

Ex Ante Evaluation of the 2007 – 2013 NSRF Operational Programme Education
Final Report

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Executive Summary

The ex-ante evaluation of the *Operational Programme Education* was performed in March 2006 – February 2007 in six phases in close cooperation with the managing authority. The conclusions of this Final Report were based on the evaluation of the early-February OP version.

The analysis of OP Education is of significant breadth and, as such, not a comprehensive analysis of specific issues. It serves sufficiently as a scoping process for a qualitative identification of the needs and components of the SWOT analysis.

The programme objectives and priority axes are consistent, reasonably justified and address the relevant needs. However, the framework activities and the proposed examples of activities, included in the *Programming Manual*, lack specific description of the instruments of intervention. (This is partly justified by the difficulty to anticipate the impact of the future education-reform legislation.) It is one of the reasons why a sound impact assessment of the program has not been performed. The link between the needs identified and the objectives formulated could be strengthened. Due to the scope of strategy and lack of specific instruments there is a risk that clear outcomes and impacts would be limited and hard to identify. The insufficiently specific instruments also pose a difficulty for setting up an effective and efficient monitoring system at the project level, capable of generating data for assessing the outcomes and impacts. Those issues are addressed in the recommendations.

The lessons learned from the 2004-2006 programming period include a higher focus on national projects and ensuring of adequate administrative capacities. (This period was not subject to mid-term evaluation; the ex-post evaluation will be performed at a later date.) There is, however, lack of verified specific instruments and experience regarding the requirements on a sound monitoring system.

The monitoring system sufficiently captures the objectives at the programme and priority axis levels. Due to a significant number of potential activities and instruments, additional indicators at the project level will have to be identified during the implementation. The target values are not overly ambitious and therefore, taking the performance of the 2004-2006 programming period as a basis, their outreach is assumed. Due to a number of probability factors in OP Education for meeting the objectives, however, cannot be verified and such assessment has to be transferred to procedures of preparation of calls for project proposals.

Similarly, the breadth of strategy and deficiencies in the linkages between the objectives and the specific instruments also pose significant difficulties for assessing the optimal financial allocation.

The description of the implementation system is of sufficient accordance with the *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006*; it could, however, provide more details on the responsibilities delegated to the intermediary body, procedures of preparation of calls for project proposals and mechanisms of monitoring and control at the project level.

The partnership principle has been implemented to a sufficient degree during OP Education preparation. Tailoring of the instruments for ensuring the stakeholders' participation to the needs of stakeholders has occurred partially.

The document is in sufficient accordance with the relevant regulations, the NSRF, strategic documents of the European Communities and strategic documents at the national and regional levels. Horizontal priorities of the marginalised Roma communities and ICT are integrated sufficiently. There is, however, a need for specific instruments to address sustainable development and creation of equal opportunities.

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The OP possesses a significant potential to contribute to the objectives of employment and competitiveness, regional cohesion, social inclusion and sustainable development, although that potential is difficult to assess with more precision.

If the key recommendations are implemented into OP Education document and during its implementation process, especially the obligation to establish prerequisites and to perform the proposed incremental strategy formation procedures, OP Education is considered appropriate for the negotiations with and approval by the EC.

Key Recommendations

This ex-ante Final Report identifies a list of recommendations considered crucial for the success of *OP Education*. According to the recommendations, the document should be modified to:

- provide framework instruments for securing partnerships as described in step *a* of the proposed process of incremental strategy formation;
- include an obligation to implement steps *b* to *h* of the said process, including the ex-ante impact assessment procedures described in step *f*, to ensure relevance, specificity and measurability of interventions;
- clarify the SWOT analysis to reflect the relevant strengths and weaknesses as factors of intervention;
- strengthen the links between the needs identified and the measures proposed.

Furthermore, at the beginning or during the implementation of *OP Education*, the following measures are considered important:

- to properly conduct the proposed process of incremental strategy formation or its variant. Should this variant prove to be more efficient and effective, including the performance of ex-ante impact assessment procedures, provision of variant interventions, quantification of targets and identification of specific instruments;
- to perform ex-post project evaluations (including projects of the 2004 – 2006 programming period) to construct the underlying models of intervention to strengthen the mechanisms for evidence-based policy-making, including the transfer of lessons learnt and best practices and identification of the appropriate instruments of delivery;
- to search for mechanisms to improve the synergies between OP Education and other strategic initiatives, including other OPs, and to improve cooperation with their implementing authorities, as well as the authorities responsible for horizontal priorities;
- to search for mechanisms to support partnerships with the relevant stakeholders in project monitoring and evaluation;
- to specify in detail the responsibilities delegated by the managing authority to the intermediate body as well as the guarantees provided by the intermediate body;
- to implement the proposed recommendations aimed at improving the monitoring system, including monitoring of a range of indicators proposed during phase IV of the ex-ante assessment beyond the targets to ensure sufficient data base, pursue partnerships to improve data collection, introduce standardised entries, termination and post-termination survey forms to assess the placement rates and soft indicators, as well as to provide for the ex-post project assessment and evaluation;
- to improve procedures of scoring and evaluation of project proposals to increase objectivity and to identify overlaps, synergies and complementarities, which also requires an enlargement of the scope of trainings provided to the evaluators as well as providing for appropriate conditions;
- to broaden and improve the delivery of assistance to potential recipients in the preparation of project proposals as well as to recipients, in particular in the area of financial management and administration of projects;
- to implement the steps proposed to improve the flexibility of payments as well as to focus the payment certification procedures and project monitoring on the relevance of expenditures vis-à-vis the project outcomes and outputs rather than on formal compliance.

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A Process of Ex-Ante Evaluation

This Final Report provides a summary of the ex-ante evaluation results of the *Operational Programme Education* (OP Education) in the framework of the specific priority 3.1 *A Modern Education for a Knowledge-Based Society* and the strategic priority 3 *Human Resources and Education* of the *2007 – 2013 National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) of the Slovak Republic*. The ex-ante evaluation is an instrument intended to improve the management procedures. The main objective defined in the Terms of Reference of this ex-ante evaluation was to provide an answer to the following question: “What are the positives and the shortcomings and what changes and modifications should be performed in the individual document sections concerning the specific priority to achieve a final version which would better respond to the needs of Slovakia, to improve the attainment of priorities and to ensure internal consistency of the document as well as its accord with other relevant policies and documents of the EU and the Slovak Republic?” This Report provides an answer to the early-February version of the document.

A1 Phases and Progress of the Evaluation in Time

The Terms of Reference defined the individual tasks and phases of the ex-ante evaluation. After a slight modification, the customer approved the following process in February 2006:

Phase I	Assessment of the strategy coherence with national and regional policies and strategic documents and the Community policies and strategic documents
Phase II	Assessment of the analysis contained in the specific priority and ranking of the disparities and development potential identified
Phase IIIa	Assessment of the strategy justification and consistency
Phase IIIb	Evaluation of the proposed financial framework (performed in a different manner)
Phase IV	Assessment of the anticipated outcomes and impacts (performed in a different manner)
Phase V	Assessment of the proposed system of the priority implementation
Phase VI	Final evaluation of the proposed document and of the recommendations incorporated therein

A partial evaluation report was produced for each phase. The ex-ante evaluation took place in March – May 2006 (phases I and II), August – November 2006 (phases III to V), and January – February 2007 (phase VI).

A2 Methods Applied

The methodology applied in the individual phases of the ex-ante evaluation is detailed in the partial evaluations. The ex-ante evaluation included:

- the concept mapping (Trochim *et al.*) to define the impacts to be assessed and to establish the evaluation parameters,
- policy cycle mapping,
- building-up on the information collected in over 150 project visits and interviews with the final beneficiaries (FB) under the framework of project monitoring performed by the intermediary body (IB/MA),
- a questionnaire survey among the FBs aimed at the needs of counselling and other implementation issues (see below),
- qualitative identification of needs and their expert weighing,
- cross-evaluation of overlaps and synergies and of the complementary nature of the measures proposed.

For a list of partial outcomes, see the appendix.

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A3 Partnership Principle

As a part of the ex-ante evaluation, a questionnaire survey was performed to establish the level of the final beneficiaries' satisfaction with ESF counselling (focusing also on other implementation aspects) in the 2004 - 2006 programming period, with questionnaires sent to approx. 94 per cent of the FB representatives. 119 questionnaires were returned with the response rate of over 25 per cent. (The response rate does not reflect the fact that in many cases, questionnaires were sent to more than one representative of the same beneficiary, with only one returning, so the response rate is higher than indicated.) Partial results from the ex-ante evaluation and questions for the public were uploaded on a web page designed solely for that purpose under the web site of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, with a visible link from the main site. The number of reactions received was, however, very low (8). Upon additions made by evaluators, the analysis and the SWOT analysis were reviewed in the process of internal (intra-agency) commenting round and by advisor teams of the Education Minister. The evaluators drew from more than a hundred monitoring visits to projects in the 2004 – 2006 programming period throughout Slovakia and from interviews conducted with representatives of the final beneficiaries.

Ev-6.5. To what extent was the partnership principle satisfied?

During the ex-ante evaluation, an adequate quality and scope of the partnership principle was established.

A4 Barriers and Limitations

The evaluation was negatively influenced by several factors:

- the 2004 – 2006 programming period was not sufficiently oriented toward the intervention outcomes and impacts, in particular with regard to the defined objectives and the monitoring system;
- shortcomings of the administrative information system and information sources on implementation of the 2004-2006 programming period;
- overall shortcomings of the existing policies concerning education, including inadequately specific objectives, instruments and financial allocation and the associated lack of research performed and published concerning the education policies in Slovakia;
- unstable legislation environment, difficult to anticipate for the future (the School Act, powers and responsibilities of certain actors, etc.);
- permanent modifications of OP Education and its *Programming Manual* in the course of evaluation;
- uncertainty regarding the existence of other OPs and the financial allocation for OP Education;
- difficulties of intra- and inter-agency coordination and cooperation within the Education Ministry.

The absence of an ex-ante impact assessment is considered the most serious limitation of the performed ex-ante evaluation and – following that – a missing assessment of adequacy of the financial allocation and of the objectives quantified. (For details, see the introduction to Phase IV evaluation report. When difficulties in the impact assessment were communicated to the customer, stress was moved to a proposal of the monitoring system.) Efforts were developed to overcome those limitations, especially by means of *incremental strategy formation* procedures (hereinafter the ISF) described in [1].

A5 Evaluation Influence on Final Text of OP Education

The evaluators worked together with the authors of OP Education in an iterative process of gradual improvements and amendments of the document. Due to the fact that OP Education was also modified for other reasons and extended by different information (which is naturally not considered a negative), this note has been included to indicate this as another negative factor (see above) because it made the workflow more difficult.

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Ev-6.1. To what extent and in what manner has the author of OP Education reflected the recommendations resulting from the various phases of partial evaluation?

A significant portion of recommendations resulting from partial evaluations has been adequately reflected in the preparation of OP Education. Several key recommendations, especially those of procedural nature whose fulfilment would require more systemic action have not been taken into account in the document preparation.¹ That has negatively influenced the evaluation itself (see above). The mentioned recommendations have been transferred into the final recommendations of this Report.

¹ The main reasons are considered to be the barriers resulting from inadequate coordination of the preparatory process by the Central Coordination Authority for the Structural Funds (CCA) and the uncertainty concerning the legislation development.

B Evaluation of OP Education

B1 Evaluation of the Analysis

The analysis of OP Education is extensive, with an aspiration of capturing the basic trends in education in Slovakia. Due to an extensive focus of OP Education it would be very difficult to bring all the analytical information with decisive influence on the strategy (i.e. on the selection of instruments, objectives, or financial allocation) in a little space within an adequate scope, such as the risk of polarisation of opportunities between populations with higher and lower levels of skills, potential disparities between the skills and qualification needs of employers with regard to regional economies, or the role of education as social protection. The analysis is not a systemic in-depth exercise and contains neither theoretical models of the various thematic areas nor a quantification of the disparities. The analysis could build more on the available analytical information and strategic processes of other institutional actors involved in the education policies including specialised sections in the Education Ministry or non-governmental or international organisations. Due to the insufficiently clear methodology guidance provided by the SF CCA, the instrument of key disparities and development factors is not exploited. A large number of institutional stakeholders have commented on the identified needs. They possess the potential to make an adequate link between the analysis, the SWOT analysis and the strategy in the version submitted for evaluation. One of the shortcomings of the OP Education analysis is the absence of examination concerning the importance (hierarchy) of the needs and its transposition into the strategy.

Ev-1.1. To what extent is the OP Education analysis coherent with the SWOT analysis, the key disparities and development factors contained in the NSRF?

The OP analysis reflects the analysis contained in the NSRF, section 3.3.1.2 *Education and Vocational Training*, with adequate coherence. It also partially reflects the demographic forecast analysis described in the NSRF section 3.3.1.1. The NSRF SWOT analysis is too broad and general for the purpose of educational strategies. A high degree of coherence has been reached between the SWOT analysis contained in OP Education and the SWOT contained in the NSRF. The majority of elements of the NSRF SWOT analysis is not quantified by the OP Education analysis. The NSRF key disparities and development factors are just a re-shuffling of the individual elements of its SWOT analysis and therefore, do not require a separate assessment on coherence.

Recommendations: [1], [2], [3], [4]

B2 Evaluation of the Strategy

Ev-2.1. Is the strategy adequately justified and well defined, with clear objectives and priorities?

In the current structure of priority axes and global objectives of the strategy is considered adequately justified. With regard to outlining the areas of intervention, the objectives and priorities are defined clearly, although not adequately specific to define the specific targets and instruments of the individual measures.² (An intervention instrument is understood as specific methods for performing an activity). Therefore, a deeper analysis of particular areas of intervention will have to be carried out when preparing calls. There is a risk that the breadth of

² The existing manner of indicating the framework activities in OP education and activity examples for OP Education PM features the following deficiencies:

- there is great room for the implementation of activities,; the instruments are not defined;
- the unit/project activity standard is missing;
- the activity examples are only potential activities (i.e. not binding);
- the link between the specific objectives and the related activities is not adequately underlined;
- the link between the activities and their effect on target groups is relatively weak;
- the amount of the proposed funding per activity and its tentative weight with regard to other activities is not clear.

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The activities of OP Education would result in a failure to reach clear results. The education measures in the health sector are considered inadequately justified.

Ev-2.2. How does the strategy take into account potential external factors and how should those factors be reflected?

A thorough analysis of several external factors – such as the demographic development, inter-regional migration or the development of qualification needs on the labour market having effect on the intervention instruments is absent. Yet, the SWOT analysis of OP Education brings an extensive list of qualitative formulations of opportunities and threats. The phrasing of specific objectives, measures and framework activities of OP Education takes external factors partially into account. Examples of specific activities contained in OP Education’s Programming Manual represent a set of potential instruments without a more detailed elaboration. External factors will can be considered when defining the intervention instruments (preparing calls).

Recommendations: [1], [3], [4]

Compliance with Existing Strategy Documents

Ev-4.1.a. Is the strategy compliant with regional and national strategic documents and policies and the Community strategic documents and policies?

The compliance with the existing national strategic documents, Community strategic documents and regional strategic documents is considered satisfactory.³ There are basically no reservations regarding the content of Chapter 7 of OP Education. The current version of strategy is considered adequately compliant with all evaluated documents.

b. Does the strategy contribute to meeting of their objectives?

The implementation of OP Education has cardinal potential to contribute to meeting of the objectives of several strategic initiatives (i.e. the *Lisbon Strategy*, *Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, *Strategy of Slovakia’s Competitiveness up to 2010*, *Conception of Lifelong Learning in the Slovak Republic* and others). With regard to the scope of potential instruments, the extent of this contribution cannot be assessed.

The progress made in searching for instruments to ensure synergy with the related OPs within the meaning of Article 34 (2) of *Council Regulation No. 1083/2006* is appreciated.

Recommendations: [1], [6]

Reflection of Needs by OP Education Strategy

Several needs are not adequately reflected by specific objectives of the priority axes of OP Education (see the phase III ex-ante evaluation report, pp. 35 – 37 and 41). That is not considered necessarily negative, as OP Education cannot be expected to effectively address all the identified in education. It is also probable that some of those needs can be identified by means of the incremental strategy formation (ISF) and addressed by instruments which would be specified during the implementation of OP Education. Should the needs be transposed into measures, they may serve as an adequate link between the analysis and strategy of OP Education even without reflecting their hierarchy⁴.

Ev-2.3.a. Are the various priorities (including the projection of horizontal priorities) and objectives consistent, synergetic with one another? Do they reflect the strategy and results of earlier analyses, especially the SWOT analysis? Do the individual priorities correspond to the needs identified in the analysis? Is there any conflict of priorities?

³ Compliance shall be understood “not in opposition to intentions, objectives and measures”. It is not considered necessary to see OP Education as a means for implementing all strategic initiatives contained in Chapter 1 and in sections 7.1 and 7.2 of OP Education – it would have to contain dozens of objectives. Moreover, the mentioned strategies have their own implementation mechanisms.

⁴ Determining the hierarchy of needs was one of the ex-ante evaluation results, applying the expert weighing method. This development of the hierarchy of need can be considered a certain scoping exercise whose results can be used in further processes of analysis.

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The priorities and objectives adequately reflect the results of the analyses published, including the analyses and objectives of existing national strategic initiatives. The priorities and objectives are adequately consistent with one another. However, due to the wide and general scope of the strategy it is impossible to assess the level of synergy with a reasonable accuracy. The justification of a separate thematic area of education in the health sector (2.2) is not adequately underlined. The link between the needs identified and the priority axes along with their measures is not adequately justified. The priorities in OP Education are ranked neither by the hierarchy of relevance (which would be of help for the financial allocation) nor by the criteria for its determining (quantification of disparities, for instance, etc.). The ex-ante evaluation has not established any overt conflict of the priorities.

b. Does the strategy react duly to challenges of the given sector or region?

Due to its scope, the analysis does not provide for modelling of positive and negative development trends. It however reacts correctly to the general challenges faced by the regions of the *Convergence* and *Regional Competitiveness and Employment* objectives. The strategy chooses a reactive (rather than proactive) approach, not specifying the adaptive mechanisms allowing identify the development trends and challenges, except for the mandatory interim (*mid-term*) evaluation.

Recommendations: [1], [4]

Horizontal Priorities

Ev-2.9. Have the horizontal priorities been reflected adequately?

The horizontal priorities of marginalised Roma communities and ICT are considered adequately integrated in the strategy. OP Education and its Programming Manual include potential instruments to address the other horizontal priorities (e.g., various ways to facilitate access to lifelong learning or support to implementation of the sustainable development principles into curricula). Nonetheless, those instruments are only examples of possible activities. To be considered adequately integrated, they would have to be a part of monitoring indicators at the level of priority axes and constitute a major part of evaluation of grant applications. Another reason is a low support by authorities responsible for those horizontal priorities.

Recommendations: [5], [6]

Partnership Principle

Ev-2.10. Was the partnership principle maintained in the strategy preparation?

The partnership principle (Article 11 of *Council (EC) Regulation o. 1083/2006*) was maintained reasonably and the Section of European Issues in the Education Ministry undertook steps beyond the framework of obligations imposed by legislation as binding for the preparation of a strategic document. Mechanisms like a workgroup for OP Education were applied, counselling teams of the Minister and consultations carried out with organisations associating social partners and several groups. When organising presence of the groups involved, the specific instruments for the support of their effective involvement were applied partially.

Recommendations: [1], [6]

Quantification and Monitoring of Targets

Ev-3.1. Is the proposed set of all indicator types adequate and reliable? What should be the planned values of objectives or the proposed interventions?

From the view of objectives at the global level and the priority axes level, the set of indicators contained in OP Education is adequate and reliable. The identified output indicators are appropriate; the capacity for measuring the intervention outcomes and effects is however limited. One of the barriers is the absence of national mechanisms for data collection to assess the

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outcomes (results) and impacts. There are no baseline values for many desirable indicators. With regard to the unspecified implementation instruments and uncertain development of legislation in education, the values and relevance (see Ev.-3.4) of indicators in OP Education and its Programming Manual cannot be set forth with sufficient accuracy. Based on the results from the 2004 – 2006 programming period, it can be assumed that the values set forth would be achieved. Yet, the values are not considered verifiable. The most questionable is the adequacy and completeness of the result and output indicators at the project level, as the list of examples of activities in the Programming Manual is extensive and the individual instruments for implementing those individual activities can require specific indicators.

Ev-3.4. Do the defined core indicators for the individual objectives allow monitoring and assessing the planned and actual progresses in the implementation of projects and project groups?

The defined core indicators allow for monitoring of progress in the implementation of projects with regard to the quantitative output; if an adequate monitoring system is provided for at the project level, then also within the meaning of the selected results (see Ev-3.1).

Based on the experience from the 2004 – 2006 programming period, the following areas of monitoring at the project level are crucial:

- determining of suitable indicators to measure various project activities;
- identification of an indicator collection system controllable by the managing authority or the intermediary body;
- development of a system of links between various levels of indicators;
- determining the requirements concerning the system of qualitative indicators.

Ev-3.3. What should be specifically taken into account in an assessment applying a macroeconomic model? Which factors should be considered to ensure the sufficient level of reliability of such assessment?

The method of macroeconomic modelling is not applied in the analysis and strategy of OP Education and it is therefore not possible to respond to that question.

Recommendations: [1], [2], [5], [9]

Financial Allocation

The instrument we developed was used by OP Education authors for additive creation of weights at the activities level (based on the criteria of priority of the need, size of the target group, financial scope of the activities proposed and their anticipated effect on employment and Slovakia's competitiveness⁵. Yet, the level of measures was taken as a basis. Due to the scope of possible instruments, it is very difficult to verify if the financial allocation is optimal. The data needed to assess the financial structure was absent. A more exact assessment was prevented by uncertainty of the specific objectives and instruments for their attainment, by the lack of data to establish the relationship between financial inputs and the results and impacts achieved, and by absence of an estimate of the absorption capacity by the various thematic areas and/or regions. With regard to territorial financial allocation, the NSRF should include an indicative allocation at the NUTS II level which was obtained as an average of homogenous distribution, pro-rated distribution by the population number and pro-rated distribution by the number of towns and municipalities which is considered a reasonable starting variant.

Ev-2.8. Is the strategy feasible, given the financial allocation for individual priorities? Is the proposed financial framework appropriate for the needs given by strategic orientation of the priority? Is it realistic enough, given the absorption capacity of Slovakia? What is the level of risk?

⁵ See the report covering phase II of the ex-ante evaluation.

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This question cannot be answered, given the current approach toward the strategy definition. The limiting factor in the 2004 – 2006 programming period seems to be the implementation (administrative) capacity, rather than the absorption capacity.

Recommendations: [1], [5]

Impact Assessment of the Strategy Variants

Ev-3.2.a. What will be the nature and scope are the anticipated strategy impact – planned interventions and their possible alternatives – on the economic, social and environmental situations of Slovakia and its regions?

It was not possible to conduct an assessment of the anticipated positive and negative impacts of the intervention (see also Ev-2.6). Due to the scope of OP Education, any assessment would be just a very rough qualitative desktop assessment without an adequate informative value.

b. Do the identified context indicators allow monitoring and evaluating the impact of interventions on the socio-economic development?

The defined context indicators allow monitoring and evaluation of a wider impact of interventions to a low degree (see Ev-3.1). One of the partial outputs of the ex-ante evaluation was a draft monitoring system with the relevant indicators monitored internally. Verified models of action of the various intervention instruments are missing to show the causal links between the inputs, realisation, outputs, outcomes (results) and impacts and that would serve as a basis in identifying appropriate indicators.

One of aims of the ex-ante evaluation is to evaluate the proposed variants from the viewpoint of their effectiveness in reaching the defined targets, in addressing the identified needs and disparities, and of their efficiency with regard to the financial framework. When OP Education was drafted, no coherent strategy variants were developed (i.e. the variant submitted is the only one).

Ev-2.4. Is the selected strategy variant optimal from the point of sustainable development and employment of all (if relevant) regions of Slovakia?

The existing version of OP Education does not provide for an evaluation on the grounds of sustainable development and employment criteria. A significant potential benefit can be assumed but the document neither takes trade-offs into account and nor specifies the instruments of intervention. Except for the distinction between the *Convergence* and *Regional Competitiveness and Employment* objectives, the strategy does not feature a territorial dimension (cf. above). It is impossible to assess if the strategy variant is optimal with regard to addressing the needs of the regions.

Recommendations: [1], [2], [5]

Territorial Objectives: Convergence and Cohesion

Ev-2.5. Are the proposed interventions set up to achieve synergy when pursuing the various EU Cohesion Policy objectives? What is the role of Bratislava/national development centres and centres of backward regions?

Ev-2.7. Are the themes of well-balanced development and of addressing regional disparities adequately and effectively integrated in the intervention priorities?

Ev-4.3. To what extent does the strategy and its priorities, objectives and financial allocation contribute to a sustainable convergence of regions (NUTS III) to Slovakia's average?

The strategy does not possess any territorial dimension reaching beyond the distinction between the *Convergence* and *Regional Competitiveness and Employment* objectives (see also Ev-2.4). The topics of well-balanced development and of addressing regional disparities cannot be considered integrated into the strategy of intervention, as the said intervention does not address the disparities between regional needs. The strategy represents a unified approach to education which

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is manifested by the similarity of specific objectives in the territories of the *Convergence* and *Regional Competitiveness and Employment* objectives. With regard to impacts, the amount of resources allocated to individual instruments will be of key importance. It is not possible to assess OP Education with regard to the synergy of thematic and spatial distribution of the intervention for achieving the *Convergence* and *Regional Competitiveness and Employment* objectives.

Ev-2.6. What is the possible impact of spatial distribution of the planned interventions, in particular the role of Bratislava/national development centres and centres of backward regions on overall Slovakia's development?

Ev-4.2. To what extent does the strategy and its priorities, objectives and financial allocations contribute to the NSRF's strategic objective, sustainable overall convergence of Slovakia to the EU-15 average?

OP Education cannot be assessed from the viewpoint of impacts of the intervention's spatial distribution on the overall development of Slovakia (i.e. assessing the potential level of OP Education's contribution to Slovakia's convergence to the EU-15 average; see also Ev-2.5, Ev-2.7 and E-4.3 above). An assessment of desirable and undesirable outputs, outcomes and impacts of the implementation of OP Education has not been performed.

Ev-4.4. Does the proposed strategy represent a relevant instrument to address problems and satisfy needs with regard to the objectives of the EU Cohesion Policy, the development Slovakia and its regions? What are the options for it to be a relevant instrument?

As indicated in the answers to questions Ev-2.6, Ev-2.7, Ev-2.8, Ev-3.2, Ev-4.2 and Ev-4.3, the strategy is not adequately defined at a level needed to evaluate its anticipated capacity to address the existing needs and its desired and undesired impacts with sufficient accuracy.

Ev-2.11. What are the options addressing the otherwise unaddressed rural development needs by the Structural Funds?

The analysis of OP Education does not provide a sufficient basis to identify the development needs of rural areas and its strategy does not contain specific objectives or instruments in this respect. Rural development, however, is not a priority of the ESF interventions. In the framework of OP Education, one of the alternatives can be the support of marginalised groups and the focus of the intervention in general terms.

Recommendations: [1], [5]

Structure of the Document

Ev-2.6. Is the structure, clarity and transparency of the document acceptable, or are any changes needed? Is the presentation of the NSRF specific priority transparent, logical, clear and compliant with the guidance of NSRF coordinator, drafted legislation and EC requirements?

The document is clearly organised but features (with regard to structure, comprehensibility and clear organisation) a few shortcomings. It is seen necessary to strengthen the link between the identified needs and measures or specific objectives, respectively. The baseline assumptions of OP Education's strategy, in particular sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2, are considered superfluous. Narratives of the individual strategic objectives are little specific and too long, little following up the analysis. Similar shortcomings can be found in section 4.3.1 titled *Thematic Concentration of Contributions* which is seen unjustified. It is recommended to delete repetitive information on the strategy. It is desirable to merge justifications of the individual priority axes with their introductory information, to shorten the text as a whole, to make links to the results of analysis and to merge the descriptions of possible channels and mechanisms of OP Education's action with the descriptions of activities. Chapter 7 (horizontal priorities) of OP Education could be more concise and placed in the introduction to OP Education along with the baseline assumptions. OP Education was drafted adequately compliant with the SF CCA regulations and is, except for the partial areas referred to in the responses to other questions in this evaluation, drafted adequately compliant with the relevant legislation and EC requirements.

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There also is a risk of loss of clarity and focus of OP Education and difficulties with building up the monitoring system. OP Education defines the area of support by means of widely conceived priority axes and measures with regard to their content which in fact cover the whole area of education. There are no specific activities indicated in OP Education which would be tied to the financial allocations made. That condition prevents from setting forth measurable indicators for the various activities at the project level and their links to priority axes.

Recommendations: [3], [4]

B3 Evaluation of the Implementation Mechanism

Ev-5.1. Are the defined objectives feasible with the proposed implementation system?

The implementation system for OP Education has been developed compliant with the SF CCA guidance and the relevant text has been unified for all OPs. Institutionally, it consists of the Managing Authority for OP Education (i.e. the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic) and agency/agencies acting as Implementing Bodies. The mechanisms of implementing the ESF funds with regard to selection of the area of intervention, i.e. the procedures for preparing and publishing the calls as a basis for implementing the assistance, are not described in OP Education. OP Education provides characteristics of project units for channelling the drawing of ESF funds (national projects and demand-oriented projects). The evaluation and control are described in general terms; no mechanisms of control and evaluation at the project level are defined⁶. The responsibilities of the implementation bodies are defined as a framework. At the level of OP Education only general types of evaluation according to the *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006* are defined.

Ev-5.2. Is the proposed implementation system adequate, admissible and generally suitable for implementation and monitoring of the proposed interventions? Or, how should it be adapted, modified or improved? What changes should be made in order to better reflect the nature and needs of the planned interventions and to allow the easiest, the most simple, the most efficient and relatively the least costly implementation?

Due to the administrative load of the implementation system it is deemed desirable to create independent institutional units, i.e. intermediary bodies or units within the intermediary bodies. They would ensure the implementation of OP Education (basically by providing a global grant compliant with Article 42 and the following of *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006*) on the basis of experience from the 2004 – 2006 programming period. From the viewpoint of the easiest, the most simple and relatively the least costly implementation, it is recommended to prefer mainly national projects.

Ev-5.3. Can the implementation system processes be performed in a more transparent, timely and cost-efficient manner?

Based on the experience made during the 2004 – 2006 programming period, it is definitely possible to improve in particular the financial flow system. This system is, however, defined by the *Conception of the Financial Management System of the Structural Funds*, not by OP Education.

Ev-5.4. Is the feasibility of all implementation system processes ensured?

It is impossible to assess with adequate accuracy to what extent the feasibility of all implementation system processes is ensured. Its individual components are defined only in general terms and the instruments for monitoring and control are not defined sufficiently, except for the mandatory annual implementation reports, interim evaluation and monitoring plan (see *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006*). The monitoring plan does offer partial guarantees of the implementation system feasibility.

Ev-5.5. Is the system of national co-financing and financial flows adequately simple, user-friendly and transparent?

⁶ The purpose of OP Education, however, is not to define mechanisms at the project level.

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The transparency of financial flows is adequate and no difficulties have been established with regard to national co-financing. The system of financial flows features several shortcomings, including the excessively high number of steps in the process and its administrative load. This system, however, is defined by the *Conception of the Financial Management System of the Structural Funds*.

Recommendations: [7], [12]

B4 Summary Evaluation

Ev-6.3. Is the document text an appropriate draft material for negotiations with the EC in the area concerned with regard to admissible changes or difficulties with alternatives?

Under the prerequisite that the key recommendations of this report are taken into account, especially the obligation to implement the mechanisms ensuring the *incremental strategy formation procedures* in the implementation process of OP Education (p. 1), the document is considered a suitable basis for negotiations with the EC.

C Recommendations

This section of the Final Report brings recommendations which have resulted from the entire process of ex ante evaluation and are still considered relevant and crucial to be indicated as a key. Incorporation of the recommendations below into the text of OP Education and its implementation mechanisms is considered one of the prerequisites for the successful implementation of the 2007 – 2013 programming period.

An Overview of Recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Recommended changes in the OP Education document
1	Introduction of mechanisms for <i>incremental strategy formation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provide framework specifications of partnership instruments (step a) - include in OP education an obligation to develop mechanisms for ISF steps b to h
2	Development of causal models of intervention and the <i>lessons learned</i> in the 2004 – 2006 programming period	- contained in 1
3	Modification of the SWOT analysis	- modification of the SWOT analysis in line with the methodology guidance
4	Strengthening the link between analysis and strategy	- point out which needs are addressed by which measures
5	Ensuring variants of intervention and evaluation of specific intervention instruments	- contained in 1
6	Strengthen the partnerships and ensure more synergy with the existing initiatives including horizontal priorities	- contained in 1
7	Define in more detail the scope of powers and guarantees delegated to the IB/MA	- none; can be governed by a contract or another type of document
8	Regularly publish the time schedule of calls with sufficient details	- contained in 1
9	Ensure a functional monitoring system including the collection of indicators beyond the framework of binding objectives	- none; should be governed by separate documents/methodology procedures outlining the monitoring system
10	Ensure good quality procedures for possibly the most objective procedures for evaluating grant applications	- none; should be governed by an applicable manual/guidance

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11	Improve the delivery of support to project authors and simplify the grant application form	- none; should be governed by applicable documents/methodology guidance
12	Raise the quality of financial management procedures and improve the budget flexibility and focus of the control on expenditure evaluation with regard to project objectives	- none; should be governed by applicable documents/methodology guidance outlining the financial management

C1 Continuous Completion of Analytical Information for Incremental Strategy Formation

Steps of Incremental Strategy Formation

[1] Our recommendations focus on the introduction of mechanisms for *incremental strategy formation (ISF)* – repetitive and continuous analysis and assessment in the preparation of calls aiming specifically at programming, causality channels of intervention, financial structure and the intervention impacts and variants. With regard to the current state, it is recommended to include an undertaking in OP Education to introduce prerequisites for an adaptive, continuously improving analysis (steps *b*, *d* and *f*), overlaid with strategic decisions of the managing authority (steps *c*, *e* and *g*). The following steps of the incremental strategy formation are proposed:

- a – building of an effective partnership⁷ with the relevant stakeholders, including a mechanism for the participation of target group representatives;
- b – participative *scoping*⁸ coordinated by the managing authority, with the aim of complementing and confirming the identified priority areas on the basis of pre-agreed criteria, including their geographical dimension;
- c – strategic decision of the managing authority in the selection of priority areas on the basis of the outputs of step *b*;
- d – implementation of short (3-6 month) partner projects procured from a single source to analyse the needs, key disparities and development factors in the priority areas⁹ according to pre-determined clear specifications;
- e – selection of variant instruments (activities) to address the needs, modelling and quantification of targets and determining the financial allocation – carried out by the managing authority. In the event of lacking external capacities, consultants can be involved in the process or, the strategic process can be delegated to a suitable partner;
- f – ex-ante impact assessment of the different proposed variants including empirical verification of the mechanisms of intervention in the 2004 – 2006 programming period and/or pilot verification of instruments (3 – 24 months) – can be performed through projects procured from a single source or a call with adequately specified conditions;
- g – strategic selection of the most beneficial variant by the managing authority;
- h – preparation of supporting materials for the call, in ideal case in cooperation between the IB/MA and partners, coordinated by the managing authority, including model cost estimates, methodologies for implementing the activities, monitoring methodologies, etc.

Certain progress has been reached in steps *a* to *c* in the preparation of OP Education – however, the process should be continuously repeated. It is proposed to specify a framework for instruments in OP Education to establish and realise thematic partnerships in the preparation of

⁷ Effective partnership requires several conditions to be met like, for instance, active providing of information concerning the purpose and way of involvement of a given stakeholder, ensuring the conditions for their involvement and developing the feeling of ownership, providing for the participation of suitable and involved representatives, etc. There are several instruments for participation of the groups concerned in the strategic processes time-tested in practice. The teams to prepare the various calls should – according to the partnership principle – be composed of representatives of the stakeholders concerned and experts active in the specific area of intervention. The main role of such partnership is considered stimulation of the stakeholders concerned.

⁸ Participative *scoping* is a process in which – in active participation of the groups concerned (i.e. partnership members in step *a*) – priority areas are identified on which OP Education is to focus.

⁹ This step is to result in a quantified relationship analysis in the thematic and geographic area of need providing adequate information for step *e*.

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calls (step *a*) and include an obligation in the text to apply the already mentioned procedure or its appropriate variant.

The preparation of calls¹⁰ for proposals consists of steps *d* to *b* of the said process. The preparation of different calls does not have to occur simultaneously. When preparing the calls it is appropriate to identify activities (instruments) which follow up one another and are realised by projects under the same call or several calls following one another, which is a dimension poorly represented in OP Education.

During implementation of these steps it is deemed appropriate to identify such instruments and priority areas that might lead to “quick wins”, i.e. areas of high priority and in which the ESF contribution may mean a fast and significant mitigation of a disparity.¹¹

Instruments of Intervention and Lessons Learned (steps *d* and *f*)

[2] It is important to ensure the necessary empirical research confirming causal relations between the intervention and its outcome or, its impacts on the socio-economic environment, respectively (steps *d* and *f*). It is recommended to synthesise the existing results of quality implementation monitoring by means of monitoring visits and to carry out an ex-post assessment of projects in the recent programming period¹². Such evaluation would result in mapping of desirable and undesirable impacts on various factors and variables of the micro- and macro-environment for the decision made in step *g*. It is necessary to assess the expected impacts, especially on the EU priority areas (the environment, gender equality of opportunities, SME, competitiveness and innovations, employment and the labour market, social and territorial cohesion). For example, when assessing the impacts of activities realised via ICT/e-learning, focus on their impact on transport, energy sources and the environment, population distribution in urban/rural areas, opportunities and equality of access to education, levels and distribution of competences in relation to the labour market development, etc. It is necessary to focus rather on areas which the assessment analysis indicates as scarce.

Based on step *d* and a thorough ex-post evaluation of projects of the recent programming period, empirically verified models of intervention causality can be developed (cf. *evidence-based policy making*) which can serve to identify instruments and absorption capacity in step *e*. Models also serve to identify specific output, result (outcome) and impact indicators at the project level which must allow aggregations to higher levels and data collection for later (interim and ex post) evaluations and therefore, ensure an adequate data base. Such assessment will also provide valuable information about the project/unit standards and effectiveness of a given activity (incl. the output/outcome unit per financial unit), needed for step *b*.

SWOT Analysis Recommendations (steps *b* and *d*)

[3] It is considered necessary to review the SWOT table, especially the S-O and W-T boundaries. The distinction between items as strengths and opportunities defines what factors OP Education will actively exploit and actively build on/develop and which are within the outreach of the intervention (i.e. strengths) and what factors are beneficial for addressing the need but are not addressed by OP Education or outside of its outreach (opportunities). The *internal-external* borderline therefore with regard to OP Education in this SWOT analysis means *addressed/developed – not addressed/not developed*. This delineation is relevant for defining the form of activities (instruments) to address a given need (cf. development factors). The same applies to the distinction between items as weaknesses and threats¹³.

¹⁰ All steps, except for *c* and *g*, can be implemented by means of OP Education's projects. Steps *b*, *d*, *e*, *f* and *h* can be taken directly by the selected projects. There also is a possibility of "comprehensive solutions" when one project would consist of several consecutive steps (with steps in-between in which the managing authorities takes strategic decisions).

¹¹ The ESR regulations point out that the ESF funds should be targeted at the most important needs to the end of achieving significant effects (concentration) in line with the objectives and priorities of the national *Lisbon Strategy* and the *National Action Plan of Social Inclusion*.

¹² The shorter programming period of 2004 – 2006 has not been closed yet. Neither its interim evaluation nor ex-post evaluation have been carried out.

¹³ Also the function of key disparities as intended by the Regional Development Ministry. Regarding the function of key disparities, see also the SWOT methodology notes in reports covering phases II and III.

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It is recommended to maintain the existing approach of distinction by individual needs. The SWOT analysis should also, together with the list of identified needs, remain a living document throughout the implementation process, further developed, verified and detailed by steps *b* and *d*.

Linking the Needs Identified with the Strategy

[4] It is deemed necessary to more thoroughly link the needs identified with the measures proposed. In order to strengthen the links between analysis and strategy it is recommended to transpose the needs into measures, i.e. to define which measures address which needs.

C2 Strategy

Variant Options of Intervention (steps *c* and *g*)

[5] A necessary component of an evaluation output is an assessment of several intervention variants or modifications¹⁴. In step *c*, OP Education should decide which of the needs identified are going to be addressed. The selected criteria are to be considered, for instance:

- the severity, urgency or priority of a need (as defined by international obligations, national strategic processes, public perception, relative size of the disparity, ...);
- measurability of the need or the possibility to isolate and separately focus on the need;
- existence of applicable instruments to address the need.

The impact assessment in step *g* is to lead to an examination of trade-offs, i.e. to a comparison of aggregated (in terms of money), desirable, preventive and curative, and undesirable impacts on the individual pillars of sustainability (on the economic, social and environmental sectors). As the sources available are limited, it is advisable to select variants with the most favourable cost/benefit factors, but take into account fair distribution of costs and benefits. At the time being, setting of priorities is missing in OP Education. Is it deemed necessary to identify such priority areas which may lead to “quick wins” – i.e. high-priority areas where the ESF contribution can mean a great difference, which is mitigation of a disparity.

OP Education should define the manner of linking the project level and the levels of measures/priority axes from the viewpoint of achieving the identified objectives (steps *d* and *e*). OP Education defines areas of intervention through priority axes and measures with a widely conceived content. The incremental strategy formation therefore should be also a process of search for specific instruments. Step *g* should be followed by the specified variant instruments. Their specification process should bring responses to the following questions:

- What needs or disparities are addressed?
- How are the weaknesses and threats addressed?
- What strengths and opportunities are taken as a basis or, what development factors are employed?
- Which are the target groups?
- What changes are to be induced in the target groups and in what scope?
- What are other expected positive and negative impacts (including the impacts of horizontal priorities)?
- What are the criteria for the quality of implementation?
- Who are the appropriate partners for implementation, monitoring and evaluation?
- What is the appropriate financial allocation per output unit with regard to the inputs needed for realising the intervention?
- What is the absorption capacity in a given territory?

¹⁴ The ex-ante evaluation objective is to evaluate the proposed measures on their effectiveness with regard to the defined objectives and the identified needs and disparities and effectiveness and cost-effectiveness with regard to their financing.

C3 Implementation

Synergies and Partnerships (steps *a* and *d-f*)

[6] It is recommended to strengthen the mechanisms ensuring a higher level of synergy with the existing strategic initiatives when preparing the calls. It is recommended to ensure involvement of authorities responsible for implementation of the existing respective thematic strategies and horizontal priorities in step *a* to find synergies with their mechanisms of implementation in steps *d*, *e* and *f* and to involve those authorities in project monitoring.

The dividing lines between content-related operational programmes (OP Research and Development, OP Employment and Social Inclusion) are clearly defined by target groups, expenditure categories and classification of framework activities. In case of a higher risk of overlapping, it is recommended to open consultations between the managing authorities. In addition, it is recommended to search for instruments to increase synergies of the operation programmes by, for instance, identifying and planning a logical sequences of activities.

It is recommended to introduce mechanisms of cooperation with the third sector and other social partners (including employers, organisations directly reporting to the individual ministries, organisations established by regions or municipalities, etc.) in implementation, monitoring and evaluation beyond the framework of the Monitoring Council and especially at the project level.

Designation of an Intermediary Body

[7] As soon as possible, it is necessary to finalise a clear definition of the relationship between the managing authority and the intermediary body concerning the scope of powers and guarantees delegated by an agreement between these two parties (full power) beyond the SF CCA regulations. OP Education has established an intermediary body – an Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. Given the fact that this institution has been established recently, it is not able to provide guarantees of its financial stability, expertise in the given area and administrative and financial management capacity¹⁵. The definition of the scope of powers and responsibilities delegated by the managing authority to the intermediary body is not satisfactory. The managing authority will have to exactly specify the relationship between the managing authority and the intermediary body in a full power and specifically with regard to the management and control system according to the Article 59 and Article 60 of the *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006* even though OP Education defines a certain framework for the content of the agreement. The powers and responsibilities in the various areas are not clearly defined. Due to the administrative complexity of the implementation system it is considered appropriate to create special institutional intermediary body units or units within the intermediary body to ensure the implementation of OP Education (basically by providing a global grant in compliance with Article 42 and the following of the *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006*).

Preparation of Calls

[8] There is a need to create a mechanism of project coordination, e.g., in the form of a time schedule of calls for the submission of grant applications linked to other steps of the incremental strategy formation. The time schedule of calls (an outcome mainly of steps *c* and *g*) should specify the individual calls in particular with regard to the time of their publication, areas of supported activities and applicable financial allocations. It should however include also other information which results from answers to questions provided in recommendation [5]. It has to be laid down with regard to the real administrative and technical capacities for implementing the approved projects. Publication will also allow preparing project capacities in the regions and planning the impacts (steps *d* to *f*).

¹⁵ When designing such body, it should be (as a rule) an institutional already existing or represented in the region or area of its operation at the time of its designation.

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Steps *e* to *h* also include the quantification of objectives and a clear identification of indicators to allow determining the impacts of the project activities (intervention instruments) performed on attaining the objectives of OP Education. It is essential to determine measurable indicators at the level of individual project activities that would allow their measurement during and after closing of project implementation. The system of indicators must be capable of allowing sound measurement outputs and outcomes (results) at the project level (which would be translated to the level of measures of OP Education) and generating data for impact assessment.

Due to the large administrative effort needed to implement demand-oriented projects it would be appropriate to specify the extent to which the system of national projects will be employed, especially basing on the experience from the 2004 – 2006 programming period. It is also deemed necessary to address the risk of some geographical areas being little addressed if the demand-driven projects remain the main mechanism of delivery.

Monitoring

[9] It is recommended to ensure collection of indicators which go beyond the binding objectives of OP Education but provide the data needed for a deeper evaluation (see phase IV evaluation report). It is necessary to ensure that the impact of the interventions contained in OP Education on macro-economic indicators (employment, labour adaptability and productivity, international competitiveness), social indicators (health, incidence of criminal acts and other socio-pathological phenomena, equality of opportunities, etc.) and horizontal priorities is measurable. The goal of the monitoring system must be to ensure data collection for future interim and ex-post evaluations. It is also necessary to provide for an institutional basis, human resources and funding. From various viewpoints it is better for the monitoring system if an intervention is realised rather via several specific and verified instruments than in an uncontrolled manner, by a wide diversity of more or less specified instruments with a loose link to the generally defined objectives.

The recommendations included in phase IV evaluation report are considered significant, concerning in particular¹⁶:

- cooperation with regional school authorities, founders, State Institute for Education, Institute of School Information and Prognosis, State Vocational Education Institute, Academia Istropolitana, State School Inspection, Slovak Academic Information Agency and other partners (potentially following-up the partnerships created in step *a*);
- adaptation of the ITMS to the requirements of monitoring and evaluation;
- monitoring of measures aimed at members of ethnic groups;
- monitoring of gender equality;
- monitoring project visits;
- standardised entry and exit questionnaire;
- ex-post project evaluations.

Assessment of Projects

[10] Prepare the most objective procedures possible for the evaluation of grant applications which would allow identifying projects with a significant opportunity of overlapping and synergy and complementarity. The procedures should ensure that two identical projects are not approved or, that a project is not rejected on whose implementation another approved project depends. A potentially significant area is the possibility of exploiting the synergy effects from implementation of projects in the same area. In that respect it is important to link the monitoring of national and demand-driven projects. Doing so would support the financial and institutional viability and allow the evaluation of project outcomes/impacts¹⁷. A project should be understood as a series of follow-up activities whereby

¹⁶ For details, see the recommendations contained in phase IV report.

¹⁷ Cooperation between national and demand-oriented projects must be identified as early as in the project approval phase. For instance, a national programme focuses on the syllabus and teaching methodology. The schools implement demand-oriented projects aimed at the development of school educational programmes. That should be done in close cooperation and, in an ideal case, the national project should be followed-up by demand-oriented projects. Or, in the evaluation process, projects satisfying that criterion should be selected.

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the financial and institutional viability would be supported, as well as the possibility to evaluate the project outcomes (results)/impacts of projects¹⁸.

The evaluation criteria of the 2004 – 2006 programming period proved several shortcomings, with regard to the ambiguity of information under assessment. In order to improve objective nature of the assessment it is necessary to methodically describe the various facts under assessment by assigning specific characteristics in a given scale. With each item of the assessment, the conditions under which the evaluator assigns the certain score to a project, must be clear. This means that criteria are to be determined for each score of each question. If an evaluator assigns the minimum or maximum score, he/she should verbally describe such evaluation. It is also considered necessary to ensure a better reflected horizontal priority in the project evaluation criteria.

Based on the experience from the 2004-2006 programming period, the focus in the project selection should remain on the expertise and experience of evaluators and on their adequate financial remuneration. The project evaluators should be selected by their expertise in the area of activities of assessed projects¹⁹. Evaluators should receive good training highlighting in particular the links between the focus of the call and OP Education on the one hand and the project on the other. In case the evaluators would be responsible for project assessment with regard the projects implementation feasibility (organisational stability of the applicant, complexity and coherence of the project proposal, adherence to the rules of sound project management) it is necessary for the evaluators to be trained in project management as well. The intermediary body should specify clear criteria for the selection of evaluators.

The evaluators also assess the financial dimension of the project. In many cases, that is a comprehensive issue: on the one hand, an array of regulations concerning the financing, on the other, the issue of an efficient utilisation of the grant. Even though the evaluators receive general training prior to the evaluation process, the listed evaluators should go through a detailed and complex training for project evaluation.

As this is a highly specialised key activity for attaining the objectives set forth in OP Education and for ensuring effective spending of the ESF funds, an adequate remuneration of the valuator is necessary, along with sufficient time for the evaluation, taking into account time necessary for one project. The evaluation process can be shortened by increasing the number of evaluators.

Support to Project Authors and Submission of Applications

[11] As it is necessary to implement good quality projects and increase the absorption capacity, the support to project authors is important. The managing authority should ensure that systematic support is provided to applicants in the project preparation phase. Such support can be realised by two basic instruments – methodology support in the project preparation by the intermediary body and active involvement of experts in the preparation of project briefs (consultations, etc.).

It is also recommended to review and simplify the grant application form. The form should be in particular simple, clear and include sufficient methodology advice. It is deemed appropriate to eliminate data duplicities. From the viewpoint of project management it is considered appropriate for the project documents to contain the logical planning matrix and Gantt diagram²⁰. The budget should be structured so that its individual items (or work packages) correspond to specific activities and vice versa.

¹⁸ That mainly applies to activities like development and publication of learning texts, designing of continuing education courses, syllabi, etc., building of information and e-learning centres or computer laboratories. A project should also include activities of their operation/exploitation.

¹⁹ In the 2004 – 2006 programming period, the project evaluation was accompanied by negatives, in particular due to a wide content variety of the project submitted. In the evaluation committee, not always experts did were represented who specialised on the area addressed by the project (for instance, e-learning, foreign languages, career guidance). That may only be achieved by narrowing down the calls to certain topics only (see the ISF).

²⁰ A project management instrument in the format of a table chart presenting the time necessary to perform each of the project activities. A graphic format for presentation of the list of deadlines taking into account the project term.

Financial Management

[12] The methodology procedures of the managing authority and the intermediary body are to exactly define not only the priorities in human resource development broken down to the level of activities but also the financial management system with regard to the following key areas:

- uniformity and stability of regulations concerning the eligibility of expenditures in the ESF implementation;
- the system of ESF drawing during project implementation;
- counselling during the project preparation in financial management,
- methodology support to applicants and project implementing entities.

In the 2007 – 2013 programming period, financial management should focus especially on establishing a functional system of financial flows. The main areas should be:

- *Lay down the regulations for budgeting and project budget drawing, allow a higher flexibility of drawing.* A high level of detail in the cost estimate which makes part of the grant contract leads to high pressure on changes during project implementation which in turn means high time and administrative burden. Therefore, it is considered appropriate to lay down only framework items in the project cost estimate binding for the final beneficiaries and their allocation cannot be exceeded. In principle, only limits for individual cost categories (personnel costs, equipment, operating costs, etc.) should be determined to achieve the identified objectives and the unit limits of the individual cost items.
- *Focus more on the project control on the spot, taking into account the control of achieving the project objectives.* The main function of control should be to see if a given expenditure is efficient and justified with regard to the project objective to be achieved. Such control cannot be performed by an administrative check of cost/expenditure documentation or by control of compliance with national or EC regulations. Control of activities is needed which are associated with the implementation of a given expenditure, performed on the project implementation site or in the final beneficiary's office. Administrative control should primarily focus on whether the expenditure is eligible with regard to the cost estimate approved and efficient with regard to the activity performed.
- *Guarantee higher responsibility of individual employees for comprehensive project processing.* A higher focus is necessary on controlling the attainment of the project objectives with regard to the efficiency and effectiveness of the operations performed and the attainment of the objectives of OP Education. In the 2004 – 2006 programming period, financial control of project became a priority, and control of the project implementation with regard to its content was considerably suppressed. One of the reasons was the administrative overload of the responsible employees of the intermediary body.
- *Ensure qualified consultancy in the area of financial management of projects.* With regard to financial management at the project implementation level it is necessary to have stable and exact rules. Such rules must be presented in a qualified manner, by methodology manuals, specialised seminars and a website, either of the Ministry or of the intermediary body. Personal consultancy by project managers (employees of the Intermediary Body) should also be provided.
- *Establish an electronic system for interim control of the submitted documents and data.* Due to the complexity of the submitted financial documentation it is appropriate to establish an electronic system for tracing the financial implementation of projects and drawing of budgets. It would serve the final beneficiaries as control of the financial operations performed and the project manager as a tool of interim control. At the same time, it would raise the compliance with regulations set forth by the managing authority or the intermediary body.
- *Ensure sufficient administrative and technical capacities to process the submitted payment requests or requests for settlement of advance payments in the managing authority or intermediary body.*

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A List of Acronyms

CCA	Central Coordination Authority
EC	European Communities
Education Ministry	Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISF	Incremental Strategy formation
Labour Ministry	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic
LLL	Life-Long Learning
NSRF	National Strategic Reference Framework 2007 – 2013
OP	Operational Programme
OP Education	Operational Programme Education of the NSRF
PM	Programming Manual
PS	Primary School
PTEI	Public Tertiary Education Institutions
Regional Development Ministry	Ministry of Construction and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic
SAIA	Slovak Academic Information Agency, non-profit organisation
SEZ	Section of European Affairs of the Education Ministry
SF	Structural Funds of the EU
ŠIOV / SVEI	State Vocational Education Institute
SR	Slovak Republic, Slovakia
SS	Secondary School
SSI	State School Inspection
SWOT	Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats (analysis)
ÚIPŠ / ISIP	Institute of School Information and Prognosis

A List of Annexes

- D1 A List of Complementary Activities
- D2 A list of Created Partial Inputs
- D3 Gantt Diagram: Incremental Strategy formation