

The European Social Fund and Popularizing Lifelong Learning and Vocational Education in the Lubelskie Voivodship

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Abstract

The accession of Poland to the European Union created both new opportunities and tasks for many entities. This article presents the analysis of the use of the European funds from the European Social Fund for vocational education (9.2 Improvement of the quality and attractiveness of vocational training) and lifelong learning (9.3 Popularizing formal lifelong learning in school forms). These two measures have been selected by the author because expending these funds on the above mentioned tasks in the current financial perspective of 2007–2012 is one of the most difficult. The SWOT analysis conducted in Poland 2006, i.e. just after implementing the Operational Programme of the European Social Fund, indicated the following: (1) low quality and attractiveness of vocational education system, (2) low popularity of cooperation between employers and schools, (3) weak system of educational-vocational consultancy, (4) weak connections between curriculums and labour market, and (5) low rate of participation of adults in lifelong learning. According to numerous researches, the vocational educational system is at a much lower level than the general education system, and therefore there is not so much interest in it. On the other hand, there is a big demand for graduates of vocational schools on the labour market. The European funds are a chance to improve the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and its promotion. It is also a chance to introduce innovative forms of teaching, equip schools with modern didactic materials, and provide additional entrepreneurship and foreign languages classes. In a modern market economy and with an incredibly fast rate of civilization development, society has to permanently upgrade qualifications and skills to catch up with changing technologies. The modern knowledge-based economy and technological race mean that employers need employees who are better educated. Their knowledge, skills and creativity will have a significant influence on the competitiveness of companies, regions and states.

Introduction

On 28 September 2007, the European Commission decided on granting support to Poland in the framework of the operational programme of the European Social Fund to Poland, in the programming period from 1 January 2007 to 31 December 2013.¹ The agreed amount of the support from the European Social Fund was EUR 9 707 176 000⁽²⁾, and a maximum co-funding rate for particular projects of 85%. These funds have been included in the Human Capital Operational Programme, the main aim of which was to “make it possible to fully use the potential of human resources by the increase of employment and adaptation potential of enterprises and their employees, increasing the level of education of the society, decreasing the areas of social exclusion and supporting the creation of state administrative structures.” (Human Capital... 2007, 11).

* Voivodeship—Polish administration region on the NUTS 2 level. Poland is divided into 16 voievdeships.

1. Decision of the European Commission no CCI 2007 PL 051 PO 001.

2. [In the journal (in both Polish and English texts) European practice of number notation is followed that is, 36 333,33 (European style) = 36 333.33 (Canadian style) = 36,333.33 (US and British style). Furthermore in the International System of Units (SI units), fixed spaces rather than commas are used to mark off groups of three digits, both to the left and to the right of the decimal point.]

The programme was divided into the following 9 Priorities:

- Priority I—Employment and social integration
- Priority II—Development of human resources and adaptation potential of enterprises and improvement of health conditions for working people
- Priority III—High quality of the education system
- Priority IV—Tertiary education and science
- Priority V—Good governance
- Priority VI—A labour market open to all
- Priority VII—Promotion of social integration
- Priority VIII—Regional human resources for the economy
- Priority IX—Development of education and competences in regions

It is worth noting that the first 5 Priorities are carried out on the central level, while the remaining 4 on the regional level. 60% of the allocated funds was earmarked for regional programmes, mainly for the support of people and social groups with 40% for the programmes carried out by particular public entities, mainly for the support of structures and systems.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Measure 9.2 “Improving the quality and attractiveness of vocational education” and Measure 9.3 “Popularizing formal lifelong learning in school forms in the Lubelskie Voivodship.”

1 Measure 9.2 Improving the quality and attractiveness of vocational education

The SWOT analysis conducted in Poland in 2006 indicated the following:

- low rate of participation of adults in lifelong learning
- weak connections between curriculums and the labour market
- low popularity of cooperation between employers and schools
- weak system of educational-vocational consultancy
- low quality and attractiveness of vocational education system (Human Capital... 2007, 110)

According to numerous researches, the vocational educational system is at a much lower level than the general education system, and therefore there is not so much interest in it. On the other hand, there is a big demand for graduates of vocational schools on the labour market. The main aim of the Measure “Improving the quality and attractiveness of the vocational education system” is to increase the quality of educational offerings provided by schools and vocational education institutions. This measure underlines the need to promote vocational education and its benefits, but the main emphasis is put on the quality of the education process. This process should emphasize additional didactic lessons, pedagogical-psychological consultancy, and support for students from rural areas. It would be important to provide innovative forms of teaching, additional entrepreneurship and foreign language classes for students, and to supply schools with modern didactic materials.

Cooperation with employers concerning job training/apprenticeship and modification of current syllabuses as well as introducing new trends in accordance with modern economic requirements is a separate issue. A great role is to be played here by labour market institutions which are to diagnose a demand for particular qualifications on the job market (Human Capital... 2007, 145). In the Lubelskie Voivodship the European funds earmarked for this purpose amount to EUR 27 533 925, which is approximately PLN 115 mln.

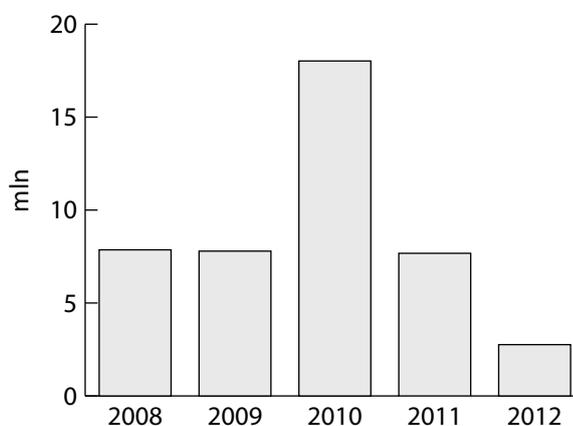
The first call for proposals, which was announced in 2008, gained a lot of interest. In total there were 84 applications submitted for the total amount of more than PLN 40 847 205, where the allocation amount was PLN 23 220 815. Unfortunately, since the quality of these applications was on a low level, only 15 contracts were signed, the value of which was PLN 7 859 711. There was a similar situation in 2009—due to low interest among beneficiaries, the allocation amount was decreased from PLN 25 mln to 10 mln. Thirty three applications were submitted and the amount of signed contracts was PLN 7 790 593. In 2010 the Department for the European Social Fund organized additional informational meetings, as a result of which 104 applications for more than PLN 67 mln were submitted and the value of signed contracts was more than PLN 18 mln (the allocation being PLN 30 mln).

Tab. 1. Calls for proposals announced by the Department for the European Social Fund of the Marshall's Office in 2008–2012 (PLN)

No. of the call for proposals	Allocation amount for the call for proposals	No. of submitted applications	Value of submitted applications	No. of signed contracts	Value of signed contracts
3/POKL/9.2/2008	23 220 815	84	40 847 205,92	15	7 859 711,41
5/POKL/9.2/2009	10 000 000	33	13 989 789,93	15	7 790 593,05
1/POKL/9.2/2010	30 000 000	104	67 829 576,81	29	18 018 795,65
6/POKL/9.2/PWP/2010	4 400 000	0	0,00	0	0,00
2/POKL/9.2/2011	30 000 000	104	95 011 860,74	7	4 680 608,95
7/POKL/PI/IX/2011	5 000 000	12	20 816 681,33	1	2 994 050,00
8/POKL/9.2/PWP/2011	7 000 000	2	2 776 506,35	0	0,00
2/POKL/9.2/2012	25 000 000	18	33 138 951,55	2	2 531 626,24
4/POKL/9.2/2012	25 000 000	44	59 449 820,04	1	229 278,80
Systemic project "Vocational future of the Lubelskie Region"				1	4 999 755,00
Total	159 620 815	401	333 860 392,67	71	49 104 419,10

Source: Own study based on the data from the Department for the European Social Fund

Unfortunately, despite promotional and informational campaigns, no application was submitted in the next call for proposals, which was dedicated to vocational schools and in which the condition was to establish supranational cooperation. It seems that vocational schools are not interested in international cooperation even though poviats and cities in the region, being the foundational bodies of these schools, have quite a lot of partnership agreements with their counterparts in many countries. At the end of December 2011, 82 schools and vocational training institutions implemented development programmes, which constituted 30,37% of the target value of the attainment indicator for the period 2007–2013. As far as cooperation with enterprises is concerned, support was given to 23 schools (the target value being 202), which constituted 11,39% of the target value. It seems that this low level of execution is mainly a result of low interest among applicants and entrepreneurs in this type of project. The reason can also be a low level of cross-financing available in the framework of the projects, which, in the case of vocational schools which are not financially supported, is an essential reason for the lack of applications for the EU funds available in Measure 9.2.

**Fig. 1.** Use of the funds in Measure 9.2 in 2008–2012

Source: Own study based on the data from the Department for the European Social Fund

In order to encourage schools to participate in calls for proposals within Measure 9.2 the Intermediary Body of the Human Capital Operational Programme introduced a strategic criterion (20 points): “The support in the framework of the project will be given to at least 3 vocational schools, which have not been granted any support under the calls for proposals announced for the Action 9.2 of the Human Capital Operational Programme in 2008–2010 by the Marshall’s Office of the Lubelskie Voivodship in Lublin”. Moreover, the availability criterion was introduced: “The project shall assume cooperation between schools and vocational training institutions and employers, aiming at modernizing the educational offer and adjusting it to the needs of the local and regional labour market (job training, introducing new specialization in education, modification of existing curriculums), including preparation of schools for changes in the education system and thus enabling schools to run and certify vocational training courses”.

Unfortunately, the above mentioned actions did not bring the expected results either—there were 104 applications submitted in the next call for proposals 2/POKL/9.2/2011. In spite of the open formula of the call for proposals which meant that the applicants did not compete between one another to score the highest possible amount of points (submitting a correct content-related application and scoring the required minimum of 60 points in total and minimum 60% of the points in each of the criteria was a guarantee to receive financing) by 31 of December 2011 there were only 7 contracts for the total amount of PLN 4 680 608 signed. It seems that this low interest of applicants in the call for proposals can be a result of a difficulty in meeting the criterion of verified availability on the stage of content-related assessment; that is, “The project shall assume cooperation between schools and vocational training institutions and employers, aiming at modernizing the educational offer and adjusting it to the needs of the local and regional labour market (job training, introducing new education specializations, modification of existing curriculums), including preparation of schools for changes in the education system and thus enabling schools to run and certify vocational training courses”.

Due to the low interest among potential applicants and the low quality of the submitted applications, the Intermediary Body ordered an evaluation survey concerning “Assessment of barriers in applying and carrying out projects under Measure 9.2 of the Human Capital Operational Programme” in order to elaborate proper forms for application for funds under this Measure, which could be helpful for the potential applicants—the schools which have not applied for funds or did apply but ineffectively. It is especially worrying that as many as 60% of school headmasters were of the opinion that it is an entrepreneur that should take the initiative to establish cooperation with their educational institution. It seems that this is the reason for the low interest in the calls of proposals and poor quality of the applications submitted. The entrepreneurs are usually more interested in receiving a non-returnable subsidy for the development of their company than in cooperating with schools. The proof for that is the fact that in the Regional Operational Programme of the Lubelskie Region for 2007–2013, 22 calls for proposals (PLN 962 302 066,85) announced under the Priority I axis *Economic Infrastructure* received 4 342 applications (Grabczuk 2012, 689).

It is headmasters that should be the main initiators of the cooperation with entrepreneurs. Such cooperation gives teachers a greater opportunity to teach entrepreneurship. With quite a high unemployment rate (14,1%), employers are not forced to train future employees. In the present global market economy, the headmasters, board of teachers, and parent councils should be responsible for applying for the EU funds if they want to develop the vocational education system. The education institutions they manage should be more competitive. It may be a matter of their mentality and certain habits, but there is no room for that in the current reality.

The next calls for proposals to be announced in 2012, such as *Testing Innovation Projects* will verify if the situation has changed. The most important tasks under this call for proposals are modernization of the vocational education offer in connection with the needs of the local and regional labour market, and actions aimed at increasing the interest of junior high school and high school pupils in continuing their education and choosing specializations which are of key importance for the knowledge-based economy. The aim of this task is to increase the level of social innovation in the educational area through innovation projects, which are in accordance with the objectives of Priority IX of the Human Capital Operational Programme.

As of 4 September 2012, the indicators, enumerated in table 2, were achieved under the measure “Improving the quality and attractiveness of the vocational education system”

Tab. 2. Indicators under the measure Improving the quality and attractiveness of the vocational education system

Indicator name	Sub-measure/types of operations (projects)	Target ind. ^a	Achiev. val. ^b	% execution ^c
Number of schools and vocational training institutions which implemented development programmes	Development programmes of schools and vocational training institutions aiming at diminishing the disproportion in students' achievements in the process of training and improving the quality of the training process	207	161	77,78%
Number of schools and vocational training institutions which cooperated with enterprises in the scope of implementation of development programmes	Development programmes of schools and vocational training institutions aiming at diminishing the disproportion in students' achievements in the process of training and improving the quality of the training process	155	77	49,68%
Number of students in vocational training schools, who participated in job training (in companies)	Cooperation between schools and vocational training institutions and employers in the scope of organizing job training for vocational school students including practical job training in companies and covering the costs of the training supervisor ^d	20 654	1456	1,07%
	Development programmes of schools and vocational training institutions aiming at diminishing the disproportion in students' achievements in the process of training and improving the quality of the training process			

Source: Own study based on the data from the Department for the European Social Fund

^aTarget indicator value

^bAchieved value of the indicator

^c% execution of the target value

^dType of operation introduced in the Detailed Description of the Programme Priorities dated 20.12.2011.after periodical review (binding as of 1 January 2012)

2 Measure 9.3 Popularizing formal lifelong learning in school forms

Unfortunately, the projects under the Sub-Measure 9.3 “Popularizing formal lifelong learning in school forms” were also not very popular among beneficiaries. The allocation in this Sub-Measure for the years 2007–2013 amounts to EUR 8 161 057,74 (i.e., PLN 33 867 675,27). Lifelong learning should also be understood as acquiring the skills of constant knowledge acquisition, combining experience with the reception of knowledge and preparing an adult to lead his/her own life (Bagnall 1990, 1–3). The main objective of this Measure is the increase in the number of adults in the lifelong learning process. It is important since the rates of participation of adults in the process of lifelong learning in Poland are relatively lower in comparison with other countries.

There is an additional problem in our country—it is the low level of education of adults in relation to young people currently completing their education. The reason for that is the educational boom that occurred in 1989 (Human Capital... 2007, 73). This stratification proves that there are needs in the scope of lifelong learning. In large measure, it is connected with both economic, social and political transformations that occurred in Poland in the last 20 years and with outdated knowledge and competences in a rapidly changing innovation-based economy. When the assumptions of the programme were formulated, Poland had “one of the lowest levels of reading and writing fluency among adults in the OECD countries (i.e., 77% of the adult population did not achieve the 3rd level), which is regarded as a minimum enabling effective participation in modern society” (Human Capital... 2007). Another important indicator is the quality of educational services offered to adults and the interest in training dependent on existing education level. People with higher education are more willing to participate in various forms of education than those with vocational training.

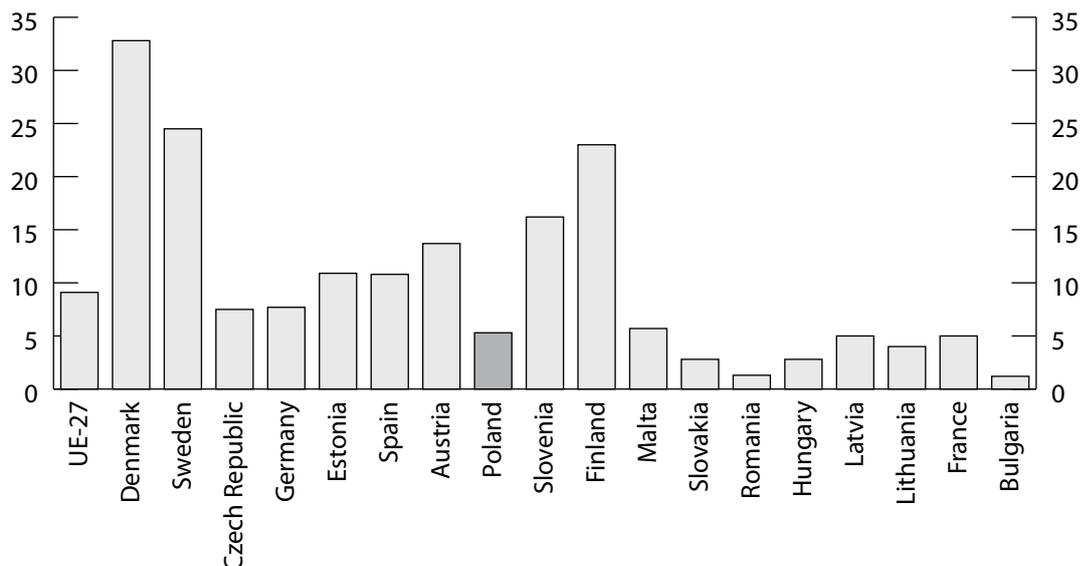


Fig. 2. Participation of adults (aged 25–64) in lifelong learning. Data from 2010

Source: Study based on the Eurostat data

In the present market economy, employees have to increase their qualifications on an ongoing basis to catch up with changing technologies (Boni 2009, 93). At present, staff quality and knowledge is more significant than their low remuneration. Therefore, people who want to play an important role in the modern economy have to upgrade their skills all the time. The labour market is more and more changeable and thus employees ready for rapid changes and constantly learning are more desired.

The Report *Poland 2030* says: “There is a need to boost the readiness of the Polish people to participate in the lifelong learning process and to provide them with an educational offer in a proper amount and on a proper level. In order to achieve it:

1. Starting as early as possible, the education system should not only convey necessary knowledge to students, but most of all it should accustom them to continuously acquire and use the knowledge and it should teach them these skills.
2. At the same time, an efficient life long learning system should be established, which will enable the ability to upgrade and change qualifications, which in turn will guarantee work mobility. It is vital to popularize and support informal education methods—the qualification acquired in this way should be verified and acknowledged” (Boni 2009).

It seems that at present we have the fastest rate of “the ageing of knowledge”, especially specialist knowledge. Even graduates of prestigious universities, who completed their education several years ago and do not upgrade their qualifications and do not make use of the informal education, may have problems in using computer or telecommunication services for example.

The objective of Priority IX—Development of education and competences in regions, under Measure 9.3 was to increase the participation of adults in lifelong learning in school forms. It was to increase the availability and quality of lifelong learning. This support is dedicated to persons aged 25–64 and those aged 18–24 who do not participate in education. This programme was aimed at adult schools, life long learning institutions, social-economic partners and employers. The activity scope was quite broad and it included informational campaigns on formal lifelong learning, upgrading education and general and vocational qualifications. Counseling services for adults, support for schools and lifelong learning institutions, monitoring of the needs of the local job market were also of great importance. Special attention was paid to development of innovative forms of training (for example e-learning) and improving the quality of the educational offer.

The first call for proposals was conducted in 2008 and it was not very popular among beneficiaries—there were 29 applications submitted. Unfortunately, the value of the applications was not high and their quality was poor. Only 6 contracts for the total amount of PLN 2 993 866 were

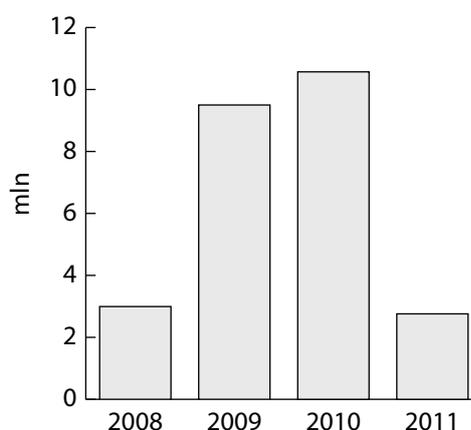
Tab. 3. Calls for proposals under the Sub-Measure 9.3 Popularizing formal lifelong learning in school forms (PLN)

No. of call for proposals	Allocation amount for call for proposals	No. of submitted applications	Value of submitted applications	No. of signed contracts	Value of signed contracts
6/POKL/9.3/2008	5 813 240	29	13 205 361,70	6	2 993 866,60
3/POKL/9.3/2009	10 000 000	71	43 445 079,65	19	9 499 936,60
3/POKL/9.3/2010	20 000 000	66	56 770 020,88	11	10 569 865,52
4/POKL/9.3/2011	10 000 000	67	59 206 321,36	5	2 758 398,45
Total	45 813 240	233	172 626 783,59	41	25 822 067,17

Source: Own study based on the data from the Department for the European Social Fund

signed while the allocation amount was twice as much (i.e., PLN 5 813 240). It was much better in 2009 when 71 applications were submitted and 19 contracts were signed (PLN 9 499 936) with the allocation being PLN 10 mln.

The situation was much more worse in 2010 when the amount to be spent was PLN 20 mln and only 11 contracts were signed (the contracted amount being PLN 10 569 865). Of course, the assumed target, according to which 8 780 people were supposed to participate in lifelong learning, was not achieved. In sum, support was given to 1 102 people, which constitutes 12,25% of the value of the target for the years 2007–2013. It is worth noting that adults aged 25–64 were more willing to make use of the support under the Sub-Measure 8.1.1 of the Human Capital Operational Programme, which enabled them in a short time (on average 2–4 months) to acquire skills and qualifications needed on a changeable job market.

**Fig. 3.** Use of the EU funds in Measure 9.3 in 2008–2011

Source: Own calculations

The situation was similar in 2011 when only 5 contracts for PLN 2 758 398 were signed, with the allocation amount for the call for proposals being PLN 10 mln. In total, in 2008–2010 there were 41 contracts signed for the value of PLN 25 822 067. The assumed amount to be spent on this call for proposals was PLN 45 813 240.

Difficulties in achieving the objectives of the measures connected with lifelong learning were observed not only in the Lubelskie Voivodship but throughout the country. That is why, as of 1st January 2012, after a periodical review, the Ministry of Regional Development excluded this Measure from the programme and introduced a new measure also concerning adult lifelong learning but with modified forms of support. The new offer additionally allowed the possibility to support persons aged 18–25 not participating in education and for the persons over age 64. High schools could also benefit from support. The above-mentioned changes seem to be beneficial since the all of lifelong learning was included under one Priority.³ However, it is essential to perceive lifelong learning

3. Until 31.12.2011 education was divided into 2 Priorities 8.1.1 — Lifelong learning in non-school forms and 9.3 — Lifelong learning in school forms

through the prism of both formal and informal education as well as self-education (Cropley 1980). This is proven by the fact that Sub-Measure 8.1.1 Supporting the development of professional qualifications and counseling for enterprises was very popular among beneficiaries.

Tab. 4. Calls for proposals announced under Priority VIII, Sub-Measure 8.1.1 (PLN)

No. of the call for proposals	Allocation amount for the call for proposals	Number of submitted applications	Value of submitted applications	No. of signed contracts	Value of signed contracts (as of 30.09.2012)
1/POKL/8.1.1/2007	6 600 000,00	137	83 012 608,15	9	6 214 864,27
1/POKL/8.1.1/2008	26 666 937,00	345	197 804 338,81	48	24 809 982,24
3/POKL/8.1.1/2008	38 498 454,73	496	326 868 473,27	75	39 023 101,27
1/POKL/8.1.1/2009	50 000 000,00	306	181 820 536,09	87	49 991 469,87
1/POKL/8.1.1/2010	50 000 000,00	245	227 725 732,64	62	49 463 462,08
6/POKL/8.1.1/2010	20 000 000,00	162	106 309 094,49	21	15 772 166,76
3/POKL/8.1.1/2011	58 500 000,00	233	198 368 173,52	55	50 533 711,26
4/POKL/8.1.1/2011	10 000 000,00	54	45 894 036,16	9	8 690 300,66
1/POKL/8.1.1/2012	30 000 000,00	140	80 095 858,57	7	3 192 822,26
2/POKL/8.1.1/2012	50 000 000,00	280	184 630 020,28	0	in the process ^a
Total	340 265 391,73	2 398	1 632 528 871,98	373	247 691 880,67

Source: Own study based on the data from the Department for the European Social Fund

^ain the process of evaluation

Projects concerned various types of training courses (both general and specific) and counseling for employees and management staff. Special attention was paid to training courses on work organization, including flexible forms of implementing sustainable production technologies, and using communication and information technologies. Training courses on accounting, finance and economics also constituted a substantial part.

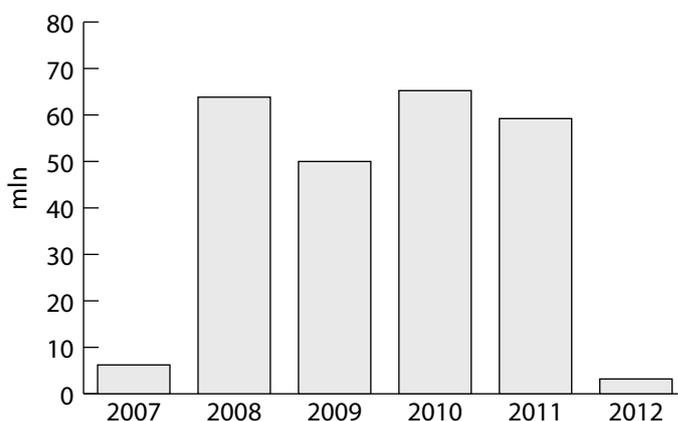


Fig. 4. Use of the UE funds in Sub-measure 8.1.1. in 2007–2012

Source: Own study based on the data from the Department for the European Social Fund

All the calls for proposals were very popular. In fact, the allocation amount for 2007–2012, which equaled PLN 340 265 391, was used in all the calls for proposals. In the above mentioned period, 2 398 applications were submitted for the total amount of PLN 1 632 528. Due to high interest in the call for proposals No. 2/POKL/8.1.1/2012, on 4 September 2012 the Board of the Lubelskie Voivodship passed a resolution on increasing the allocation amount from PLN 20 mln to 50 mln.⁴

4. Uchwała nr CXXX/2630/2012 Zarządu Województwa Lubelskiego z dnia 4 września 2012 r. (Resolution of the Board of the Lubelskie Voivodship).

Conclusions

It seems that the undertaken actions and decisions will have a positive influence on the lifelong learning system and will result in increasing the number of people participating in education. It is necessary at present since “the pace of civilization development imposes on modern man the necessity to continuously upgrade knowledge and skills.”⁵ This necessity is also underlined by the European Parliament and the European Union Council, which issued the recommendation on establishing the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. The most important element included in it is promotion of the idea of continuous learning not only by means of traditional methods, but also using other forms and in various periods of life, including lifelong learning by practice above all.

It is also important to create conditions for granting formal qualifications to persons upgrading their knowledge, regardless of the method, place and period of learning. The recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council do not have a binding character but they do emphasize the necessity of creating new educational policy based on lifelong learning.

The accession of Poland to the European Union and the financial aid granted to our country provide a unique opportunity for promotion and implementation of lifelong learning and vocational education. A modern knowledge-based economy and the technological race mean that employers need employees who are better educated. Their knowledge, skills and creativity will have a significant influence on the competitiveness of companies, regions and states. Innovations, research, implementations and patents are the canon of economic organization both at present as well as in the future.

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5. Europejskie i Krajowe Ramy Kwalifikacji (European and National Qualifications Framework).