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Financing of distance learning in rural areas by the European Social Fund

Abstract. The paper is an attempt at evaluating the degree of accuracy of realization of the project: distance learning centres in rural areas financed from the European Social Fund in the frame of the priority II: Development of knowledge-based society, action 2.1.: Broadening the access to education – promotion of lifelong learning; scheme a: decreasing educational inequalities between urban and rural areas. The aims of the project in question include:

1. Creation and equipment with computers and internet connection, of at least 250 distance learning centres in rural areas (in order to enable the final beneficiaries to use the available distance learning programs)
2. Employment in the centres of qualified staff whose task would be to help using the centre's resources.
3. Creation by the draughtsman, of a countrywide network of distance learning centres using the existing IT infrastructure with units running distance learning.
4. Enabling the final beneficiaries to complement or increase the level of education in the form of distance learning especially at the post-gymnasium level.

Key words: structural funds, lifelong learning, rural areas

Introduction

Membership in the EU obliges Poland to obey the EU laws. In the area of Common Agricultural Policy the following laws are in force:

- 1) since 1/01/05 the directives: Environment protection embracing:
 - wild birds
 - groundwater
 - soil affected by agricultural nitrates
 - environmental pods and wild fauna and flora.
- 2) since 01/01/2006 the directives: Public health, animal health and plant health concerning:
 - the market circulation of plant protection measures
 - prohibition of application of some compounds that have hormonal effects,
 - food security
 - fighting and control of animals' diseases.
- 3) Since 01/01/2007 the directives: Animal well-being embracing the protection of:
 - calves
 - pigs
 - farm animals.

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The non-compliance with the EU directives may result in the reduction or exclusion from EU funds.² In order to counteract this, a special farmer-oriented system of lifelong learning³ could be established (courses, trainings). This system should also embrace the other habitants of rural areas, for whom the basic income does not and will not come from the work in a farm.

The relatively lower level of education in rural areas in comparison to cities causes inequalities between village and cities. Because the low education level constitutes a barrier to economic growth and employment promotion, steps have been taken aiming at facilitating the habitants of rural areas the access to education. For the education offer access in rural areas is significantly decreased due to geographical (the distance to establishments pursuing lifelong learning) and economic barriers. According to the Ministry of National Education (MEN) this aim could be reached by rendering accessible to the inhabitants of rural areas the opportunities of lifelong learning. The equipment of rural households with computers with internet access largely diverges from analogous indicators for urban areas and therefore, according to MEN, an effective mode of accelerating the creation of a lifelong learning system in rural areas could become distance learning centres.

⁴ The undertaking is to be realised in the frames of the competition published in December 2006, and concerning the accomplishment of the project: Distance learning in rural areas (CKNO). The competition was published basing on the provisions of the Complement to the Operational Program Human Resources Development⁵ in the frames of priority II: Development of knowledge-based society, action 2.1.: Broadening the access to education – promotion of lifelong learning; scheme a: decreasing educational inequalities between urban and rural areas. For the realisation of the project in the frames of the competition, 49 356 320,00 PLN was directed, including the financial support from:

- 1) the European Union' European Social Fund (EFS): 37 012 304,37 PLN (74,99%),
- 2) the state budget: 12 344 015,63 PLN (25,01%).

In-house contribution was not required.

This paper makes an attempt at evaluating the degree of accuracy of realization of the 4 aims the project was set to accomplish:

² These are the consequences according to cross-compliance whose legal base constitutes the Council Regulation No. 1698/2005.

³ In the light of paragraph 3, point 17 of the Education System Act of September 7th, 1991 (Dz. U. 2004, No. 256, item 2572, with amendments), lifelong learning is understood as education in schools for adults, as well as gaining and complementing general knowledge, capabilities and professional qualifications in extramural forms by individuals who have obeyed the obligation of education.

⁴ A distance learning centre, as understood by MEN, would be a centre with educational and cultural functions, equipped with computers connected to the internet, providing the beneficiaries the possibility for lifelong learning online aiming at complementing or increasing the level of education.

⁵ The ruling of the Minister of Regional Development, as of January 30th, 2006, amending the ruling concerning the adoption of the Complement to the Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development 2004-2006, Dz. U. No. 29, item 206 with amendments.

Aim 1 – Enabling the final beneficiaries the completion of or increase in the level of education in the form of distance learning especially at the post-secondary school level

Research on the diagnosis of educational needs of rural areas inhabitants should go far ahead of the CKNO idea realization agenda. This means that this stage of the project should be excluded from the competition and constitute an independent commission. The research should focus households with various sources of main income. It would be recommended that the respondents answer the following questions:

- 1) What form of education would they prefer to participate in (school or extramural)?
- 2) What are the substantive areas of knowledge and qualifications they would like to improve?
- 3) How much time would they be ready to devote for distance learning?
- 4) What inconveniences connected with distance learning could cause the lack of interest in this form of education?

Only in the light of the obtained research results it would be possible to consciously take the decision concerning the need to finance centres of distance learning from the EFS. Otherwise, the idea of CKNO can be thwarted by the impossibility of adjusting the supply (online offer) to the demand (final beneficiary profile). Unfortunately, the experiences drawn from the first period of programming and the trainings organised, indicate quite often that there is a problem of the scarcity of people interested in this form of education. The initial results of the research conducted by the author – in the form of interviewing the directors of Lifelong Learning Centres (CKU), and Vocational Training Centres (CKP) of the Lublin Region⁶ imply that the inhabitants of rural areas are not especially interested in participating neither in the free of charge forms of school lifelong learning, nor even more so, the paid extramural forms.

Aim 2 – Creation and equipment with computers⁷ and internet connections of at least 250 distance learning centres in rural areas

Distance learning centres should be proportionally located covering rural areas communes in all country, where no such cultural-educational centres exist. To the extent it is possible, the centres should be placed equally in all the country, according to the documented regional needs. It is worth noting here that in the frames of priority II of the Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development, action 2.2. – scheme a: Increasing the usage of computer and communication technologies in the process of education, counselling, and vocational advice, and modernization of educational equipment, computer labs had already been purchased earlier for the CKU and CKP in all the country. The average number of these labs per county is presented in table 1.

One can note that in six regions there is less than a half of computer lab per district at a CKU or a CKP. It does not mean however that CKNO should most of all be located in

⁶ Research funded in the frames of the research grant of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education No. N11200532/0208.

⁷ The computer equipment together with the necessary software should be characterised with parameters that enable using the available distance learning programs, tools and methods of distance learning.

these six regions in order to equalise the numbers. For the equalizing numbers thesis is not always proved right. It should rather be checked to what extent is the currently working equipment at CKU and CKP used for distance learning. For if the research would show that the equipment is not fully used in the establishments whose statutory aim is the organization of lifelong learning, then the aggravated expenses of computer equipment would end up as a misfit allocation of the EU funds.

Table 1. CKU and CKP that got the EFS funding for computer labs in every region

Region	Number of districts in the region	Number of CKU, that were provided for computer labs	Number of CKP that were provided for computer labs	Average number of computer labs (in CKU and CKP) per district
Lower Silesia	29	3	5	0,3
Pomerania-Kujawy	23	10	11	0,9
Lublin Voivodship	24	6	7	0,5
Lubusz Land	14	4	4	0,6
Lodz Region	24	10	7	0,7
Smaller Poland	22	5	4	0,4
Mazovia	42	18	19	0,9
Opole Region	69	7	4	0,2
Subcarpathian Region	25	12	16	1.12
Podlaskie Voivodeship	17	5	7	0,7
Pomerania	64	10	7	0,3
Silesia	65	15	12	0,4
The Holy Cross Land	14	1	4	0,4
Warmia & Mazury	21	5	7	0,6
Greater Poland	35	9	12	0,6
Westpomeranian Region	21	5	8	0,6

Source: Author's research, basing on the data obtained in 2006 at the Information Systems Department of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration.

The competition documentation implies that the creation of distance learning centres should be pursued using the existing and available infrastructure of communes (e.g. buildings of school to be closed or other public utility buildings). In case of schools to be close it is important to remember that they are closed with the end of a school year (i.e. in August), whereas the localization and equipment of CKNO should be completed in March 2008 at the latest (i.e. before the school year ends). In case of other public utility buildings one should pay attention at least to two issues:

- the regulation of the legal claim to the building expected to be the seat of a CKNO (especially important while applying for EU funds for technical infrastructure),
- establishing the division of expenses of the premises' exploitation by a few subjects in the same building (especially important while drafting the system of CKNO's financing).

Aim 3 – Employment of qualified staff whose task will be to help using the centre's resources

These persons should be able to prove qualified in the knowledge of sources of available distance learning programs and should be fluent in computer skills (e.g. MS Office, e-mail, internet).

Finding qualified staff should not be problematic because at least for three years various forms of professional development in this field have been organized. Concurrently even to the project in question, free of charge graduate studies are financed by the EFS, in the frames of action 2.2. of the Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development: 'Vocational education of staff to run the centres of lifelong distance learning'. Participation is restricted to persons who:

- 1) Have a university degree.
- 2) Have pedagogical qualifications.
- 3) Have computer skills in managing operational systems (Windows or Linux), and office software.
- 4) Are able to use e-mail and web browser.
- 5) Are employed at:
 - public schools and establishments of lifelong learning (e.g. CKU, CKP),
 - school inspectorates,
 - public schools and educational establishments (e.g. of teachers' professional development).

The course embraces 360 hours in stationary mode (lectures, demonstrations, seminars, and workshops in computer labs), and in extramural mode (online). The program of studies includes: introduction to distance learning (30 hours), psychology of distance education (50hours), computers and networks (50 hours), multimedia facilities creation (60), information technology education tools (60), web design of didactic websites (30), organization of distance learning process (20 hours), didactic measure, and evaluation in distance learning (30 hours), copyright law and distance learning (10 hours), graduate seminar (30 hours). There are six universities engaged in organizing the postgraduate studies:

- 1) Warsaw University (candidates from the regions: Mazovia, Podlaskie, and Lodz);
- 2) Jagiellonian University (candidates from the regions: Smaller Poland, Holy Cross Land, Silesia);
- 3) Marie Curie-Sklodowska University (candidates from the regions: Lublin, Subcarpathian);
- 4) Nicolaus Copernicus University (candidates from the regions: Warmia & Mazury, Pomerania-Kujawy, and Pomerania);
- 5) Adam Mickiewicz University (candidates from the regions: Greater Poland, Lubusz, and West Pomerania);
- 6) University of Wroclaw (candidates from the regions: Lower Silesia, and Opole).

The staff should be employed in the centres on March 31st at the latest (CKNO's project deadline), so before the planned date of the postgraduate students promotion. In spite of the fact that the cadre has been educated for some years now, the task of hiring it in the centres may turn out problematic. Firstly, the issue of employing this kind of specialists is not regulated by the law on distance learning. It is not clear whether the employment

should be based on labour law or for example, the Education System Act. Each of these legal bases determines different minimum remuneration. The minimum remuneration in turns determines the aggravated expenses of the project connected to staff. Secondly, it is not determined which documents proving professional qualification will be recognized (postgraduate studies certificate equally treated as trainings?). Thirdly, the program of studies does not include a track shaping the capabilities of online education promotion depending on the final beneficiary's profile (e.g. a farmer). It was quite optimistic on the side of the program's authors to assume that a teacher in CKNO will be comfortably waiting for students highly motivated to make use of services offered in this kind of establishments.

Aim 4 – Creation of a countrywide network of distance learning centres using the existing IT infrastructure in cooperation with units already operating distance learning schemes

Accepting the optimistic approach that excludes competition in the field of distance learning services in Poland one could assume that until March 2008 the aim cited above will be reached. It is nevertheless worth underlining that currently the market of services providing distance learning is dominated by big units such as public and private universities. It is then difficult to expect that – without appropriate legal regulations – these units will risk their up to date achievements in this field for the sake of an inchoate form of constant contact and cooperation with the created distance learning centres.

Conclusions

In the conclusions I would like to once more underline the doubts concerning the functioning of distance learning centres in the context of the financial responsibility for their maintenance. If CKNO should be financed from the districts' income, then amendments to the public finances bill, and the local self-government units' income bill, should be considered in order to guarantee increased funds inflow for these units. If, in turn, the possibility to use the CKNO offer would be conditioned to some extent by the participation of the students themselves, one should maybe concurrently consider the introduction of individual education accounts concept. Invariably however, the most important issue remains the problem of inciting the needs to use the services offered by CKNO among the beneficiaries in general. And maybe – given the current state of knowledge about the role of education in people's lives – what is necessary is to introduce some legal measures that would force individuals to change their attitudes into the direction desired.

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