

ESF Cohort Study: Wave 1

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The European Social Fund (ESF) Cohort Study involves a large scale quantitative survey with two waves of interviews. The survey is designed to evaluate the longer-term outcomes of the training and advice provided through the ESF programme. It will also be used to measure a number of indicators and targets that cannot be captured through respondent monitoring information.

Wave 1 of the ESF Cohort Study took place between April and September 2009, and included interviews with 10,947 ESF participants. Most participants were interviewed by phone, although a small number of face-to-face interviews took place with more vulnerable respondents.

This report contains the findings of Wave 1 of the ESF Cohort Study 2008-2010. Survey data has been weighted so that it is representative of the profile of ESF participants according to management information available in April 2009, when the sample for the study was drawn.

The study covered four of the ESF priorities, including: Priorities 1 and 4, which have a focus on extending employment opportunities and tackling barriers to employment; and Priorities 2 and 5, which aim to develop and improve the skills of the workforce.

Respondent characteristics

ESF funding is targeted towards groups that are seen to be disadvantaged in the labour market, such as people with disabilities, lone parents, and people aged over 50. The ESF Cohort Study (Wave 1) found that:

- 37 per cent of participants were female;
- 15 per cent were aged over 50;

- 18 per cent were from an ethnic minority group;
- 32 per cent said that they had a disability or long-term limiting illness (LTLI);
- eight per cent were lone parents, while seven per cent had caring responsibilities for a sick, disabled or elderly person.

Projects under Priorities 1 and 4 had an objective to support participants who were out of work, including those who were unemployed, economically inactive and young people who were not in employment, education or training (NEET). The survey found that 95 per cent of Priority 1 participants and 93 per cent of Priority 4 participants were out of work, including ten per cent in Priority 1 who were NEET and four per cent in Priority 5.

By contrast, the majority of Priority 2 (78%) and Priority 5 (89%) participants were in employment, in line with the objective of these priorities to develop the skills of the workforce. Twenty-one per cent of employees worked part time, around three-quarters (73%) earned less than £15,000 per year and most (85%) worked for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Expectations and experiences of ESF

Most participants felt that their ESF course was helping them to gain or improve the skills needed for work and that it was boosting their self-confidence about working. The ESF Cohort Study found that:

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- in terms of work skills gained, 49 per cent of participants were gaining practical skills relating to a particular job, 34 per cent were improving their basic computing or IT skills and the same proportion (34%) were gaining reading and writing skills;
- 66 per cent of participants said that the course was improving their motivation about working, while 63 per cent said it was helping them with communication skills.
- ten per cent of participants who were parents were receiving help with their childcare responsibilities.

Satisfaction levels with ESF provision were relatively high, with 78 per cent of participants saying that the course was relevant to their needs, 57 per cent saying that the level was 'about right' and 73 per cent confirming that they were 'very or fairly satisfied' with the course.

There were some differences in expectations and experiences of the course among different priorities and demographic groups. For example, younger people and women tended to be more satisfied with the course. Generally, people from ethnic minority groups were more positive than White people about their experiences of the course, while people with a disability or LTLI tended to have more negative views.

Qualifications

Before starting the course, 17 per cent of participants had no qualifications, while a further 26 per cent had qualifications below Level 2 or had 'other' qualifications. Participants who were lone parents or disabled were less likely to have qualifications.

Thirty-eight per cent of participants were studying towards qualifications through the course, although this figure was higher in Priority 2 (78%) and Priority 5 (74%). Of these, most were studying towards NVQs (71%). Other qualifications that participants were studying towards included City and Guild qualifications

(20%), GCSEs (6%), A Levels (5%), OCR qualifications (5%) and BTECs (4%).

Six per cent of participants were studying towards 'other work-related qualifications'. Three per cent were doing basic skills qualifications.

Outcomes

The majority of participants (82%) had already finished the course when they took part in the Wave 1 ESF Cohort Study, and the report looks at early outcomes of these participants.

The study found that the rate of unemployment among Priority 1 and 4 participants fell from 70 per cent in the week before the course to 50 per cent at the time of the interview, while the employment rate rose from five per cent to 22 per cent in the same period. However, the rate of unemployment at the time of interview was not as low as it had been among these participants 12 months before the course (41%). Participants with disabilities and no qualifications were less likely than other groups to have moved into work.

Of those participants who were in employment at the time of the interview and who had been out of work in the week before the course, 52 per cent said that the course had helped them to find a job. Younger people were more likely to say that the course had helped them to find work.

Of those who remained unemployed, most had made job applications (68%) while around one-third had been to job interviews (34%). Thirty per cent of unemployed participants had used contacts from the course in their job search, while 24 per cent said that someone on the course had suggested that they apply for particular jobs.

Forty-one per cent of those participants who were employees said that, since they had been on the course, they had improved their job security. Of these, a high proportion (86%) agreed that the course had helped them in this area. The course also seemed particularly

beneficial to those employees who had taken on higher skilled work for an existing employer (21%) – with 81 per cent acknowledging that the course had helped them to do this work.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 738 9. Research Report 647. July 2010).

You can download the full report free from:
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