

THEMEGROUP YOUTH IN WORKING LIFE

EVALUATION OF LABOUR MARKET PROJECTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

*What evaluations and evaluators say
about youth projects co-financed by
the European Social Fund*

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The Theme Group Youth shall act to ensure that experiences and knowledge are utilised from projects that have financing from the European Social Fund. The Theme Group Youth cooperates with the Swedish Public Employment Service, Communicare, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the Swedish National Agency for Education, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and the Swedish National Board for youth Affairs. The work is coordinated by the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs.

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Preface

Young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) have been a priority of the European Social Fund (ESF) in Sweden during the period 2007 to 2013. So far in Sweden around two hundred projects for young people have been initiated or concluded. Many are run by municipal authorities, though aim to improve cooperation between the various public stakeholders.

Theme Group Youth has been assigned to draw on the experience and knowledge gained from these projects. This work includes the conduct of a statistical analysis of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), an inventory of projects, in-depth studies of the various methodologies and approaches they use and also the identification of obstacles in work with young people. The assignment of Theme Group Youth indicates a trend towards the adoption of labour market policies founded on knowledge.

In this report Theme Group Youth presents an analysis based on the work conducted by evaluators in relation to youth projects supported by the ESF in Sweden. Two different studies have been used to draw on the evaluators' work in two completely different ways.

Tranquist Utvärdering was commissioned to analyse a selection of evaluations to investigate whether general knowledge can be extracted. The analysis reveals that although it is possible to comment on project outputs, it is not possible to develop a general understanding of the impact of the different methodologies on the basis of the evaluations. This study was conducted by Joakim Tranquist. The analysis and conclusions drawn in the text are his.

Theme Group Youth's evaluation-questionnaire results provide a picture of the evaluators linked to labour market projects. The evaluators describe both the conditions for their work and project outputs, as well as how well different methodologies are considered to function.

Theme Group Youth would like to thank Joakim Tranquist for his work. Our thanks are also extended to Oscar Svensson, research officer at Theme Group Youth who coordinated this work and conducted the questionnaire study, and to Magnus Björkström for his work on the design and compilation of the questionnaire, and also to other colleagues within Theme Group Youth. Furthermore, we would like to thank Lars Brännström (National Board of Health and Welfare and Stockholm University) and Sara Martinson (Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy, IFAU), who have contributed their ideas during the course of the work.

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1 Executive summary

Theme Group Youth has been assigned to draw on experience and knowledge gained from labour market projects for young people supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) in Sweden.

This report provides a compilation of knowledge gained from evaluators of these projects. The report includes a preliminary meta-analysis of project evaluations. The report is also based on a survey, where evaluators answered questions about their work, the projects and how they conduct their evaluations. On this basis Theme Group Youth makes the following conclusions and proposals.

What we can learn from evaluations and evaluators:

- Labour market projects for young people often have a large ‘toolbox’ available, offering many different kinds of initiative and support. This reflects the varied needs found among the young participants. The report includes an overview of the various methodologies and approaches used.
- The evaluators indicate that there are positive project outputs, concerning the number of young people that went to education, training or employment and the level of satisfaction among both participants and staff.
- On-going evaluation is the most common means applied for evaluation.

- Despite positive indications concerning project outputs, it is difficult to extract general knowledge about the impacts of the various methodologies in youth projects. The evaluation reports presented up until now generally lack supporting data for such knowledge.

Proposal for a knowledge-based labour market policy:

Several proposals can be presented regarding how a strategic use of the European Social Fund can support the development of a knowledge-based labour market policy for young people:

- The knowledge resulting from evaluations and activities should become a more self-evident component in the development of a knowledge-based labour market policy.
- The evaluations often lack descriptions of methodologies and their impacts. The knowledge produced through evaluations should be comparable. It would consequently be desirable to offer projects and evaluators certain concrete tools for follow-up and evaluation.
- Evaluation reports should be communicated and compiled systematically, and should be easily accessible and searchable for different stakeholders.



2 Knowledge through evaluation of youth projects supported by the ESF

The work of Theme Group Youth involves drawing on experience and knowledge from youth projects in Sweden that receive co-funding from the European Social Fund (ESF). This partly involves drawing on the work of those evaluating these projects. The evaluations within the ESF can be linked to broader issues, such as the development of a knowledge-based labour market policy and an evidence-based approach. Through this report we would like to draw attention to the following:

- The evaluators' assessments of the project work.
- Who the evaluators are and the focus of their evaluations.
- Survey methodology and approaches used in the evaluations.
- How fruitful an overall review of the evaluations made by youth projects during the period 2007 to 2013 would be, aimed at shedding light on the impact of the various methodologies used by the projects.

Survey and meta-analysis – two ways of drawing on the work of evaluators

Theme Group Youth used two strategies to draw on the work of evaluators: first through a survey questionnaire for evaluators relating to both project and evaluation work; and second by the compilation of and meta-analysis of a number of

evaluations carried out. The introductory analysis is based on an evaluation questionnaire, to which responses were received from 64 per cent of the 107 evaluators.

A large number of youth projects co-funded by the ESF were or are being conducted during the period 2007 to 2013, and it is only now that evaluation reports from these projects are starting to be completed on a large scale. For this reason the second part of the report comprises a preliminary meta-analysis initiated by Theme Group Youth and which was conducted by Tranquist Utvärdering. The aim of this study is to identify what could be expected to be the outcome from a meta-analysis on a grander scale. The study is based on 23 evaluation reports that were examined with regard to the possibility of extracting general knowledge about the level of efficiency of, primarily, the various methods and approaches used in the projects. The question we sought to answer was: *On the basis of Theme Group Youth's mandate, would it be productive to conduct a meta-analysis of evaluations using a large number of project evaluations as an information base, and if so what questions could possibly be answered?*

On-going evaluation within the ESF

There are a number of different ways to evaluate labour market projects for young people. A distinguishing feature of the ESF in Sweden during the period 2007 to 2013 is that on-going evalu-

ation is recommended for how projects should be evaluated. This affects the kind of knowledge produced by evaluators and the way in which this knowledge can be utilised, both within projects and in comprehensive analyses of the work of youth projects as a whole. 'On-going evaluation' means process-supporting evaluation where knowledge is continually fed back from evaluators to projects. This feedback may both affect the focus of the work and become a component part of the process of dissemination and influence emanating from the work of the project (Svensson, Brulin, Jansson & Sjöberg, 2009).

The European Commission has recommended that Member States should use on-going evaluation as an approach within the Structural Funds. The model is referred to as *lärande utvärdering* [lit. learning through evaluation] within the ESF in Sweden, while the model is known as *följeforskning* [lit. on-going research] within the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The Swedish ESF Council, which administers the ESF in Sweden, has produced guidelines on follow-up and evaluation (Jansson, 2010, Svensson et al., 2009) as a support for project owners. These guidelines emphasise, among other things, that it is important for the advocacy activities to be able to demonstrate the pros and cons of different project methodologies compared with the methodologies and approaches used for normal activities.

Experience of on-going evaluation in Sweden

How on-going evaluation has functioned within the framework of the ESF has been studied on the basis of information received from 634 projects and supported by supplementary interviews (Jönsson & Eriksson, 2010). This study establishes among other things the proportion of the budget set aside by the projects for the purpose of evaluation. Within the ESF in Sweden, Operational Program (OP) 1 focuses on 'competence development' and OP 2 on 'improved labour supply and unemployment'. Within OP 2, within which most of the youth projects are conducted, the proportion of funds set aside for evaluation amounted to 2.6 per cent of the total budget. Twenty per cent of all of the projects within both areas had not set aside any funds for external evaluation. Seventy-five per cent of the projects where no funds had been set aside for evaluation were projects under OP 1. About ten per cent of all of the projects had not set aside any funds for internal follow-up.

Around a third of the evaluators interviewed were unaware of the term 'on-going evaluation'. On the other hand, it was observed that, compared with previous evaluations, there was in a high proportion of projects (90 per cent) a difference between the approach adopted within the evaluations and the contribution provided to their own process.

Similar analyses have also been conducted within the ERDF in Sweden (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2011). Around

two per cent of the budget was set aside on average for on-going evaluation of projects within the ERDF. At the same time, there was a high variation – from 0.5 per cent to 8 per cent. There are also guidelines within the ERDF for using process evaluation as a methodology (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2010).

In order to grasp the scale of the sums involved, it may be mentioned that 690 million Euro was received from the EU for the implementation of the ESF programme in Sweden during the period 2007 to 2013, together with a similar amount of public co-financing from Sweden; i.e., 1.4 billion Euro in total (Swedish ESF Council, 2011a). Earlier analyses show that 2.4 per cent is the median figure for amounts devoted to external evaluation for a project receiving support within either of the priorities of the ESF (Jönsson & Eriksson, 2010). Based on these figures, an estimated 34 million Euros has been used for external evaluations during the period 2007 to 2013, corresponding to approximately 5 million per year. It is possible to make various assessments about whether this represents a small or large proportion in relation to how much is invested in these activities. It is in any event clear that there is a significant market for evaluators, and it is interesting not only to reflect upon their perception of youth project work, but also the conditions for conducting productive evaluation work (even if this aspect is not the focus of this report).

The possibility of evaluations contributing to learning in projects may also be affected by the size of the evaluation budget. There are analyses

that suggest that learning rarely takes place by means of a joint analysis on the part of the evaluator and the project. Furthermore, when budgets are less than 12 000 Euro there is a clear tendency towards a reduction of the value in the form of learning for projects and in the value for external readers. According to the analysis, a reduction in terms of quality in respect of the first-mentioned can be observed as early as 29 000 Euro (Sävenstrand, 2011). An argument has also been presented here in relation to evaluators rarely criticising interaction within the project; instead criticism is usually directed at actors outside this circle, which might be explained by the evaluators' interest in procuring future assignments. This kind of predisposition raises the issue of the pros and cons of the project engaging its own evaluator. One advantage is of course that in such cases the order for the evaluation can better meet local needs. This kind of dependency problem may constitute a potential disadvantage, while another kind of organisational arrangement might improve opportunities for analyses interlinking experiences generated from several projects.

The spread of an evidence-based approach

As indicated by this report, youth project work supported by the ESF often includes many different kinds of support, which may be explained by the varied support needs of those participating in the projects. The work spans a broad field encompassing, among other things, rather traditional labour market policy initiatives, studies, job hunting, health

promotion work, and initiatives bordering the social services' area of operation and that may lead on to activities within health services and medical care at a regional level.

This also results in projects moving within both different fields of policy and knowledge, with different traditions and conditions as regards methodologies and approaches. The projects' activities can, among other things, be seen in the light of the work for evidence-based practice conducted by the National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden. There are, for example, projects that make use of Supported Employment, which is one of the methodologies being examined by the National Board of Health and Welfare (www.socialstyrelsen.se) for evidence. Work along these lines is also expanding, for example, within the Swedish National Institute of Public Health. One of their assignments was to develop a method bank for health-promoting initiatives, where issues concerning usability for learning, development of methodologies and also follow-up and open comparisons were discussed, together with the follow-up of evidence-based methodologies (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2009). Two steps have been described: first, gaining fuller knowledge of the methodologies used and the size of the groups that are the subject of the initiatives; and second opportunities to follow up the effect of initiatives.

As indicated by the survey questionnaire results, several different kinds of methodology and approach are used within youth projects. One related issue is how and why different methodolo-

gies are chosen at a local level. Methodologies may be chosen on the basis of what represents the current trend or is considered to be contemporary. The starting point should instead be to look at the needs within the group and then try to find methodologies with the best scientific support (Olsson & Sundell, 2008). At the same time it should be pointed out that in these respects the preconditions for 'labour market policy' in particular are not as solid as for 'social policy'. It is also interesting to discuss how evaluations of labour market projects compare to this and their potential to contribute to knowledge in the field (for example, as regards identifying methodologies and approaches) and eventually bring knowledge to the table about the effectiveness of the different approaches. It should be noted that the latter is not necessarily the stated aim of the evaluations.

Towards an evidence-based labour market policy?

It may be of interest to reflect on long-term trends within evidence-based practice and how these could affect other areas, such as labour market policy and the various components of youth policy. In this context it is worth emphasising the overall finding of the Swedish National Audit Office that extensive changes have been made to Swedish labour market policy, but that there are considerable difficulties in evaluating the impact of the different measures and that "... there is often no evidence as to whether the changes made to the policy have the potential to yield a positive impact" (Swedish National Audit Office,

7 June 2011, p. 2). Furthermore, the Swedish National Audit Office has also stressed the importance of a more evidence-based labour market policy when introducing or removing measures (Swedish National Audit Office, 2010). It is interesting to discuss the extent to which the ESF, youth projects supported by the ESF and evaluators may influence such a trend. This also applies at European level. To provide a basis for such a discussion, the following section presents the findings from the survey questionnaire conducted, which was targeted at evaluators of youth projects. The outputs from an analysis of the evaluation reports for youth projects are then dealt with. On the basis of these two component parts, which are independent of one another, we will then return to the issue of developing an evidence-based labour market policy.



3 Survey for evaluators

A survey questionnaire has been carried out to shed light on the evaluators' assessments of youth project work and the structure of the evaluation work.

Response rate

The questionnaire was sent to 110 evaluators who had been identified through an earlier questionnaire presented to labour market projects for young people in Sweden. Three evaluators stated that their projects were not youth projects or that they had not been supported by the ESF. On this basis, 68 of 107 evaluators responded, representing a response rate of 64 per cent.

Youth project evaluators and evaluations

Those engaged to evaluate youth projects supported by the ESF belong to different kinds of operation. Most belong to some form of consulting business, where the greater part (49 per cent) had their own consulting firm and 13 per cent belonged to larger privately owned consulting firms. In addition to this, 21 per cent belonged to a contract research unit at a university/college and eight per cent belonged to a research and development unit (R&D unit). In addition, nine per cent stated 'other'. Many of the evaluators had previous extensive evaluation experience.

The content and focus of the evaluation work

Many evaluators state that they apply the approach of on-going evaluation (90 per cent) (see Table 3.1). Many focus on internal processes (87 per cent) and methodologies for creating jobs for young people (79 per cent).

Table 3.1 Content and structure of the evaluation of youth projects

	%	F
On-going evaluation/interactive evaluation	90	61
Internal processes in the project work	87	59
Methodologies for getting young people into employment	79	54
Final report	79	54
How many participants <u>went on</u> to education/training/employment	66	45
To what extent did participants <u>come closer</u> to education/training/employment	65	44
Mid-term review	52	35
Socioeconomic relevance of the project	13	9
Impact study with comparison group	4	3
Do not know	2	1

In the evaluation, around two thirds measure how many participants went on to education, training or employment. However, there is a variation in the measurement exercises used. Therefore it is difficult to get comparable outputs between the different projects. Seventy-six per cent stated that the measurement exercise should take place immediately after participation in the project has come to an end (up to two months after it finishes), 36 per cent after three to six months and 13 per cent at some point more than six months after participation has ended. Ten evaluators stated that

they employed more than one measurement point.

Many also measure whether participants get closer to education, training or employment. The reason for this question was not only to encapsulate perhaps the most obvious outcome target for the participants (how many go on to education, training or employment), but also slightly more qualitatively how young participants improve their position in the labour market by coming closer to education, training or employment. This may be a particularly important indicator, not least because many participating in youth projects are

very distant from the labour market, where many are long-term unemployed and where different kinds of disability are common (see Theme Group Youth, 2012:6). Many also state that the project applies methodologies for documenting the progress of participants, which constitutes a strong indicator that this is an aspect that will be covered in the course of the evaluations.

The socio-economic importance of the projects was referred to by Theme Group Youth in its reports *Young people outside the labour market and It pays off* (2010a; 2011a), which have also been translated into English. Thirteen per cent of youth project evaluators will touch on this kind of issue.

No less than 79 per cent state that they will in the evaluation analyse methodologies for getting young people into employment. Four per cent will conduct an impact study where there is a comparison group that is not allowed access to the project work. One might be concerned about whether this represents a small number.

In light of the focus on on-going evaluation and the more process-supporting approach applied during the period 2007 to 2013, it is unsurprising that relatively few have structured the evaluation as an impact study.

The impact of the evaluation work on projects

Almost half of the evaluators consider that their evaluation work has had 'quite a considerable' or a 'considerable' impact on the project's development. Many of the others felt that it was too early to assess this issue. Responses from the

evaluators were compared with the benefits that project staff experienced from the evaluation. This suggests on the whole that there is general satisfaction with the evaluation work, even if there are exceptions. Responses from the evaluators were compared with the benefits the evaluators in particular highlighted the limitations in terms of evaluation budgets. There is also a broad spread in the size of budgets set aside by the projects for evaluation. On average this involves 39 800 Euro per project (median = 33 700 Euro), but there is a wide spread spanning 0 Euro to 244 000 Euro. In relation to project budgets, the median amount for evaluation budgets is 2.5 per cent for youth projects, which on the whole is similar to the budgets for projects within the ESF in Sweden.

Views on evaluation within the ESF

The evaluators also had an opportunity to provide comments on the evaluation of projects supported by the ESF. Just over 40 per cent provided comments that may be viewed as comprising a sampling card of the various perspectives within the field concerning the pros and cons.

Several emphasised the advantages of on-going evaluation as an approach, while some evaluators had encountered various challenges in their work when using this methodology. One evaluator stressed that on-going evaluation has better prospects of functioning where there is geographical proximity between the evaluator and the project, another highlighted the importance of there actually being time for dialogue between the evaluator and various stakeholders in the project

(steering group, project management and staff), which may present a risk of it being brushed aside if the project encounters challenges and needs to extend its work with participants. There was also one evaluator who found it difficult to explain the difference between on-going evaluation and traditional follow-ups to project representatives. According to this evaluator this may be due to several different terms being used in Swedish for 'on-going evaluation', namely '*lärande utvärdering*' [lit. learning through evaluation] and '*följeforskning*' [lit. on-going research] and that the ESF and ERDF use different terms. It may also at the same time be noted that guidance from the Swedish ESF Council has gradually improved in this field.

Meanwhile the impact of the new approach can be limited in some cases. One evaluator emphasised that there are actors in the evaluation market that do not use on-going evaluation. Another evaluator emphasised that it was a traditional evaluation that had been procured and that the impact of the evaluation was therefore limited for the project, and that ESF should consequently impose more stringent requirements for this when projects are procured.

In the same vein, another evaluator emphasised that clients were experienced purchasers, which created favourable conditions and adequate resources together with expectations in relation to the evaluation work. Four evaluators stressed the clear limitations in terms of the projects' evaluation budget. One recommended that project applications that include ambitious evaluation

plans, including on-going feedback, should not be granted when the budget set for evaluation did not afford any scope for this kind of work. Another observed that on-going evaluation cannot live up to its full potential if the scope of the budget is too limited and stated by way of an example that they had 12 000 Euro per year over a three-year period for evaluation, corresponding to one month of manhours per year.

Three evaluators highlighted the need to include the evaluation work from the start of project planning or at the start of the project to enable it to have a productive impact on the focus of the project. One of them made the following observation:

"It would be worthwhile to consider a more systematic evaluation using a control group and a follow-up of employment status. However, this requires the evaluation plan to be an integral part of the project plan and for it to start at the same time as the project. Such a systematic evaluation would be difficult if the evaluator is only engaged after the project has started."

Someone also felt that too much focus within the ESF is placed on evaluation at an individual level, while their evaluations related more to the structural situation and development opportunities.

Some comments may in different ways also be relevant in terms of the evaluation of projects and their preconditions. One evaluator noted that it may be difficult to live up to project targets that are formulated at an early stage. The surrounding environment may change, forcing projects to adapt to new circumstances. Some felt that knowledge of project planning and the criteria

provided for projects within the ESF are often inadequate among those stakeholders involved in a project, and in light of this sought training initiatives. A third evaluator pointed out several different kinds of difficulty, such as that learning between projects is unusual, that the choice of methodology may be 'more opinion than learning' and that the rules governing the award of funds for projects may influence the work in an undesirable way.

Participants with different needs require a large toolbox

NEETs comprise a heterogeneous group, and Theme Group Youth has advanced our knowledge of this group in Sweden through the report *Young people not in education or employment* (2011b). The questionnaire shows that youth projects use many different approaches and methodologies. They span health promotion, counselling, psychological support and initiatives to increase motivation to more traditional labour market measures, such as guidance and practical work experience and also initiatives to stimulate entrepreneurship and produce opportunities for work, studies or practical work experience abroad. This may be seen as representing the diverse needs that exist among those participating in the projects, where many are a long way from education, training or employment.

Assessment of the various methodologies

There are several challenges when providing an overall description and assessing on going work in youth projects. In some cases methodologies are used that have known and established names and descriptions of what the methodologies entail. In other cases the practice and approach involved may be more difficult to narrow down and may mean different things for different projects (and also different project representatives). Differences in interpretation may also affect named methodologies. In this investigation a distinction has been made between first methodologies that are more well designated and defined and second approaches that may involve different practices. It may also be appropriate to emphasise here that the success of the work may depend on a number of factors, such as support, knowledge about methodologies/approaches, conditions in the surrounding environment and the actual methodologies themselves (see, for example, Olsson & Sundell, 2008).

The evaluators had to assess how well the projects' initiatives and methodologies functioned, with reference to the aim of young participants going on to education, training or employment (see Table 3.2). This not only provides an indication of the approach used in projects, but also the overall assessment that much of that done is functioning well.

The three *approaches* that most considered to function 'well' or 'very well' were support for getting structure in their everyday lives, counsel-

Table 2.3 Evaluators' assessments of how well different approaches and methodologies functioned in projects

Approach	Very poor	Poor	Neither good nor poor	Quite good	Very good
Counselling support to enable participants to formulate goals for their future, including education, training and/or employment (n=46)	0	0	9	59	33
Practical work experience (n=45)	0	2	11	42	44
Initiatives to enhance motivation (n=43)	0	5	7	47	42
Support to enable participants to get structure in their everyday lives (get up in the morning, be punctual, work with others, etc.) (n=43)	0	0	7	54	40
Vocational guidance and job seeking activities (n=42)	0	0	10	43	48
Vocational training (n=37)	0	8	19	43	30
Educational guidance on how to look for courses and education (n=34)	0	0	12	59	29
Passing participants on to support/other initiatives (n=29)	0	7	21	55	17
Support to enable participants to complete formal compulsory or secondary schooling (n=28)	0	0	25	43	32
Guidance to stimulate entrepreneurship and self-employment (n=27)	0	19	33	30	19
Health promotion (n=26)	0	4	39	39	19
Entrepreneurship (n=21)	0	19	33	38	10
Transnational exchange of experience between representatives of the project and projects/activities in other countries (n=21)	0	10	19	33	38
Psychological support (n=10)	0	10	40	30	20
Period abroad in employment, education, training or for practical work experience for participants (transnational exchange (n=9))	0	11	22	22	44
'Coaching' (individual guidance under another name) (n=45)	0	0	4	40	56
Apprenticeships (n=13)	0	0	31	31	39
Other named methodologies or approaches (n=13)	0	0	15	31	54
Navigator Centre (n=9)	0	0	11	44	44
OCN (Open College Network) (n=8)	13	13	13	13	50
Supported Employment (n=7)	0	0	0	43	57
Young and Active in Europe (n=2)	0	0	0	50	50
7-TJUGO (n=2)	0	0	0	0	100
ELD (Experience Learning Description) (n=1)	0	0	100	0	0
Production school (n=0)]	0	0	0	0	0

ling support to formulate goals for future education/training/employment and guidance in seeking work. Approaches where some experience difficulties are entrepreneurship or guidance to stimulate entrepreneurship/self-employment and also transnational exchange. There are several proposals for how the latter can be improved in Sweden (see Swedish ESF Council, 2010 and Theme Group Youth, 2010b).

The three *methodologies* that most (100 per cent of those who made an assessment) considered had functioned 'quite well' or 'very well' were the Youth in Action in Europe programme, Supported Employment and 7-TJUGO (Table 3.2). The next three (between 85 and 95 per cent) were: coaching (or individual guidance under another name); the Navigator Centre; and also some other named methodologies/approaches. In a Navigator Centre competences from municipal and state boards are pooled to provide youth with coherent support and guidance in the labour market field. There was mixed experience on the part of some as regards Open College Network, though it is worth noting that few responded to this question. Once again there is reason to emphasise that there are many reasons for why a methodology functions well or less well, which may relate to both the conditions in the surroundings and the methodology itself. In-depth studies are required to be able to fully respond to this kind of question.

Projects to develop cooperation

Developing cooperation between the various public stakeholders comprises an integral part of the aim for 90 per cent of the projects in question. The Swedish Public Employment Service, the municipal social services, the municipal labour market departments and industry are the most common actors in this work. Many of the evaluators who could make an assessment consider that the development of cooperation referred to has also been achieved within the project. Key factors for cooperation are involvement on the part of staff and managers together with well-organised cooperation. In cases where collaboration functioned less well, a strong emphasis was put to the attitude of managers and the organisation of the work, while obstructive rules and regulations were also highlighted as a problem.

Rules and regulations that obstruct

Forty per cent of the evaluators emphasised that different rules and regulations obstruct the work with young people. This may involve co-financing rules for ESF-funded projects, different rules concerning who is allowed and able to take part in project activities and qualify for measures for young people through the public employment service. Furthermore, some evaluators point out that variations in the rules among and within authorities are problematic, for example different rules for documentation. Some evaluators are unanimous in the opinion that rules and regulations are sometimes used as a pretext for not cooperating, while there are unquestionably others who manage to cooperate and interpret the rules and regulations in a way that facilitates cooperation.

Project outputs for young people and organisations

Fifty-eight per cent of the evaluators stated that the project's work to develop participating organisations in relation to young people was 'successful' or 'very successful', and only 13 per cent that the work was 'less successful'. This involves long-term development work for the organisations. The result was slightly more positive as regards the issue of the extent to which projects enable project participants to go on to education, training or employment. The evaluators had to make an overall assessment of the work of the project in getting those young people participating in the project to go on to education, training or employment. Here 65 per cent stated that the work of the project had been 'successful' or 'very successful' and only four per cent stated that it had been 'less successful'.

The most important factors for success

Many emphasised that key factors for success in work involving young people are the project's use of practical work experience or work placement and the commitment of or treatment by staff and also cooperation. The work of projects in relation to practical work experience is described in the report *Through training we lower the threshold* (Theme Group Youth, 2011c). Many evaluators also provide a rather positive perception of how project work has been incorporated into ordinary activities: ten per cent assessed that the work of the project would live on in its entirety and 82 per cent that some parts would continue.

4 A study of evaluations of youth projects conducted by Tranquist Utvärdering

Tranquist Utvärdering was commissioned by Theme Group Youth to conduct during the period October 2011 to January 2012 a preliminary study – prior to a possible meta-evaluation – of youth projects that received support from the ESF in Sweden. This involved an analysis of 23 evaluation reports selected by Theme Group Youth after compiling evaluations from projects for young people.

The meta-analysis conducted in this study is a ‘meta-synthesis’ – a qualitative review of a number of evaluations with the aim of generating all-embracing knowledge based on their content. The primary aim is that such an approach should contribute to future programme development, improved implementation and knowledge-based decision-making (Patton, 1990).

As a starting point for categorising the content of the evaluation reports in question, reasoning is applied from a model that is often used for evaluating competence development and learning, namely Donald L. Kirkpatrick’s (1994) evaluation model, which comprises four levels:

1. **Reaction:** Have the participants reacted positively or negatively to the initiative they have taken part in? *Did they like the initiative?*

2. **Learning:** Did the participants assimilate the intended knowledge, skills, attitudes etc.? *How did they develop?*
3. **Application:** Did the participants benefit from what they received from the initiative? *What benefits did they get from the initiative in their everyday lives?*
4. **Impact:** Did the intended impacts arise as a consequence of the initiative? *Have the objectives been achieved in the long term and has this resulted in other organisational benefits?*

What Kirkpatrick’s model lacks is an ambition to explain why outputs and impacts arise. A ‘programme theory model’ could supplement Kirkpatrick’s model in this respect. The very essence of the programme theory is to provide an evidence base for analysing which parts of a project contributed towards creating different outputs and impacts and why this happened. In order to assess whether methodologies have been effective, an evaluation, in accordance with this line of reasoning, must lead a discussion about the causal linkage in relation to outputs and impact. It is not sufficient to observe that impacts have

arisen. The issue of why various outputs and impacts have arisen must also be asked. This is necessary in order to enable general knowledge about various causal linkages to be assimilated. Figure 4.1 shows how these analytical models are combined, the knowledge present in the evaluations studied (marked in green) and where knowledge is lacking (marked in red).

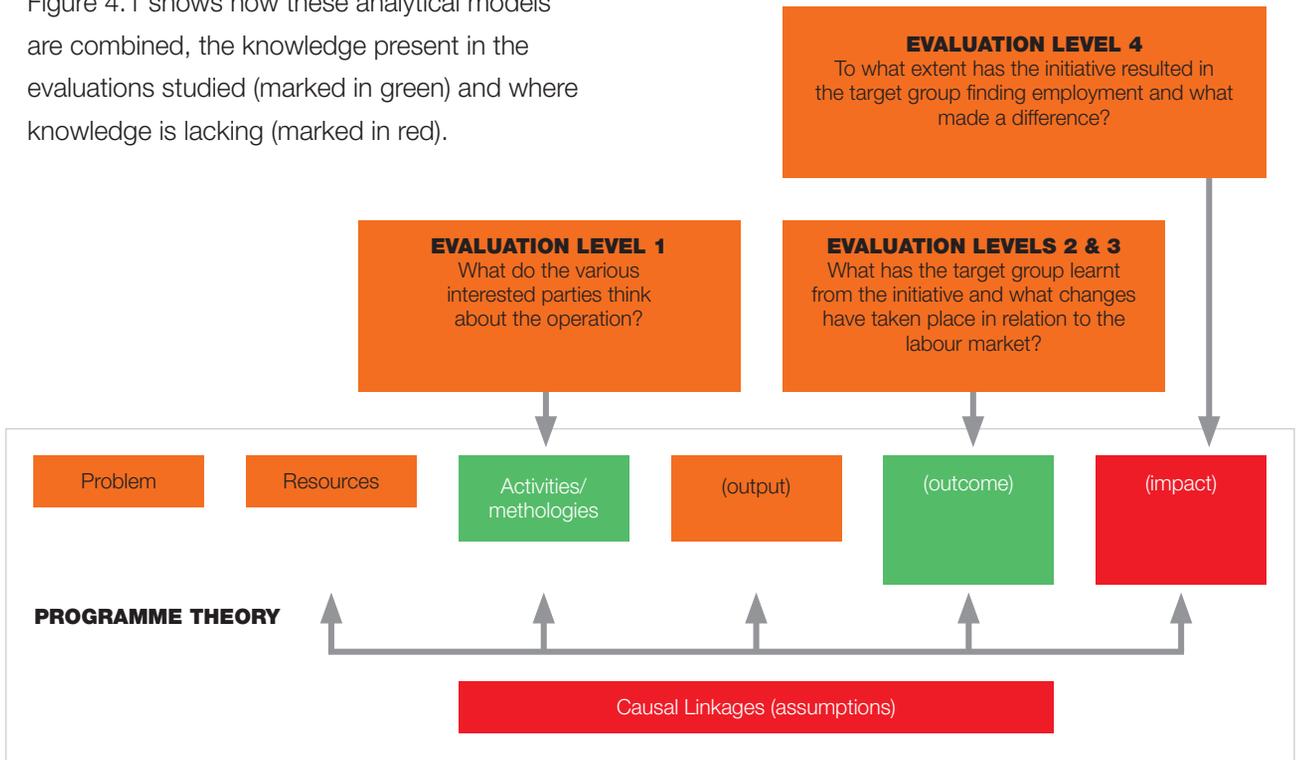


Figure 3.1 Programme theory and Kirkpatrick's evaluation model in relation to evaluations of youth projects financed by the ESF that have been studied

Many factors make it difficult to measure impact

Many factors affect unemployment and exclusion among young people, for instance socio-economic context and a proliferation of parallel programmes and political initiatives at a national, regional and local level. Here different factors interact in complex ways. When several differ-

ent initiatives occur simultaneously it is difficult to isolate the impact of each initiative (see, for example, Green & Hasluck, 2009). This often applies because many individuals participate, or have participated, in several different initiatives. Another more concrete dilemma in an analysis of 'what works' relates to the point in time when evaluations are conducted. The extent to which

an initiative is regarded as successful may depend on when success is measured. Some initiatives yield a more positive impact in the long term than in the short term, while others give rise to a more immediate impact. For example, it takes longer to see the impact of intensive support for groups further from the labour market than it does for support for individuals who are closer to employment. Within the ESF the evaluations normally run in parallel with projects and it is unusual to have longitudinal studies with measurement points after the end of the project.

Focus on achieving the objectives and direct impact

It is more common for evaluations to dwell on the objectives achieved by the projects than to focus on their impact. This is also confirmed by Sävenstrand (2011, p. 12) who states that “the most common purpose of the evaluation is to measure the achievement of objectives and it is also short-term outputs that are best satisfied in the reports”. As an example of such outputs, you can read in many reports that young people feel that the project has helped them to get closer to the labour market. This could possibly be viewed as a short-term impact.

Positive assessments from staff and participants

A number of short-term changes can be identified in the evaluations. In this respect, the reports establish overall that many participants are positive towards the projects they have taken part in and

that the projects have helped them to establish better daily routines, a social context in their life and support from stakeholders that the participants met through the projects that is more personal than would otherwise have been the case. Above all, there appear to be different forms of coaching that were both applied in the projects and valued positively by participants.

Rare links between methodologies and impacts

The preliminary study reveals the difficulties in generating general knowledge about project outputs and impacts in relation to different approaches. In summary it is established that the evaluations are essentially qualitative case studies that only to a limited extent relate to outputs and impacts specifically. Above all, there are no actual descriptions of the methods of working and the assumptions underlying the choice of these in relation to intended impacts. In the long run this means that we can only conclude that certain effects arose, but we cannot explain why. In other words, it is not possible to say what has worked for whom and the circumstances under which this has occurred. However, the evaluations contained extensive material that in various ways provides a picture of the lessons that can be learnt from projects within the ESF.

Unusual aspects of impact evaluations

In conclusion, individual reports in the sample can be characterised as impact evaluations (for example, Drambo, 2010) or evaluations aimed at

explaining a positive impact (for example, Johansson, 2008). In those cases where the evaluations seek some form of deeper understanding, there is often a history of one or more concluded project periods where previous evaluations have revealed positive impacts. Projects have then been refinanced and the studies now at issue are primarily based on this project history and seek explanations for previous evaluation outputs (see, for instance, da Mata & Nyberg 2008).

Conclusions

What position should we adopt on the uncertainty in terms of the possibilities of extracting general knowledge from the evaluations concerning the outputs and impacts of various approaches in relation to initiatives for young people?

One question that must be raised before producing a model for a full-scale meta-evaluation, regardless of whether the focus is on the outputs and impacts or on another perspective (for instance, the content, implementation, organisation or structure of the project), relates to the intended use. This ultimately governs what one needs to know, who is interested in knowing this and how the product is intended to be used.

The next reasonable question to ask relates to assessment. No assessment has been conducted in this preliminary study of the chosen reports with regard to, for instance, quality. This is common in a meta-evaluation, at least as part of the investigation (see, for instance Swedish Government Official Reports – SOU 2005:29; Lindgren, 2009; Sävenstrand, 2011). It is important that the

assessment criteria applied are clearly articulated and discussed before such work starts.

In light of this, it may, despite these reservations, be relevant to proceed with a full-scale meta-evaluation. It will in that case be of importance that the problems identified have already been dealt with at the planning stage. At the same time there may also be conceivable alternatives to a meta-evaluation. For example, if one intended use is to make outputs from a large number of evaluations available to a broader group outside the specific projects, one alternative may be to create a database of the evaluations in question. The conclusion drawn after this preliminary study in relation to a meta-evaluation of youth projects financed by the ESF is that there is unlikely to be much prospect of assimilating any general knowledge about the importance of different methods of working in terms of long-term impacts.

Above all, there are no actual descriptions of methods of working and assumptions underlying the choice of these in relation to intended impacts. In the long run this means that we can only conclude that certain effects have arisen, but we cannot then explain why. The same conclusions have also been drawn in assignments of a meta character in other contexts (Sävenstrand 2011). This can probably be partly explained by the evaluation approach introduced within the ESF during the current programme period, namely ongoing evaluation.

However, the evaluations contained extensive material that in various ways provides a picture of the variety of projects within the ESF. It is

likely that this knowledge bank may be used in forms other than just through a meta-evaluation. However, one question that needs to be specified relates to benefit – for whom and in what respect it would be productive to have an inventory of the experiences from evaluations of youth projects financed by the ESF. Only when this question is answered will it be possible to finally plan the overall work for those evaluations that are continually being produced within the ESF.

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5 Reflections and proposals

This section begins with reflections on the findings from both of the studies and concludes with a proposal by Theme Group Youth directed at projects, evaluators, the Swedish ESF Council and other actors whose work involves or who are responsible for evaluation and evaluation systems linked to Swedish labour market policy.

Indications of positive project outputs

A picture emerges from the evaluators' questionnaire that the youth projects are quite successful, both as regards the methodologies used and the cooperation efforts made work, which is pleasing. Projects apply a number of different methodologies and approaches. This may be seen as a reflection of the target group requiring a number of different kinds of support on their path to employment, training or education. The initiatives range from work involving counselling and psychological support, via health promotion and providing structure for everyday lives, to more traditional labour market measures, such as guidance, practical work experience and vocational training. The overall picture is also that evaluators often have a positive perception of how the various methodologies and approaches have functioned set against the objective of young people going on to education, training or employment. However, it is problematic that little of this appears to find its way into the evaluation reports themselves.

On-going evaluation as an approach

Many evaluators use on-going evaluation as their main approach. Evaluators often exemplify the work of the project on the basis of several aspects, from processes in the project's development work to how many young people are getting closer to or alternatively go on to education, training or employment. In some cases a calculation has also been made of the project's potential socio-economic significance.

Methodologies, approaches and impacts are missing

The review of the youth project evaluations conducted so far shows that it is difficult to describe which methodologies and approaches were used and compare the impact they have in the long run. However, it should be added that this does not form part of the assignment for most evaluators and it would be possible to shed light on other issues by studying the evaluations. Still, it is part of the particular mandate of several stakeholders, including Theme Group Youth, to elucidate approaches, methodologies and impacts.

It should be added that it is generally difficult to make this kind of assessment, for example to distinguish the significance of various initiatives/measures, of changing circumstances and of variations in the conditions affecting participants when they start to take part in an activity. This is something that is not unique to the work within the ESF.

Findings from the questionnaire indicate that future evaluations may possibly be oriented in a way that affords greater potential to analyse methodologies and their impacts. For example, it would be of particular interest to monitor those who stated that they conduct evaluations of projects which have a comparison group. This means that the work of Theme Group Youth in compiling evaluations will continue. Other questions in relation to this material may also be presented in the future.

Narrowing down methodologies/ approaches and promoting a knowledge- based labour market policy

One of several ways to encapsulate how projects work has been to identify through evaluators questionnaires which methodologies were used. This involves rather diffuse approaches, such as coaching, to more clearly delimited methodologies, such as Supported Employment. This will become an important information base for further studies about individual methodologies. Furthermore, it is relevant in this context to raise the question of what forms the basis for the choice of methodology and approach, how this relates to trends in the field and the existing knowledge available through activities, policy and research.

There may be tension between continuing to develop tried and tested methodologies and the ESF's criteria for supporting innovative activities (Swedish ESF Council, 2011b). Continuing to develop tried and tested methodologies may not always be regarded as innovative at a national

level, but may be of great interest and also innovative at a local level from a knowledge-based perspective. New approaches and methodologies can be chosen based on a number of different interests. Here it may be worth recalling the fundamental point of departure for an evidence-based approach, where the starting point is based on local needs, and then attempt to find the best, most established approach possible to meet these needs. The work conducted locally can then clearly contribute to knowledge about the approach in question at a national level.

Proposals by Theme Group Youth Increased focus on methodologies and impacts, and a systematic compilation of evaluations

- It is a large undertaking to identify and analyse the impact of various methodologies and approaches that aim to support a knowledge-based labour market policy. This means that stakeholders elucidating these kinds of issue, such as Theme Group Youth, are largely dependent on knowledge presented by other stakeholders. Thematic groups within the ESF can improve knowledge of approaches to a certain extent, but it would be valuable if the evaluation work could more clearly contribute to this process. Such aims must naturally be considered in relation to other functions that the evaluators have and may have. The report clearly shows that the work of the evaluators in the projects, which is often structured as on-going evaluation, is generally considered to be of great benefit.

If the ambition is to comment on methodologies and their impacts more clearly than hitherto, it is likely that another follow-up system within the ESF and other parts of labour market policy is required, where the knowledge produced through evaluations and activities becomes a clearer component.

- Making knowledge from projects available represents an important step in the accumulation of knowledge within labour market policy. This material should be of interest to everyone, from projects and activities seeking to develop their own work to evaluators and researchers that want to analyse various aspects of project work (for example, the possibility of producing knowledge that can be generalised). The Swedish ESF Council's project bank currently contains some project evaluations, but the material could be compiled in a more strategic way and presented more systematically.

Make it mandatory for projects to submit evaluation reports to the Swedish ESF Council (or other suitable stakeholder), and make this material easily accessible and searchable for various actors who are interested in the projects' activities.

Increase opportunities for aggregatable knowledge through projects and evaluations

- At a local level it might seem unnecessary to describe methodologies and approaches. Those ordering an evaluation are often well aware of these. At the same time there needs to be better

preconditions for developing more clearly aggregatable knowledge, where external researchers, evaluators and others can see what has characterised the work. This is required to enable comparisons between the various approaches and to see patterns in the impacts. It may be appropriate to emphasise this even more clearly within the manuals provided by ESF (Jansson, 13 December 2010; and SPeL, November 2011a, 2011b). There should be good preconditions for documenting the work, as learning evaluators also have a greater closeness to projects than more traditional evaluation structures. Issues that it would be interesting to document as far as possible include: the way in which those participating in the project have been recruited; the approaches and methodologies used; the knowledge and experiences that participants have when they enter the project and also when they stop taking part. This would create better opportunities for external stakeholders to learn from projects than is currently the case. In the long term, based on the indicators that projects report to Statistics Sweden, it may transpire that participants from a specific kind of project are more successful in establishing themselves in the labour market. It would then be beneficial for the work to be documented in detail so that the impacts can be linked to a particular approach retrospectively. If anything from one, five or ten years has elapsed since the project came to an end, the evaluation report is probably the document that has the potential to provide the best guidance as to how the work was conducted.

Projects and evaluators should ensure that the methodologies and approaches used are documented as part of the dissemination work.

- To extend the use of introductory needs assessments in activities and to eventually draw up formalised monitoring systems are a significant step towards documenting the work that takes place in the projects. Projects currently use, for instance, interviews, documentation systems and sometimes standard forms for such assessments. Greater uniformity could be sought in this field. Tools may include standardised registration and discharge forms or recommended measurement points for project outputs (measurement exercises relating to the status of participants after the conclusion of a project currently vary both between projects and among evaluators). Here, Theme Group Youth's compilation of registration and discharge forms may become part of this work. If several projects and activities use identical questions, this opens up the opportunity for comparisons, while the information base may provide scope for more standardised forms that can be used by a number of stakeholders and projects. One question that may be raised in such a context is the trend toward suggesting 'getting closer to the labour market' as an objective (an alternative measurement to how many actually go on to education, training or employment). Yet this is seldom defined. The aim of the ESF is to increase the supply of labour and this also includes increasing the number of people available for work. Registration and discharge forms might

form one way of measuring a 'move' closer to the labour market. Of course the interest in this kind of tool may vary depending on the different needs and previous local follow-up systems, which suggests that use of this kind of tool should be voluntary. It is also important to assure the quality of this kind of tool before starting to use it.

Providing assistance for projects and evaluators in the form of certain concrete tools for follow-up and evaluation should be considered as a step towards improving the opportunities for comparability and aggregatable knowledge.

- Support for exchange of knowledge between evaluators should be considered. At the same time it should be emphasised that it is the projects' order specifications for evaluations that determine the aim and structure of the evaluation. It is reasonable to assume that a small budget for an evaluation would have significant consequences for the interest in and possibility of participating in these kinds of activity. There may also be limited interest for this in the 'evaluation market' in general, as knowledge-sharing can actually support individual evaluators, but may also mean in practice that there is a need to share experience and knowledge with competitors. Attempts have also been made to generate an exchange of experience, but have demonstrated that this is difficult to achieve. This suggests that a more feasible way would be to consider a requirement to document methodologies and approaches in the evaluations, and that evaluators should relate the outputs to other, similar, activities and the

purposes set out in the contract announcement through which the project received funds.

Consider support and networks for the exchange of experience between evaluators so that they can find mutual points in common that may lead to increased comparability.

- It may be interesting to consider alternatives to the current system where projects engage their evaluators themselves. As a suggestion, this may be done by announcing project funds in combination with an ‘evaluation contract announcement’ where there is also a clear structure stipulating that the evaluation is to be productive for both projects and in relation to the possibility of accumulating knowledge of general value. In such a pilot project, formalised documentation methods would be drawn up, which could then be circulated as a recommended approach for future evaluations. A model where a common evaluator is responsible for evaluations may also be considered for smaller projects, where parallels can be drawn between the projects (see, for example, Jönsson & Eriksson, 2010). The latter could possibly be done by several projects coordinating their interests and jointly engaging just one evaluator.

There are possibilities within the ESF frameworks to consider alternative models for organising evaluation work, which may form a starting point for work during the period 2014 to 2020.



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This is an analysis based on the work conducted by evaluators of youth projects supported by the European Social Fund in Sweden. We both investigate the prospect of developing general knowledge from evaluations produced up till now and analyze assessments from evaluators through a questionnaire. On this basis Theme Group Youth make several suggestions of how to improve the possibilities for an evidence-based labour market policy in the future.

The report is produced by Theme Group Youth which is assigned to compile knowledge from ESF-projects run during 2007–2013. Many projects comprise cooperation between several actors in the public as well as in the private sector.

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EVALUATION OF LABOUR MARKET PROJECTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE