arrangement.

The vast majority of stakeholders interviewed for the targeted consultations at the national level and for the case studies identified that **simplified cost options (SCOs) support improved efficiency**. Respondents to the Policy Delphi validation agreed. However, all stakeholders that spoke of SCOs also identified challenges in their implementation. Several mentioned that the development of SCOs was still a process with a heavy administrative burden, and one that took time to implement, with stakeholders speaking of delays from the European Commission in approving SCOs proposed by Member States. This is further reflected in the views of respondents to the public consultation for whom the application of simplified cost options was the most insufficient administrative arrangement for the implementation of operations, despite the fact the SCOs were mentioned as an example of helping to simplify the preparation and implementation of projects by several national respondents.

Several respondents to the public consultation suggested having an enhanced **focus on qualitative indicators** rather than quantitative measures to assess the results of ESF interventions. This was also expressed by some national level stakeholders consulted, where respondents suggested that results indicators should be more relevant to the goals of the IP.

5.4. Coherence

Overall stakeholders expressed the view that ESF operations under TO10 display a generally good coherence with other EU funding programmes, though views vary significantly per fund. There is consensus that **Erasmus+ and ERDF are the funds that are most coherent with ESF**. The results of the public consultation show very high shares of respondents (the highest in relation to any other EU programme or instrument) who consider that TO10 actions are coherent with Erasmus+ (107 of 173 (62.3%) of the general public, 236 of 370 (63.8%) of organisations managing ESF, and 34 of 46 (74%) of other organisations). This is followed by high shares of respondents considering that TO10 actions are coherent to the support offered through the ERDF.

These two funds were also most frequently highlighted by stakeholders consulted in targeted interviews as particularly coherent with ESF TO10.

However, many of the stakeholders interviewed felt that coherence was challenging to achieve in implementation. This was confirmed by respondents to the Policy Delphi validation. There was agreement on the **complexity of having to apply under both funds for a joint project**, as well as on the factors influencing coherence: the lack of cooperation between institutions responsible for each fund on the national level; different implementation and delivery modes (direct vs. shared management); the difference in target groups of the funds; and insufficient communication to potential beneficiaries on the possibility of combining funds.

Views on coherence with other EU funding instruments are more mixed. A large number of respondents to the public consultation from the general public did not know or did not wish to provide an answer on whether ESF activities are coherent with a number of other schemes (i.e. COSME- 112 of 173 (65%), EURES- 110 of 173 (64%), AMIF- 102 of 173 (59%), other ESI Funds and Horizon 2020/MSCA 100 of 173 (58%)). EU and national level stakeholders interviewed were also less able to comment on the degree of coherence of ESF with the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions and Horizon 2020. Where views are expressed though they appear to agree on the **limited coherence with Horizon 2020 (MSCA)**. Stakeholder views from targeted interviews, case study interviews and the Policy Delphi validation showed that coherence between ESF and MSCA was challenging in practice and only 29% of respondents from the general public and organisations managing/delivering ESF felt that there was coherence between the two funds.

5.5. EU added value

The perception of EU added value resulting from ESF TO10 operations was positive overall among the range of stakeholders consulted. The **vast majority of ESF participants responding to the public consultation agreed that having ESF support made a difference**, though organisational respondents tended to be more positive. 323 of 370 (87.2%) of organisation respondents indicated that more can be done than with national or local resources only. 128 of 173 (73.9%) of respondents from the general public agreed. Other positive aspects highlighted were that new issues can be covered (71 of 173 (41%) of general public and 229 of 370 (61.8%) of organisations) and that the ESF enables experimenting with new ways of delivering services (60 of 173 (39.3%) of general public and 212 of 370 (57.2%) of organisations)

A majority of stakeholders interviewed shared this view, highlighting in particular that ESF TO10 supported disadvantaged groups that would have otherwise not been targeted. Stakeholders on both EU and national level confirm that the ESF TO10 operations produced effects at the national and/or regional level that would not have taken place without this EU level intervention. A minority of stakeholders interviewed, coming particularly from the EU level stakeholder group, however, expressed the view that the **ESF TO10 support to innovation in education and training has been limited**. This is also reflected in the public consultation responses where 'ESF enables experimenting with new ways of delivering services' was the least selected advantage of ESF TO10 operations by the general public and individuals aware of the ESF but not receiving support (68 out of 173 respondents (39.3%)). Respondents to the Policy Delphi agreed, highlighting that where innovation is achieved through the ESF it needs to be better embedded into national legislation to ensure spill over effects of the good practice.

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