

E-EDUCATION TOOLS AS A WAY TO ESF POSSIBILITIES DEVELOPING IN LATVIAN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

Statistical data of utilization of the means of European Social Fund in Latvia shows that its largest part ends up in Riga. First of all, this is due to relatively small amount of applications submitted from regional entities due to preconception that the preparation of application is too complicate and this assumption causes incredibility in own forces. The paper describes the approach and measures by what Riga Technical University (RTU) within co-funded by European Social Fund (ESF) project intends to improve ability of regional entities and inhabitants to uptake opportunities provided by ESF. The core of measures is specially developed continuing educational courses covered either overall issues of project management customized to wide auditorium as well as information regarding particular activities and calls. To draw replaying of recorded materials near to live event the network of supporting points consisting of appropriately equipped premises and appropriately trained coordinators whose will play a role of presenters and mediators to information holders are developed. This network will be expanded by upper-layer supporting points governed by first level coordinators. At the same time the library will be enriched by additional learning courses and records of informational events related not only to ESF activities.

Keywords:

European Structural Funds, regional development, project application, e-Environment, further education.

Introduction

There are relatively small amount of applications for European Social Fund (ESF) in Latvia projects submitted from regional entities. Analyse of inhabitants' awareness about acquisition of European Structural Funds in Latvia (SKDS, 2005) shows that only 7 percents of respondents who could be potential applicants compel themselves to write a proposal. From our point of view, the main reason is the preconception that the preparations of applications are too complicated and this assumption causes incredibility in own forces. These fears are proved by the fact that only one third of those who decided to apply to funding consider that the process of preparation and submission of project application was simply or rather simply than hard-earned (PKC, 2005).

One of the main aims of ESF is developing of human resources and promoting integration into the labour market (SPD, PC, 2004). Data about acquisition of ESF programs in education (AVED, 2005) shows that more than half of approved projects and more than half of amount of funding is realizing in Riga.

It is necessary to investigate the reasons of such situation and elaborate particular set of measures for situation improvement.

We consider one way to improve the situation to be the appropriate continuing education of regional entities' representatives and inhabitants, giving them the same knowledge and skills as in metropolis in issues related to the submission of applications. This education envisages distance learning which would increase their competitiveness in National programs, open calls and grants and therefore facilitate increasing of their level of life and promote accession of the Republic of Latvia to the European Union.

Description of current condition

In Republic of Latvia applications for ESF projects usually prepare special people, who either digest methods of project drawing up self-taught, attending, for example, ESF announced project competition seminars about particular activities, or external project drawing up specialists.

There are just few serious courses, such as organized by the Ministry of Education and Science project manager courses about EU funds, it projects

and project application drawing up. These courses take place in Riga and because of high participation fee are financially beneficial only for big organizations, such as leading high education institutions, to prepare specialists for ESF state program support.

In Riga and biggest cities project application drawing up can be digested by consulting with more sophisticated application writers, as well as with representatives of agencies responsible for particular activities. For instance, it could be (MoES, 2004) Agency for Vocational Education Development (<http://www.piaa.gov.lv>). Such consultations could be both in presence and by postal courses like e-mail. In provinces it is possible to consult practically with PIAA employees only using e-mail.

Thinking about first project application for people without any special knowledge frequent and informal consulting, which can be possible mainly in Riga, is necessary. Just mentioned partly explains big amount of project application from Riga and rather small amount of project application from provinces. To motivate province organizations and inhabitants to participate in EU funds' project competitions and other activities serious work with dormant people, who are interested in it, is necessary. Suitable form for this work is further educational courses in provinces.

There are a lot of continuing education programs offered in Latvia. Principally those programs envisage:

- full-time training;
- extramural teaching, where trainee receives teaching materials;
- few distance learning courses, where trainee receives teaching aids by post or e-mail.

No one of offered training forms fully satisfy potential project applicants' and executors' requirements. It is due to following reasons:

Fulltime further education courses are organized in Riga and cities, thus it is difficult for province inhabitants to attend courses because of their immobile lifestyle. Moreover, attending a course with several days of business trip obligates potential submitter to prepare project application, but people, at least psychologically, are not ready for it.

Extramural and E-courses usually organize further education in concrete narrow profession specializations, prescribing that participants already are specialists in concrete reviewed area.

Further education programs usually are developed for long time. In the case of EU fund activities it is difficult to predict when and for what activity the course must be produced. Therefore in training course for potential project's applicants two parts must be prescribed – universal general part and variable part related to concrete activity (opened call).

For province inhabitants, starting working with concrete project application must be clear, that they will get all information that is provided in centralized applicants' seminars, which they could not attend. The possible solution is to draw up informational part of centralized seminar, so that it will be available to potential interested all over the country.

We came to a conclusion that a set of concrete measures, which provides province inhabitants' involvement in EU fund's activities, potential project applicants' training, notification and consultation offices in their places of adobe, is necessary. By our opinion, the most convenient way of involving province inhabitants in EU fund activities is usage of learning-communication environment on the Web.

Main idea

The basis of proposed campaign is implementation via Internet in the form of distance learning specially developed course consisting of two parts. First one is devoted to overall issues of project management adapted to wide auditorium. Second one devoted to specifics of ESF projects' application and implementation. To support fulfilment of mentioned above course (especially its second part) is created multi-level technical-human environment covering the whole country (Lavendels, 2006). This environment is providing conditions for course studies also after project completeness (multiplicative effect).

Integrated approach and preconditions

Within the framework of activity, specially devoted to enhancement of the economically relevant continuing training opportunities (MoES, 2004) two projects are implemented:

- “Informational Technologies for motivating Latvian provinces to take advantages of opportunities provided by ESF” (hereinafter “RTU Project” in distinguishing with projects as subject matter);
- and “Informational Technologies for further education of Latvian province teachers of Informatics”, which is developed together by RTU and Institute of Mathematics and Informatics of Latvian university.

RTU Projects' timeliness is confirmed by the fact, that later on new national program “Regional EU structure fund informational centre establishment and activity” was announced (FM, 2006), that solves problems touched in RTU Project on highest level.

Projects are parts of integrated set of measures “Informational Technologies to form universal learning-communication environment on the Web” and envisage technical, methodical and information technologies solutions to form universal learning-communication E-Environment in state with

supporting points in provinces. Integrated approach envisages variety of measures, int. al. participation in ESF projects to achieve both direct project aim, and prepare conditions for further ESF projects execution developing universal learning-communication environment on the Web.

Facilities developed during mentioned projects, together with supporting infrastructure will be used as a base for further ESF supported activities' realization in Latvian provinces.

Concerned RTU Project has several preconditions. First of all in such a way during the partially funded by ESF project "Informational technologies for inclusion of the young people with special needs into education and society" (Lavendels, 2005) RTU is drawing up methods for development of communication environment for groups of inhabitants with specific needs.

From other hand is realized approved by the Ministry of Education and Science further education programme "E-course for practical computer using in teaching of programming and adopting of application programs" (ISEC, 2004, Sitikovs, 2005).

Thus was acquired first experience in organizing via the Web further education with properties of classical classroom teaching (Grundspenkis, 2005, Grundspenkis, 2006).

General aim

Projects' general aim is to facilitate human resources' development and encourage improvement of situation in labour market by securing high level of employment and struggle against unemployment, as well as realizing equalization of regional economical distinction. To gain the aim it is necessary to stimulate Latvian provinces' organizations and inhabitants to maintain situation improvement in regions, int. al. to employ abilities, which offer EU fund activities both in form of National program, and projects' competition form, that Project is pointed at.

Project envisages the set of concrete measures, which will make possible province inhabitants to get main knowledge in their places of adobe to participate successfully in ESF activities, thus to stimulate both personal situation improvement, and regional development.

Project contributes to average-term aims defined in Single Programming Document (SPD, 2004) and Programme Complement (PC, 2004) – competition ability's development and employment improvement, human resources development and infrastructure improvement, as well as structural policy's horizontal aim following-up – information society's formation, region development and gender equality. Project work results will further valuable accession of the Republic of Latvia to the European Union.

Direct aim of work and main activities

Direct aims is further e-education on the Web of Latvian province inhabitants for drawing up and execution of project applications for ESF supported activities competition, to motivate province organizations and inhabitants to participate in ESF activities.

To achieve mentioned above aim the following was done:

- development of equipment for preparing voice and video materials accordingly with project needs;
- setting up a set of supporting points in all Latvian areas as well as appropriate training of their responsible persons - coordinators;
- development of computerized learning course about project organization and its implementation in general as well as for ESF project application and realization particularly;
- implementation of these learning courses on the Web using network of supporting points;
- creation of urgent information about ESF activities in computerized form and its deployment on the Web to motivate Latvian province inhabitants to participate in those events;
- preparation of provisions for computerized learning courses self-dependency after projects are finished.

Target group

Projects' direct target group are Latvian province state establishment and municipality employees, who are interested in offered by ESF opportunities. Province organizations and inhabitants want to participate in ESF activities, but do not have necessary knowledge and support for successful drawing up project application and its realizing.

Developing environment for province inhabitants' e-further-education in their places of adobe Latvian province organizations' and inhabitants' possibilities to take advantages on opportunities provided by ESF are drawing near to city inhabitants' opportunities.

Gender equality

Currently in provinces is appreciable level of unemployment, usually limited demand is for low-qualified rough labour performers, thus provinces' women have worse employment opportunities than men.

As the result of the project qualified performer level of employment must rise, namely, demand for ESF project applications' potential writers and executors, int. al. for typical women positions:

secretaries, specialists in document drawing up, accountancy and calculation, must come in sight in Latvian provinces. By this medium by the result of project's activity in long period of time particularly for province women employment opportunities must grow.

The project envisages continuing E-education, directed towards EU fund digestion, for province inhabitants in their places of adobe. In this manner gender equality is more strengthen, as province women, taking into consideration their lifestyle (housekeeping connected with farming, insufficiency of junior children educational establishments), have problems in improving their professional knowledge in fulltime studies far away from their places of adobe.

Investment in regional development

Provinces' involving in digestion of ESF resources and execution of ESF projects directly stimulate regional development.

Preparing specialists for ESF activities' execution, project will form people in provinces who can take part in European Unions' joint actions for regional development upon the bottom of regional planning documents that determine development priorities and support the set of particular measures. By these mediums project also makes a relevant contribution in regional development.

Development of informational society

Project involves trainees in information technologies and web usage in their daily work and prepares them for new digestion of computer usage. Project prescribes realization of learning process by using informational technologies, wherewith project activity itself stimulates informational society's formation in state provinces. Usage of informational technologies rouses interest directly in young people, in this manner directly young people are involved both in project's direct activities, and informational society's formation.

Description of the course

One of the most respected standards in the field of PM is developed by Project Management Institute "A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). ANSI PMBOK2000" (PMBOK, 2000). This document has the overall nature and could be implemented in any kind of projects. Nevertheless each particular project has its own (and maybe unique) properties, in most cases caused by assumptions and constraints related to project sponsors. One of such case is features of specific requirements to projects funded by ESF in Latvia. (Sitikovs, 2006).

What is regarding to the second part of the course that for province inhabitants starting work on concrete project application must be clear that they will get all information that is provided in centralized applicants' seminars, which they could not attend. The possible solution is to record informational part of centralized seminar, so that it will be available to potential interested all over the country. But there are two issues related to recording and replaying correspondingly. Simple recording of event to video-camera could not provide necessary quality (for instance slides shown on the wall-screen have much worse quality than originals power-point-slides) and simple video-recording will be huge in size as a file. So special cutting of video, slides and sound is necessary to provide both appropriate quality and minimum size of file. From other hand simple replaying of recorded event is not equivalent to participation on this event. First of all it is related to impossibility to ask a question. So it is necessary to implement some mechanism allowing providing analogue of feedback from listener to presenter.

Technological solution

The idea is to use a technology when into the file is recording not an image, but only changes against previous picture. In this case showing a static image like a slide will not require any volume of storage. Usage of such approach (exactly ScreenFlash – see www.unflash.com) made a good showing (Sitikovs, 2005).

Provision of feedbacks

The idea is not to replay recorded event on user's PC, but to organize some equivalent of seminar – public demonstration of recorded event to the group of participants. For this case is necessary to settle up a set of supporting points covering the whole country.

On the first stage a set of 5 supporting points in all Latvian areas is established. The supporting point consists of appropriately equipped premises (school's computer lab, library's hall etc.) and appropriately trained responsible person – coordinator.

During public demonstration of electronic course coordinator plays a role of presenter with a responsibility to answer to questions raised during the presentation or to play a role of mediator between auditorium and seminar's holders. On first stage of its growing the network of supporting points was used for promotion and education regarding ESF activities.

Then the network will be expanded by second level of supporting points subordinated and reported to coordinators of first level points. Second level supporting points will work under the same rules as first one with single distinction that second level points coordinators are mediators between their

auditoriums and first level points coordinators. At the same time library of presentations will be extended by additional learning courses and records of additional informational events related not only to ESF activities.

Usability of results

Project's work results mainly are anticipated to ESF activities support and ESF projects applications' compilers and executors.

Preparing specialists to execute ESF activities, Project prepares people in provinces, who can take part in joint European Union regional development measures, on the ground of regional planning documents that determines development priorities and supporting measures. Thus Project invests as well in regional development.

Project's target group acquires new knowledge via the Web, wherewith it will be drawn nearer informational technologies usage in daily routine – informational society's formation will be stimulated.

Conclusions

Within the RTU project "Informational Technologies for motivating Latvian provinces to take advantages of opportunities provided by ESF" first phase of learning-communication environment on the Web is developed. This environment will be further maintained and expanded. Modernizing and developing the environment further education courses will be reconsidered. Thus from the course about particular activities outdated topics could be removed, but instead new topics about outstanding ESF offers will be included.

Acquired abilities in project organization and information technologies skills will provide growth of Latvian province inhabitants' economic activity in longer period of time.

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