

Evaluation of the European Social Fund Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming projects

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This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the Innovation, Transnational and Mainstreaming (ITM) strand of the 2007 to 2013 ESF programme. The aims of the evaluation were to examine the impacts of projects funded under the ITM strand, explore what works in terms of moving people closer to the labour market and identify whether the lessons from project activity are influencing future mainstream policy and policymakers. Key areas for investigation included how the ITM strand is delivered, whether it has been effective in generating new ideas to influence policy and delivery, and the key lessons for future transnational activities in the next round of European Social Fund (ESF).

The ITM strand funds projects to develop and trial innovative approaches to moving individuals towards the labour market, sharing lessons with transnational partners and with the aim of informing policy development and delivery through mainstreaming. The key features of the strand include:

- the structuring of the projects funded around six themes, namely: active inclusion; engaging with employers; information and communication technologies (ICT) and the digital divide; demographic change; skills for climate change and sustainable development; and social enterprise;
- projects are based on partnerships, including at least one transnational partner – although unlike previous transnational ESF innovation programmes no specific parallel funding was available in most other Member States to support transnational activities; and

- a central support body, the ITM Unit hosted by Birmingham City Council – whose responsibilities include providing support throughout the delivery period, supporting mainstreaming efforts through the provision of Thematic Events and identifying suitable policy contacts.

A total of 32 projects received ITM funding, with all but three operating at the time of the study and many being granted extensions of time and/or funding to complete or extend their activities into 2013. Consequently it was too early to provide a final assessment of impact across the strand, although several examples of successful national and local mainstreaming were identified.

The study fieldwork took place between February and June 2012, and included a programme of stakeholder interviews; a telephone survey of 20 ITM projects (to explore progress, innovation, partnership working and achievements to date); and in-depth case study fieldwork with the remaining 12 projects (which featured project visits and interviews with project leads, key national and transnational partners and participants). A sample of individuals with policy responsibilities, referred to as ‘policy influencers’, who had attended ITM events or engaged with individual projects were also interviewed to establish impact (actual and potential) on policy development and delivery.

Key findings

The study found that overall the projects had made good progress towards the achievement of their aims and objectives of developing and testing innovative approaches across the six themes of the strand. As the majority of the projects were

still implementing their approaches at the time of the study, with several yet to start their full dissemination and mainstreaming efforts, it is too early to provide a final assessment of their impacts. However, their achievements to date show that several have achieved real mainstreaming success at the national level, while for the majority the benefits have remained at the local or regional levels.

The study concluded that the ITM strand had been effective in generating and testing new ideas with the potential to influence the delivery of policy locally and nationally. The mainstream impacts identified show that many projects have the potential to be influential at the national level, and the challenge for the remainder of the programme is to maximise the degree to which project outcomes can be brought to the attention of the appropriate national policy influencers. Previous innovative programmes have shown the difficulties of engaging and sustaining the interest of this group, and the challenge this poses at a time of public sector stricture and restructuring is a considerable one.

The delivery of, and the structures developed for, the ITM strand were shown to work well, again in the face of challenges not envisaged at the outset. The thematic approach provided clear distinctions around project activities, with the themes selected being considered appropriate for the policy needs at the time they were developed. However, changes in policy over multi-year programme periods are inevitable, which in this case were compounded by measures in the Coalition Agreement to address the public sector deficit. Combined these have seen significant changes including the abolition of the Government Offices and key local mainstreaming targets (such as RDAs), and changes in national programmes (such as the abolition of Train to Gain and the introduction of the Work Programme), which influenced the management of the strand and projects' mainstreaming abilities.

Finally, the study has shown that when transnational partnership works well it can produce real benefits for projects, even with the challenge of reciprocal funding only being available in three Member States. Challenges also exist around identifying appropriate

transnational partners, and while the majority of projects considered that the benefits resulting for them were worth the resources invested, it was apparent that for some the 'return on their investment' was greater than for others.

Summary of research

The findings in terms of innovation, transnationality and mainstreaming are summarised below.

Innovation

The ITM projects were found to have developed and implemented a range of innovative approaches across the six thematic areas. They have a strong focus on new approaches to policy implementation, most commonly featuring process (the development of new methods, content or approaches) or goal innovation (working with different groups, sectors and types of qualifications). Context oriented innovation was identified less frequently:

- Common areas of 'process' innovation included the development of whole person/employer approaches (providing holistic, integrated solutions for target groups with multiple and complex needs); the use of ICTs to enhance delivery (for example by bringing job vacancies together at a single point); and social enterprises as a mechanism for new employment opportunities.
- Examples of 'goal' innovation included working with new target groups (including individuals with mental health problems, disabilities, ex-offenders and young people NEET); and developing new qualifications and training outcomes – in a range of areas from increasing employability amongst challenging to reach groups to low carbon and sustainable development training for employers.
- Examples of context innovation focused mainly on the creation of new networks.

Across the projects several elements emerged as having worked well in implementing their innovations, including the role of partnerships, development of whole person/employer approaches, and the use of ICTs in working with learners and delivering new provision.

Challenges were experienced in terms of working with difficult to engage groups and as a result of changes in the national policy agenda, which also meant that projects had to review both their activities and their potential audiences for mainstreaming.

The study concluded that the ITM strand is distinct from mainstream ESF as a vehicle for the development, trialling and mainstreaming of innovative approaches. Although mainstream ESF is not without innovation, the specific aims, objectives and key features of ITM offer both clarity in terms of focus and the freedom to trial innovative approaches, with potential failure being part of the learning process.

Transnationality

The majority of the projects had embraced the transnational element of ITM, with almost two thirds engaging with two or more transnational partners. In many cases the composition of transnational partnerships changed over time – as either partnerships broke down or, more commonly, new partners were identified whose activities more closely matched those of the English projects.

Transnational partnerships were developed through a range of routes, most commonly following previous contacts or joint working, in some cases through the earlier EQUAL programme. Finding transnational partners was a challenge for some projects, with a partnership broking event organised by the ITM Unit leading to new partners being identified.

Transnational activities commonly focused on visits to other Member States to share practice and observe provision directly. Parallel development and the import of innovative practice were also key objectives – with projects both learning from and providing lessons for their transnational partners.

The projects were at different stages of their transnational work – in some cases activities had been limited while in others transnationality had been a strong feature from the outset. The majority of projects cited a range of benefits from their transnational activities, including:

- learning from the experience of others across a range of interests;
- observing similar approaches being delivered on the ground – showing what could be achieved and providing lessons for delivery; and
- gaining confidence that their innovative approaches could work (accounting for political, structural and cultural differences).

A less tangible, but nonetheless valued, benefit was the sharing of experience amongst the project team (and participants if included in transnational work) to enhance partnership cohesion and shared purpose. However, in some cases learning from transnational partners was limited, with practice in England being found to be more advanced than that of the transnational partner. In some cases this led to projects seeking out new transnational partners, where they could be more specific in their search having established the type of activities they wished to explore.

Overall the projects considered that the benefits of their transnational work were worth the resources expended on them – with only a couple reporting otherwise. The majority considered that their transnational learning complemented, rather than underpinned, their approaches – although a significant minority reported more direct influences which were key in taking their work forward.

The main challenge to transnational working was the lack of reciprocal funding for activities between Member States. Although less of an issue with Swedish, German or Polish partners, where funding was available for transnational work, differences in programme timings also caused difficulties.

Dissemination and mainstreaming

Although the projects were at different stages of their mainstreaming plans, all had been involved in some form of dissemination activity – most commonly via the Thematic Events and through meetings, conferences and presentations locally and nationally. Projects also made contacts with policy influencers through a range of routes – the Thematic

Events, contacts brokered by the ITM Unit, and through their own efforts. The Thematic Events were viewed positively by both the projects and the policy influencers attending them – particularly the events in 2011 which introduced an element of cross-thematic learning and a more current policy focus. However, several projects felt that policy influencer representation at events was disappointing, and others would have preferred more formalised follow-up to capitalise on awareness raised and contacts made.

Projects' dissemination and mainstreaming activities had most commonly been locally focused, with lessons being shared with partners and others to continuing the activities trialled. Others reported facing challenges in making links with national policy influencers – exacerbated by changes in the public sector infrastructure resulting from measures to address the deficit. Many projects had worked hard to establish contacts with national policy influencers, which had resulted in the successful mainstreaming of approaches trialled.

Although too early to be definitive, examples of mainstreaming outcomes identified included:

- informing local employment, health, social enterprise and skills development strategies;
- developing new training courses, materials and delivery approaches – with mainstream impacts being primarily local but with examples at the national level;
- the introduction of new services, through local arms of national agencies such as Jobcentre Plus, with the potential for adoption more widely; and
- the development of models of supported employment for a range of target groups, again adopted local level but with examples showing the potential to be up-scaled.

Recommendations

The report featured a series of recommendations for the remainder of the strand, and for future innovation and transnational programmes.

Recommendations for the remainder of the strand

Our recommendations focus on supporting further mainstreaming at the national level, including:

- continuing to emphasise the expectation that projects will share their outcomes with a view to mainstreaming at the national level;
- putting plans in place to capture the final learning outcomes of projects, including extending the programme of the Thematic Events to provide the opportunity for learning to be shared; and
- continuing to provide support to projects to identify potential policy influencers – recognising that the Thematic Events are not the sole route to mainstreaming.

Recommendations for future Innovation and Transnational Programmes

The study recommended that innovative programming such as ITM should be continued, where it offers a distinctiveness and added value over mainstream ESF. Other recommendations included:

Programme Delivery Model

Future programmes should:

- continue to provide support to projects through a dedicated support unit – in recognition of the nature of the support requirements of such programmes compared to mainstream delivery;
- replicate a programme of events and other mechanisms to raise awareness of the projects, and to share their emerging and final lessons; and
- take steps to ensure that policy inputs continue to influence the initial scoping of project activity as well as project implementation.

Transnationality

Consideration should be given to whether the transnational component should continue to be mandatory, or an option which would attract additional funding. Other recommendations included:

- consider issues around parallel funding of transnational activities by other Member States, with lobbying at Commission level to ensure funding is available for transnational work; and
- a transnational partner brokerage service should continue to be included in any project support.

Mainstreaming

Recommendations here included:

- continue to follow the current model of support for mainstreaming applied under ITM – to reflect the specific needs of innovative programmes and the challenges of developing policy links;
- at the outset ensure that projects' mainstreaming ambitions are set high, while at programme level being realistic about the challenges and about what can be expected;

- recognise that the thematic events are not the sole route to mainstreaming – and that support continue to be offered to identify and engage with potential policy influencers, perhaps through establishing 'policy ambassadors' to represent Departmental interests; and
- the Managing Authority may wish to consider if a series of short-term, tightly focussed projects may address the barriers faced by innovation projects seeking to influence specific policy areas.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 97 6. Research Report 817. November 2012).

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