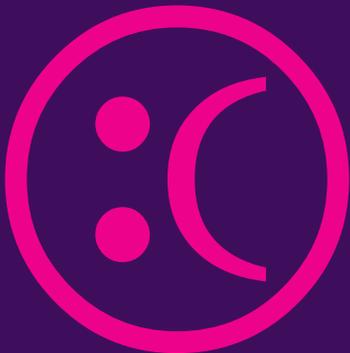
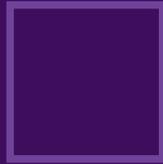
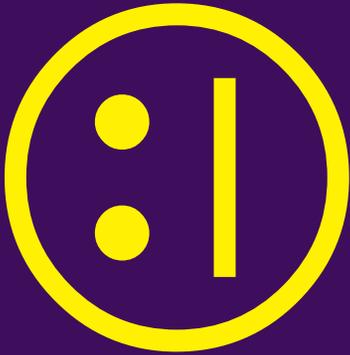


# Lessons learnt from labour market project evaluations

- a Meta-analysis



# Theme Group Youth

Theme Group Youth is working to ensure that use is made of the experience and knowledge gained from projects financed by the European Social Fund. The Swedish Public Employment Service, Communicare, Swedish Social Insurance Agency, National Agency for Education, National Board of Health and Welfare, Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society all cooperate in the Theme Group.

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# Summary

Tranquist Utvärdering has been assigned by Theme Group Youth to conduct a meta-analysis of evaluations of youth projects funded by grants from the European Social Fund (ESF) during the programming period 2007 to 2013.

The purpose of the study is to acquire knowledge about the methods and approaches, implementation and structural impediments identified in the implementation of labour market projects directed at young people and also about the quality of the evaluations. This meta-analysis encompassed 61 evaluation reports.

The main conclusions are as follows:

- The resources of the Social Fund aided the creation of more favourable conditions and additional resources for projects, resulting in there being more time and staff for each individual participant than for regular activities.
- The work of the projects often leads to young people moving on to employment, education, training or other initiatives.
- It is difficult to understand what exactly leads to this outcome as working arrangements and methods have not been tested and evaluated in detail.
- There are few references in the evaluations as to why projects chose to work using various methods.
- The focus of the evaluations is often directed at the project staff's personal meetings with the young participants.
- There was a significant variation in the quality of the evaluations studied.
- The scientific basis is weak in many reports.
- The evaluations are often isolated case studies whose primary benefit lies at the project level.

## Discussions and proposals by Theme Group Youth

By way of introduction, Theme Group Youth reflects on the findings of the meta-analysis linked to previous experiences. This section concludes with Theme Group Youth's proposals for future initiatives.

### 1.1 The issue of a knowledge-based labour market policy

The meta-analysis has not provided through a study of the evaluations any answers to the question of what underlies the choices of the methods and approaches made by projects. Is the choice based on existing experience and knowledge within the activity or research or different policy orientations, or have choices been made on the basis of entirely different mechanisms? It has been observed both within social and labour market policy that central and local government activities are based to a far too little extent on knowledge about the impact of different approaches, initiatives and methods (Swedish Government Official Reports – SOU 2008:18, Swedish National Audit Office 2011). This applies in particular to labour market policy.

The Swedish National Audit Office (2010) has highlighted the importance of a more evidence-based labour market policy where measures are introduced or discontinued. It was established in an overview of municipal labour market initiatives that there are few scientific studies demonstrating the impact of different measures on participants and that "... this is an area where there is largely no scientific foundation to express how the measures actually function and their impact" (Thorén 2012, p. 45). Knowledge generation within social work has been formulated in terms of evidence-based practice, something that

may have a greater role to play within future labour market policy compared with today. Evidence-based practice entails a balance of the best available knowledge (studies), own expertise and the individual's situation, experience and wishes (see Sundell & Soydan, 2008).

Evidence-based practice is sometimes misinterpreted as being based solely on scientific reports. Although these represent an important component, other elements are vital as well. Knowledge and experience within the profession and among those participating in various initiatives may have a greater influence on various decisions, particularly where there are no scientific studies. One important factor in evidence-based work is that policy makers and civil servants have access to knowledge about the impact of various labour market initiatives for young people. Ideally, they would be able to make decisions on the orientation of an activity or about the preferred initiatives for a specific situation on the basis of such knowledge and taking account of local needs. If such knowledge is lacking, the choice of initiative may, in the worst case scenario, be based solely on personal discretion, and the initiatives provided have no impact or even the opposite impact to that intended.

It can be observed from the projects studied through the evaluations that Supported Employment is a method that was evidence tested within the National Board of Health and Welfare, though this represents an exception. There are usually no extensive studies to provide any guidance on the choice of methods, and the question is then which knowledge base should be used.

One problem within labour market policy is that there are often no studies about defined methods, which makes the road to evidence-based labour market policy a long journey. Raised awareness about different methods and their impact should be of interest to the vast majority of people, as this enables comparisons to be made and there-

by affords further opportunities to assess whether the work has been successful in relation to other alternative approaches.

Certain parallels can be drawn between the endeavours towards collaboration in youth projects supported by the European Social Fund and such endeavours within other areas, for example, the financial coordination (Finsam). We should be able to learn from this work, which should result in generalisable knowledge. When developing national structures for Finsam's follow-up and evaluation, there should be reason to consider the interaction between follow-up systems and evaluation functions between Finsam, ESF and the work implemented by, for instance, IFAU, and how they can jointly contribute to a knowledge-based labour market policy.

## 1.2 A common framework but a fragmented picture

Although both projects and evaluators had common ground in the Social Fund's programmes and horizontal criteria, the regions' action plans and the rules and regulations relating to young unemployed people, young people as a target group, there have been significant differences in the preconditions for the evaluations in terms of time and budget, but also focus and evaluation models (the evaluators' competence and choice of methods).

In a previous study, where evaluators of youth projects were asked questions about preconditions and findings (Theme Group Youth, 2012a), a picture emerges that the methods used in the work of youth projects and the endeavours to effect cooperation are often successful, which can only be welcomed. However, what does represent a problem is how infrequently descriptions of this successful work end up in the evaluation reports themselves. This makes it difficult for anyone to be inspired by and import successful approaches. Project applications and other ma-

terial provide relatively little information on these matters (Theme Group Youth, 2010 ).

### 1.3 The importance of a social context

We can see from the meta-analysis that projects not only make considerable efforts to provide young participants with individual initiatives and social support, but also individual-related support during a placement. It was established in previous labour market research that job-like initiatives yield the best results (IFAU, 2011). So is it the social context or individual-related support during a placement that has an impact? We cannot answer this with any degree of certainty. However, in the absence of more extensive studies, we can use the experience gained from the work conducted as our starting point. Theme Group Youth has identified several success factors from projects that we encountered between 2009 and 2013; success factors that are broadly in line with international labour market research (see IFAU, 2011). These factors are:

#### Success factors

- Cooperation and co-location
- Integrated approach
- Voluntariness
- Salutogenic approach
- Multi-professional team
- A flexible toolbox
- Cooperation with employers
- Individually adapted initiatives
- Clear purpose for each initiative
- Sustainability – it may take time (Theme Group Youth, 2011).

This, together with the good results from projects, makes it even more important to be able to identify in future HOW the work is actually conducted and can be incorpo-

rated into regular activities.

### 1.4 Evaluation in the best interests of the project, project owner and ESF

Ongoing evaluation as an approach may be positive for the individual projects and, given certain preconditions, also for the implementation of the Social Fund programme. However, the suspicion we held during the pilot study in 2012 has been confirmed: there is a lack of focus on approaches, methods and their impact in the evaluations (Theme Group Youth, 2012a). This means that the evaluations are not giving the Swedish ESF Council or the project owners the information they require. The project owners are not told what has an impact or the extent of that impact, and thus nor are they given clear guidance about what should or should not be implemented. The Swedish ESF Council cannot aggregate knowledge in a way that helps to develop the national policy within the areas in question.

A follow-up is conducted of the proportion of participants who are in employment, education or training some time after participating in a project; this is obtained by Statistics Sweden via registers. It is possible to discern the outcome from this at a project level. However, it is not possible to link the target group's characteristic features (input and output values) or methods/approaches used and outcome. These components should be more clearly linked in the future. This may be done with the help of future theme groups or by an evaluator monitoring several projects, which we will revert to in the proposals below.

#### 1.4.1 Budget and client competence

There is a significant variation in how much projects have budgeted for evaluation, both in terms of actual amounts and in relation to the project's total budget. This creates different preconditions for the work of the evaluators.

In terms of the evaluation's focus, the study shows that there are no descriptions of evaluation models and project logic; the evaluations often lack a theoretical foundation. This is largely dependent on the projects not having any such foundation. The work of projects is also rarely set in relation to the surrounding activities. And, as previously mentioned, one common consequence of this is that the evaluation studies processes within the work of the project and not the impact. The evaluation is often concluded at the same time as or earlier than the projects, which further impedes an evaluation of the impact. Recipients who wish to implement approaches in regular activities or aggregate knowledge from a number of evaluations consequently find it difficult to utilise the evaluations. An evaluation is often procured during the start-up phase of a project. The focus of the procurement appears to be largely based on the needs of the project/project management and to a limited extent on the needs of the project owner (the needs of the client instead of the needs of the recipient). The evaluations within the Social Fund should provide responses to questions presented by the projects, project owners and the Social Fund. A well thought-out and logical structure for evaluation – also coordinated with other funds and structures – is required to make this possible. The challenge is to do this without losing the support that projects feel they get from the process evaluations. In this respect it may be relevant in the future to enhance our understanding of the knowledge that project owners require to enable them to make decisions about their prospective future activities.

## 1.5 Difficult to describe methods and approaches, together with their impact

It should be added that it is generally difficult to assess the impact of methods and approaches. This is not at all unique to projects supported by the European Social

Fund or for that matter to Swedish labour market policy. The difficulty derives, among other things, from it being difficult to separate the importance of various initiatives/ measures, changing circumstances and variations in the preconditions affecting the participants when they start to take part in an activity.

However, there are countries that have a more sophisticated system. In an analysis of 25 initiatives to combat youth unemployment in nine EU countries, Eurofound established that they could only draw conclusions relating to impact in three cases (out of 25); two of these initiatives were from Finland and one from France. Sweden was criticised partly for not setting any goals relating to outcome and thus making it impossible to assess whether they had been achieved, and partly because there was a weak link between municipal initiatives and national structures (Eurofound, 2012).

The work developed becomes difficult to assess without clearer descriptions of the methods being included in the evaluations, but the main restrictions are in respect of the opportunity to learn from projects already completed, to disseminate experiences and, for those who wish to start development work, to build on previous experiences of different working methods.

It is probably not particularly strange for this to be lacking in the evaluations because, as we explained above, the reports often specifically focus on those who have executed the work, who are well aware of the methods and approaches. However, this significantly reduces the opportunities to create aggregated knowledge about the work of projects. There are similar difficulties in subsequent research conducted within the European Regional Development Fund (Fred, Aggestam, Jakobsson & Svensson, 2012). Areas where the most advances have been made are within the care services and social work ([www.kunskapsguiden.se/evidensbaserad praktik](http://www.kunskapsguiden.se/evidensbaserad_praktik)).

In preparation for the programming period 2014–2020, the European Commission has placed a clearer focus on the impact of the European Structural and Investment Funds, which will be reflected in Sweden’s programmes. There may be reason to recall here the important starting points for an evidence-based approach. The English institution Research in Practice (RIP) has produced various guides that may lead to organisations successfully implementing change work ([www.socialstyrelsen.se](http://www.socialstyrelsen.se)). Implementation takes time. It may sometimes be several years before a new method has been integrated and become part of the ordinary work. Researchers usually talk about two to four years. It is possible to describe the implementation process as four phases.

## Needs identification

Change work should start by identifying the needs of new methods.

## Introduction

When needs have been identified and a decision made to introduce a new method, the next step is to secure the necessary resources. This requires premises, time and activities, new materials, recruitment and the training of staff. Teaching needs to include both exercises and continual feedback in order for change work to be successful.

## Use

Each method includes elements that constitute the essence of the method. These elements are referred to as ‘core components’. An important part of the implementation of a new method is to use the core components in the manner intended. The method can only be claimed to have been implemented correctly if the core components are implemented in the right way.

## Maintenance

A new method can only be said to have been implemented when more than half of the professionals are using the new method in the manner intended. Activities that have successfully maintained an evidence-based approach often have strong leaders who have managed to demonstrate the advantages of conducting an activity based on knowledge of research. Good leaders create a working climate that supports continuous development and improvement of the initiatives applied, focussing on improving the situation of the final target group.

(Source: National Board of Health and Welfare, 2012)

Consequently, local needs constitute the starting point and subsequently trying to identify approaches that are good and well-founded enough to cover these needs. An analysis of the surrounding world, a needs analysis and also a target group analysis are required before the start of a project in order to facilitate this. The work conducted locally can then clearly contribute to the knowledge about the relevant approach at a national level.

## 1.6 Proposals by Theme Group Youth

The aim of the proposals presented by Theme Group Youth is to provide answers to two questions:

- How can we ensure that the programming period 2014-2020 provides a better understanding of different methods to facilitate a more informed choice of methods in the future?
- How can we make the work of the evaluators and projects easier in our quest to improve the opportunities to aggregate knowledge?

### 1.6.1 Increased focus on methods and impact 2014–2020

If the wish is to be able to comment on methods and their impact more clearly than hitherto, another follow-up system within the European Social Fund and other parts of labour market policy is required, where the knowledge produced through evaluations and activities becomes a clearer component of such system.

The work to develop programme logic to provide answers to questions about the impact of various methods should be based on experience gathered from the National Board of Health and Welfare relating to evidence based practice. Theme Group Youth recommends that cooperation between different public authorities, the Swedish ESF Council, the National Board of Health and Welfare and responsible ministries should start as soon as possible in order to draw up such a programme.

### 1.6.2 Make the evaluations available for research

Making knowledge from projects available represents an important step in knowledge building within labour market policy. There should be interest in such material on the part of everyone involved, from projects and activities that want to develop their own work to evaluators and researchers who want to analyse various aspects of the projects' work, for example, the possibility of producing generalisable knowledge. Some projects, including evaluations, are currently lodged with the Swedish ESF Council's project bank, but a more systematic collection and presentation of the material should be possible.

Ensure that it is mandatory for all projects to report their evaluations. Assign the Swedish ESF Council (or another

appropriate stakeholder) to compile evaluations and make this material readily available and searchable for various stakeholders who are interested in the projects' activities.

### 1.6.3 Increase the opportunities for aggregatable knowledge through projects and evaluations

Locally, it might appear unnecessary to describe methods and approaches, as the client of an evaluation is well aware of these. At the same time, better preconditions are required to develop clearer, aggregatable knowledge where outsiders, researchers, evaluators and others will be able to see what characterised the work. This is to enable a comparison of different approaches and to identify patterns in their impact. There may be cause to emphasise this even more clearly, for example in the Swedish ESF Council's guidance for follow-up and evaluation for the programming period 2014-2020 and other guides for procuring evaluations and for on-going evaluation. There should be good preconditions for documenting the work, as on-going evaluators are also closer to projects than more traditional evaluation structures. If several projects and activities use identical evaluation questions, this opens the door for comparisons, while the supporting information may provide scope for more standardised forms that can be used by several stakeholders and projects.

As part of the work to disseminate information, projects and evaluators should ensure that the methods and approaches used are documented in the evaluations. A standardised way for projects and evaluators to produce such descriptions should also be considered aimed at improving comparability between different activities.

## 1.6.4 Knowledge about participants is important

Being aware of the participants' preconditions is necessary to be able to assess whether the outcome of a method or approach is interesting enough to implement. One and the same method/approach may result in very different outcomes depending on the needs and preconditions of the target groups. It should be possible to use standard registration and de-registration forms as a way of measuring and documenting both the characteristics of participants and their 'move' towards the labour market. Of course, the interest in this kind of tool may vary considering different needs and previous local follow-up systems, which suggests that it should be voluntary to use this kind of tool. It is also important to quality assure this kind of tool before starting to use it. In the preliminary study conducted in 2012, which preceded this meta-analysis, we discussed Theme Group Youth's reflections on the standard registration and de-registration forms used to assess a participant's 'status' before and after participating in the project (Theme Group Youth, 2012a). This may involve background factors such as level of education and previous contacts with, for instance, the Swedish Public Employment Service and also the young person's assessments of their skills and how far removed they are from employment, education or training. Theme Group Youth has initiated the compilation of this kind of material to examine different structures in the work. We have also contributed towards projects and the evaluators within the drop-out procurement using similar tools, and answering common questions. This work is still underway, but hopefully it will result in a greater opportunity to aggregate knowledge from the drop-out procurement than other invitations to tender. Major method development work within this area is also being conducted within the 'Plug In'

drop-out project. We will also be able to learn from this for the future. These initiatives are obviously important for the structure of the next programming period, but unfortunately we will have to pre-empt them as we already need to develop our tools.

The Swedish ESF Council should provide projects and evaluators with concrete follow-up and evaluation tools as a step towards improving the opportunities for comparability and aggregatable knowledge.

## 1.6.5 Clear requirements for the evaluations

The purpose and structure of the evaluation is determined by the specification of the project evaluations ordered.

The issue of evaluation is owned by the project. An attempt has been made to generate an exchange of experience between evaluators, among other things, through the process support provided by SPeL, which has shown that this is difficult to achieve. A small evaluation budget may have significant consequences on the interest in and possibility of participating in this kind of activity.

The general interest in this within the 'evaluation market' may be limited as, although knowledge sharing can certainly function as support for individual evaluators, it may also mean in practice having to share experiences and knowledge with competitors. This suggests that clear requirements should be imposed on documenting methods and approaches in the evaluations and that evaluators are to relate the findings to other similar activities and for the purposes set out in the invitation to tender through which the project has received funds.

Impose clear requirements on projects for methods and approaches to be documented and described in the evaluations and that this is to be related to other activities

in the surrounding world and the objectives of the Social Fund.

### 1.6.6 Coordinated procurement or another evaluation structure

Trying out alternatives to the projects' current arrangement for engaging evaluators may be of interest. One such alternative may be, for instance, through an invitation to tender for project funds to be combined with an 'invitation to tender for evaluation' with a clear structure setting out that the evaluation is to be productive both for the projects concerned and in terms of the potential to build up generalisable knowledge. Here, formalised documentation methods can be drawn up which can then be disseminated as a recommended approach for future evaluations. A model where one evaluator is responsible for evaluating several projects could be considered for smaller projects, where parallels can be drawn between projects (see, for example, Jönsson & Eriksson, 2010).

There should be a more standardised strategy for evaluation for the period 2014 to 2020. This may be implemented through cluster evaluations (one evaluator for several projects) linked to invitations to tender or a specific theme (this may be based on target group, method, sector or some other factor).

### 1.6.7 Needs identification for structural impact

There is a lack of knowledge about the extent to which decisions about methods in regular activities are based on the current knowledge situation (Svensson & Zander, 2014). There should be good opportunities to conduct an analysis before the start of programming period 2014-2020 concerning who and on what grounds decisions are

made about initiatives to strengthen a young person's transition between education/training and employment.

The Swedish ESF Council or another relevant stakeholder should be assigned to conduct a study about the grounds for decisions concerning what initiatives for young people are made in regular activities. Knowledge about what the organisations need to know in order to be able to make a decision may represent an important contribution to the development of a functional structure for evaluation.

### 1.6.8 Learning from other countries in order to develop robust structures

As mentioned previously, the problems associated with developing an ongoing structure for labour market policy initiatives is not unique to Sweden. On the other hand, a lot can be learnt from what other countries are doing. One starting point may be Eurofound's report from 2012 and the report Focus 09 Methods against the exclusion of young people – examples from Europe (National Board for Youth Affairs, 2009).

Theme Group Youth proposes that the Swedish ESF Council in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders conducts an international comparative analysis in a number of countries about the important factors for a robust follow-up, evaluation and aggregatable learning structure for Sweden.





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