

Evaluation of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities within the European Social Fund

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Background

The current programme of the European Social Fund (ESF) runs from 2007 to 2013. The programme supports EU, national and regional strategies to tackle weaknesses in the labour market.

The ESF Gender Equality (GE) and Equal Opportunities (EO) Mainstreaming Plan for England and Gibraltar 2007-2013 outlined the vision for mainstreaming GE and EO across all levels of the ESF programme. GE and EO mainstreaming is a social justice-led approach to policy making in which equal opportunity principles, strategies and practices are integrated into all aspects of the policy. In terms of ESF programme delivery, programme mainstreaming involves integrating equal opportunities into high level plans, delivery arrangements and monitoring and evaluation systems. NatCen was commissioned to evaluate the mainstreaming of GE and EO within ESF, in light of the Mainstreaming Plan. The aims of the evaluation of GE and EO within ESF were to assess progress towards implementing the GE and EO Mainstreaming Plan at different levels of ESF operation; examine GE and EO Policies and processes at different levels of ESF; and, identify and make recommendations on good practice to encourage GE and EO among ESF providers.

These considerations were made within the context of understanding barriers to accessibility experienced by different groups.

Methods

The evaluation was primarily qualitative and consisted of five stages: A literature review; content analysis of 34 Equal Opportunities policies drawn from across ESF provider organisations and regions; in-depth interviews with 32 strategic staff members including Contract Managers (CMs) representing different Co-financing Organisations (CFOs) and regions; Case Studies with 12 provider organisations, which consisted of 45 in-depth interviews with strategic and operational provider staff, participants, stakeholders and employers; and, triangulation of the qualitative data with relevant Cohort Study and Management Information (MI) quantitative data.

Key findings

The impact of legislation and policies

It was acknowledged that the Mainstreaming Plan operates within a context where the equalities agenda is highly salient. This agenda is driven by a number of intersecting factors, including UK and EU equalities legislation. GE and EO legislation and EO policies were perceived by CMs and provider staff to be valuable tools in the promotion of equalities and for acting to place equalities high on the agenda of publicly-funded bodies. The legislation also set out standards which should be reflected in an organisation's practice.

The evaluation found that ESF stakeholders promote equality in line with their public duties. However, the content analysis of policies

indicated a variation in quality, and it is suggested that further improvements on the content and relevance of providers GE and EO policies could be encouraged. This includes ensuring that the specific roles and responsibilities of named individuals regarding the promotion of GE and EO are clearly set out within policies; that it is specified when policies will be reviewed and updated, and the date of last review clearly indicated; and that policies encourage the use of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs).

Knowledge, training and understanding of GE and EO

Whilst commitment to the promotion of GE and EO at all levels within ESF was found, the extent to which this operated in practice varied according to the knowledge, skills and capacity of staff (at all levels) and views they held about their role in relation to GE and EO.

Training on GE and EO mainstreaming for CMs was provided by ECOTEC earlier in the programme. The training was developed following a needs analysis and then piloted before being 'rolled out'. CMs who had attended the training praised it for being informative and well presented. It improved their understanding of mainstreaming in broad conceptual terms. However, there appeared to remain some confusion over the exact meaning of GE and EO mainstreaming and the exact CM responsibilities it applied even after attendance at the training. Thus, clearly defining the roles of CMs and targeting further training, based on the existing knowledge of GE and EO, and the role of staff member, is recommended to ensure a consistent level of expertise.

Promoting GE and EO – Procurement, contract management and monitoring

Procurement and monitoring processes are viewed as highly developed and successful processes of mainstreaming in operation. However, there were concerns that procurement

and monitoring can become a 'paper exercise' and there is a need to ensure, via the contract management process, that GE and EO practices outlined in the procurement process are translated into action.

Contract Managers perceived their roles and responsibilities regarding GE and EO differently between different CFOs and different individuals. Clarifying roles and responsibilities therefore is a priority area to address the varying levels of expertise and commitment evident. This is in the context that there was a sense from some CMs that the promotion of GE and EO was not necessarily a central aspect of their role or one that they had the resources to take on. Variation regarding CMs' views of their roles regarding GE and EO led to variation in the support available to providers to promote GE and EO. This could be very well supported. Providers noted that, provided their overall performance was good, they did not anticipate input from their CMs regarding their promotion of GE and EO.

Encouraging GE and EO in the context of barriers to employment

Findings from provider staff and participants interviewed pointed to the proactive and sustained promotion of GE and EO as integral to ESF service provision and delivery. This was in terms of serving the general population of ESF participants in a manner that took account of GE and EO, as well as providing niche services for specific groups facing particular disadvantages in the labour market – the 'dual approach'. There were concerns from niche providers, however, that the flexibility inherent in the dual approach may be being threatened by an increase in prime contracting.

Ways of working with participants that promote accessibility

Key ways in which ESF-funded providers worked to promote access and diversity were identified as via:

- 'active' outreach to participant groups, and building links with community and voluntary sector organisations within local networks who have specialist knowledge of the needs of different groups;
- flexibility in terms of service – providers could make appropriate and timely changes in service offers, in response to individual participant needs;
- flexibility in the delivery of ESF-funded provision – flexibility in timings, location and structure of training being tailored to meet diverse participant needs and circumstances;
- 'active' employer engagement, by which providers built sustainable relationships with employers, challenged negative employer perceptions of different participant groups, or provided guidance and support around necessary adjustments.

However, the extent to which providers were able to promote GE and EO varied, depending on the target group that providers aimed to help, and the knowledge and understanding of provider staff regarding GE and EO. Thus, the role of CMs to support and advise providers mainstream GE and EO is important to ensure consistency across the programme. This is coupled with the need to ensure CMs are adequately supported to be able to undertake this role.

Equality targets

The 2007-2013 programme includes a coherent set of equality targets for the ESF programme (the first time these have been set within an ESF programme). Results from the MI data and Cohort Study indicated progress is being made to meet these equality targets. For

example, targets are being achieved in relation to disability in Priorities One and Four, and gender and ethnic minority targets are being achieved in Priority Five. Targets are very close to being met for engaging those aged over 50 in Priorities One and Two. However, rates for engaging women are particularly low in Priority One in comparison to the targets set (35 per cent against a target of 51 per cent).

Engaging with diversity

Provider staff reported that the gender target of 51 per cent female may be untenable, especially so given the current economic situation, with traditional male industries being particularly affected and providers reporting an upturn in men accessing their support.

Work was reported to engage ethnic minority groups by providers, such as outreach via trusted community organisations. It was also reported that more could be done to ensure ethnic minority communities are informed of the provision via active outreach.

Some providers were found to be 'working with whoever needs the service', with less explicit focus on promoting access to less engaged groups, especially if overall performance was good. However, outreach to particular groups may be necessary to ensure that ESF reaches those less engaged who could benefit from the services. Promoting awareness to staff of why outreach and engagement is important, and not just a 'paper exercise' to meet targets, is therefore recommended.

Examples of successful outreach are provided in the full report and included posters in different languages, drop-in sessions in community centres, a presence at community events, and having staff with specialist knowledge or skills with which to engage with the local community (i.e. being able to speak other languages).

Mainstreaming Plan

A key aim of the evaluation was to assess progress made towards implementing the Mainstreaming Plan. It was found that mainstreaming is well advanced. This stemmed from the promotion of GE and EO already being embedded in the structure of the organisations involved in ESF.

Contract Managers reported that achievements towards mainstreaming GE and EO could be seen in terms of the Plan offering a benchmark to aim for, and that the procurement and monitoring processes provide ways of ensuring that specific GE and EO policies and practices are put in place, against which providers can be assessed. This embedded GE and EO within the planning, delivery and monitoring process of the programme. The procurement process and ways of working providers adopt were reported to support the dual approach successfully. The ECOTEC training and GE and EO being a cross-cutting theme of the programme have thus far both acted to promote the visibility of GE and EO well and progress is being made towards the equality targets and a number are being met.

However, there remained variation in the extent to which GE and EO were integrated into delivering and planning at all levels, which stemmed from variation in the priority given to GE and EO, and knowledge regarding GE and EO that staff members had. Promoting GE and EO could be viewed by staff as a bureaucratic exercise that added a burden to workloads. Existing ESF resources such as websites were found to be under-utilised.

Conclusion

Substantial progress has been made in mainstreaming equal opportunities, however further work could be done in order to make mainstreaming even more effective, including: clarification of what specific tasks should be undertaken by CMs and providers to promote GE and EO; the application of consistent

measures of progress and good practice in relation to the promotion of GE and EO (such as EIAs); and further dissemination of information relating to these measures.

The evaluation found overall that good progress is being made towards implementing the Mainstreaming Plan, and that GE and EO are integrated into the planning, implementation and monitoring of the programme at every level.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 786 0. Research Report 667. July 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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