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STUDENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EU FUNDS: IMPORTANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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Abstract:

People learn their whole life due to acceleration pace of life. Lifelong learning in that sense is all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. The European Union helps fund projects and organisations which contribute to the implementation of EU programs and policies. About 80% of EU funding is granted through programmes managed in the EU countries themselves. This paper provides more detailed information on Operational programmes 2014 – 2020 in Croatia and relevant EU funds. Within this paper, a survey of young people about getting acquainted with EU funds was conducted. This survey was carried out among 85 students of Polytechnic of Pozega, which intended to establish how familiar people are with the topic of EU funds and possibilities afforded by those funds. The methodology used is questionnaire. The aim of the research is to show awareness of the opportunities that EU funds offer and to emphasize the importance of lifelong learning.

Keywords:

Lifelong learning, Education, EU funds

CONOCIMIENTO DEL ESTUDIANTE SOBRE LOS FONDOS DE LA UE:
IMPORTANCIA DEL APRENDIZAJE PERMANENTE

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Abstracto:

Las personas aprenden toda su vida debido al acelerado ritmo de vida. El aprendizaje permanente en ese sentido es toda actividad de aprendizaje emprendida a lo largo de la vida, con el objetivo de mejorar el conocimiento, las habilidades y las competencias desde una perspectiva personal, cívica, social y / o laboral. La Unión Europea ayuda a financiar proyectos y organizaciones que contribuyen a la implementación de programas y políticas de la UE. Alrededor del 80% de la financiación de la UE se concede a través de programas gestionados en los propios países de la UE. Este documento proporciona información más detallada sobre los programas operativos 2014 - 2020 en Croacia y los fondos pertinentes de la UE. En este documento, se realizó una encuesta a los jóvenes sobre cómo familiarizarse con los fondos de la UE. Esta encuesta se llevó a cabo entre 85 estudiantes de la Politécnica de Pozega, que intentaba establecer cuán familiar es la gente con el tema de los fondos de la UE y las posibilidades que brindan esos fondos. La metodología utilizada es cuestionario. El objetivo de la investigación es mostrar conciencia sobre las oportunidades que ofrecen los fondos de la UE y hacer hincapié en la importancia del aprendizaje permanente.

Palabras clave:

Aprendizaje permanente, educación, fondos de la UE

1. Introduction

The concept of lifelong learning is the idea of establishing learning in all life spans (from early youth to age) and in all forms in which it is realized (formal, no formal and informal). Learning is a continuous process in which the results and motivation of an individual for learning in a given life-time are conditioned by the knowledge, habits and learning experiences acquired in the younger age. With the concept of lifelong learning, the goals of an economic nature are most often linked, for example, to achieve greater competitiveness and sustainable employability. On the other hand, one must not neglect equally important goals that contribute to the more active role of an individual in society. These are the goals of fostering social inclusion, the development of active citizenship and the development of individuals' individual potentials.

The European Union (EU) touches our lives in many visible and invisible ways. Using only 1% of the EU's overall wealth each year, the EU budget provides funds for roads, railways, bridges, airports, waterways, power lines and pipelines; it promotes the information society, and cultural and linguistic diversity; it supports training for the unemployed and funding for job creation; it fights discrimination and disability; it keeps rural economies alive; it funds research of children's diseases, the natural habitat, dangerous chemicals, safe food, more environmentally friendly vehicles, new energy resources, and safety at sea; it fosters student and youth exchanges; it funds urban renewal; it helps small businesses set up and grow (SAFU: European Funds for Croatian projects, 2009). The focus of spending decisions and supporting different projects is on meeting the challenges of the modern world in the interests of a better life for its citizens. The European Community has its own budget to finance its expenditure. The majority of the revenue to fund the EU budget comes from Member State contributions based on Gross National Income. Additional amounts come from agricultural duties, customs duties, and VAT (Value- Added Tax) based resources. (WWF, 2006)

Following full EU membership Croatia gained access to the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund which provide numerous opportunities for financing. This requires a fair number of well-informed and trained people, capable of writing a good project and of implementing it in line with EU procedures. It is therefore imperative for the government and public institutions to invest into training of both the general public and potential future experts. One of the positive factors for joining the European Union is EU funds that allow partial or almost complete financing of well-written projects that have the purpose of developing a certain part of the country (Tolušić, 2013).

2. Importance of lifelong learning

Higher levels of education and continuous learning, when accessible to all, make an important contribution to reducing inequalities and preventing marginalisation. This, however, raises fundamental questions about how well equipped traditional education and training systems are to keep pace with the developments outlined above. The scale of the challenge is highlighted by data on participation: albeit limited in terms of the age range and types of learning covered, it is nevertheless indicative that the Labour Force Survey in 2000 found only 8% of EU 25-64 year olds participating in education and training – some way off the vision of lifelong learning for all. (Eurostat, 2017)

Traditional policies have tended to focus too strongly on institutional arrangements, lifelong learning places the emphasis on people and on collective aspirations to create a better society. Lifelong learning takes a comprehensive view of the supply and demand for learning opportunities. It values knowledge and competences gained in all spheres of modern life, and which are therefore relevant to coping with modern society. The effective implementation of lifelong learning in the EU requires more, better and more equitably distributed investment, especially given that few Member States match the overall expenditure rates of Canada, South Korea, Norway and the United States. (OECD, 1998) The objectives of a European area of lifelong learning must be both to empower citizens to meet the challenges of the knowledge-based society, moving freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries in pursuit of learning; and to meet the goals and ambitions of the European Union and the candidate countries to be more prosperous, inclusive, tolerant and democratic. (Commission of European Communities, 2001) Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts. The coming decade must see the implementation of this vision. All those living in Europe, without exception, should have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change and to participate actively in the shaping of Europe's future. The key messages suggest that a comprehensive and coherent lifelong learning strategy for Europe should aim to:

- guarantee universal and continuing access to learning for gaining and renewing the skills needed for sustained participation in the knowledge society;
 - visibly raise levels of investment in human resources in order to place priority on Europe's most important asset – its people;
 - develop effective teaching and learning methods and contexts for the continuum of lifelong and life wide learning;
 - significantly improve the ways in which learning participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning;
 - ensure that everyone can easily access good quality information and advice about learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout their lives;
 - provide lifelong learning opportunities as close to learners as possible, in their own communities and supported through ICT-based facilities wherever appropriate.
- (Commission of the European Communities, 2000)

3. Learning about regional policy and available funds of the European Union












It is crucial to learn about EU funds and its opportunities in order to help financing project with the goal of reducing regional disparities and to boost regional development.

It is often stated that the European Union is much more than a mere free trade area and that it fulfils many state-like functions without being a state in the traditional sense of the term (Wesley Scott, 2006). It is possible to acknowledge the lack of possibilities for regions to realize tasks in the area of investments in infrastructure and restructuring, concentration of development and on the other hand, the worsening of backwardness in peripheral regions as negative phenomena associated with the lack of an appropriate regional policy. Such a state of affairs favoured the creation of increasing inter-regional differences which strengthened the dynamic growth of urban agglomerations, the process of depopulation

of rural areas, growing unemployment especially among young people in peripheral areas far away from urban centres. This economic and demographic phenomenon clearly made it impossible to bring about social and economic cohesion. The increase in the unfavourable economic phenomena caused the necessity of creating coherent regional policy whose tools in accordance with the Single European Act became the structural funds (Pachura, 2010).

Regional policy is a way of national government intervening in the distribution of various activities between its different regions, and has usually focused on the distribution of economic activities. In basic terms, it includes a wide range of activities to encourage the redistribution of economic activities to regions facing economic decline or restructuring. Regional policies of the European Union have had to address these various issues in attempting to both establish a mechanism for common recording and measuring of regional change and targeting policy interventions. (Cardiff University, 2005)

Figure 1. Regional development priorities of European Union

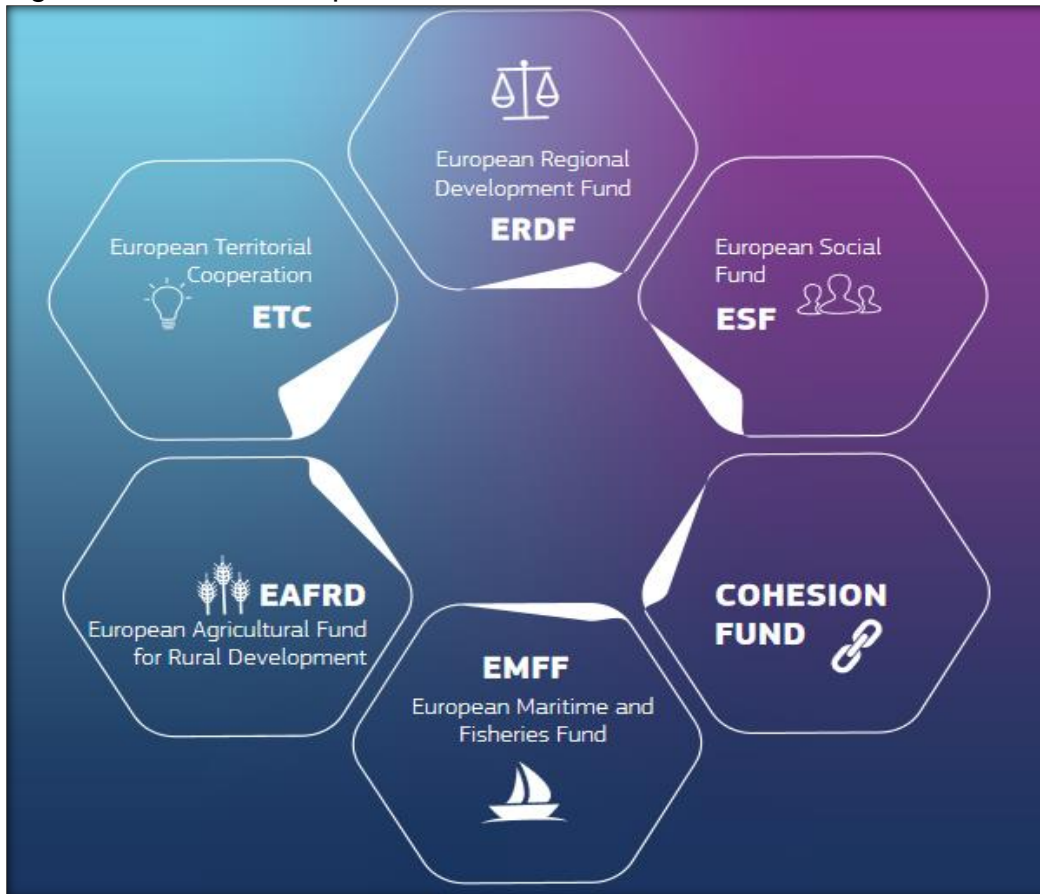
 1. Strengthening research, technological development and innovation	 5. Promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management	 8. Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility
 2. Enhancing access to, and use and quality of, information and communication technologies	 6. Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency	 9. Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination
 3. Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs	 7. Promoting sustainable transport and improving network infrastructures	 10. Investing in education, training and lifelong learning
 4. Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy		 11. Improving the efficiency of public administration

Source: European Commission, 2014

Community development can help excluded people and marginalised social groups to articulate their interests and to recognise, identify and confront the social institutions and groups that prevent them from representing those interests. (Henderson, Vercseg, 2010) An important change in the organisation of knowledge production across economies nationally and internationally over recent years has been the growth of R&D outsourcing.

As a focus for the formal exploitation of knowledge within industry, R&D is seen as an important part of the wider knowledge economy and, with its outsourcing, of the development of knowledge-intensive business services. (Cooke, Schwartz, 2007)

Figure 2. ESI funds for period 2014-2020



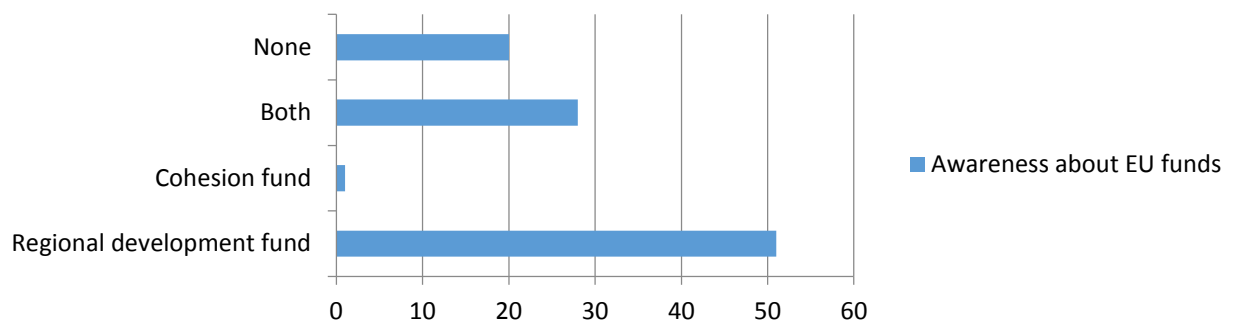
Source: European Commission, 2015

The 2014-2020 programming period brought forward a new legislative framework for these five Funds, which fall under the EU's cohesion policy, the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. These five ESI Funds are the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

4. Research results

A public opinion poll was conducted in the Croatia on 600 adult respondents by Ipsos Puls Agency. Research was conducted in order to see the level of information and knowledge about EU funds and its benefits.

Graph 1. Awareness about EU funds

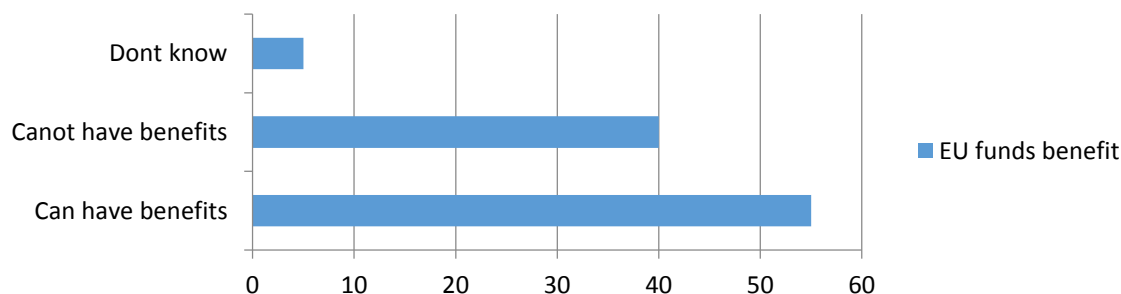


Source: Fond za zaštitu okoliša i energetska učinkovitost, 2017

Croatian citizens show a very high level of awareness (79%) of the existence of EU funds (Cohesion and Regional Development funds). The average in EU28 is only 28% while only Poland and Slovenia show a better recognition of EU funds. This positive indicator is under the influence of a greater public interest and media immediately after the end the process of Croatia's accession to the European Union. At the same time we can see that 20% of the people did not hear about the funds. On the other hand 53% of them did not know the jurisdiction body for that funds and 45.7% never heard about the internet page of that funds. (Fond za zaštitu okoliša i energetska učinkovitost, 2017)

The Ministry of Regional Development and European Union funds was conducted a public research which, among other things, aimed at identifying the global perception of EU funds and the existing level of information of the general population about the opportunities offered by these funds. Research has shown that the majority of respondents about EU funds have been informed through TV and the Internet, but when it comes to specialized websites, familiarity and use are at a very low level.

Graph 2. Perception about EU funds benefit

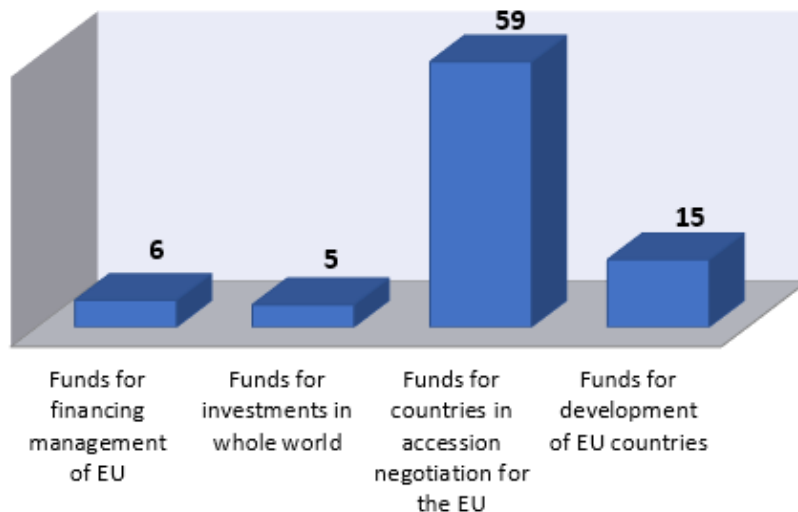


Source: The Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, 2014

Slightly more than half of the citizens (55%) believe that they can benefit from EU funds, though the prevalence of indirect use is largely prevalent through participation in projects launched by other entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations or institutions. However, as many as 40% of respondents believe that they cannot personally benefit from EU funds. Greater personal benefit is perceived by younger respondents through some form of additional education or the expansion of employment opportunities. (The Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, 2014)

We also conducted a primary research using the survey questionnaire method on a sample of 85 students of Polytechnic of Pozega. The aim of the research was to examine the information and education of the students about EU funds as significant part of lifelong learning.

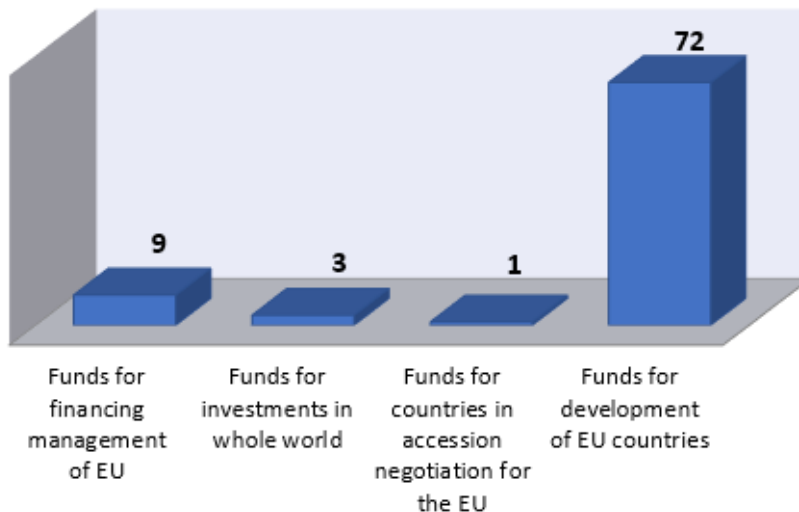
Graph 3. What are the pre-accession funds



Source: authors research, 2017

It is evident that most of the students are informed and educated about the existence of pre-accession funds and 59 of them know what they are intended for.

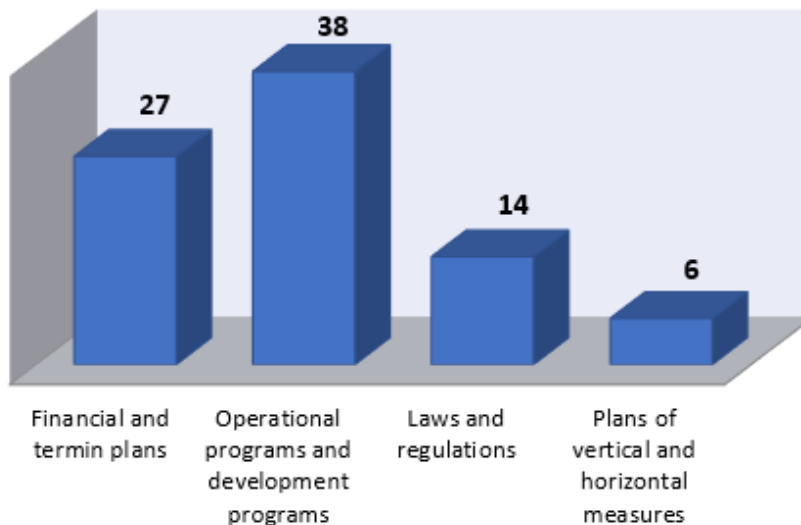
Graph 4. What are EU funds



Source: authors research, 2017

It is evident that most of the students are informed and educated about the existence of EU funds and even 72 of them know what they are intended for.

Graph 5. Which documents are foundation for EU funds



Source: authors research, 2017

We can see that only 38 of students know which document are the foundation for attracting EU funds.

5. Conclusion

Lifelong learning is the key to the development of each region, especially if we look at lifelong learning in the context of EU funds. Citizens of the Croatia and European Union need to recognize the importance of projects co-financed by EU funds because their implementation has a positive impact on their quality of life. Having information and be educated about the benefits is crucial for the future of every country in the European Union. Research results offered us a statistic but not the explanation why we are not educated enough. The primary research among students shows us a good knowledge about EU funds. One of the reason is because Polytechnic of Pozega have certificated programs for EU funds and offers students and other to go through courses and learn more about the EU and its funds. Despite all, we must ask ourselves “Why absorption of EU funds is so low?” in Croatia and “Why Poland have succeeded?”. One of the reasons lies in good planning and well organized system. Based on the above, we conclude that for the quality and successful preparation and implementation of the European Union projects it is necessary to have well-trained and well-informed people who know how to conduct projects in accordance with European procedure. Because of the frequent fluctuation in administrative staff leads to insufficient experience and practical knowledge of employees, and in the end it disturbs the quality of project management and causes their incomplete utilization.

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