



GOVERNMENT  
OF MALTA



# FINAL REPORT

SPD7/2021/076 (LOT 2)

# 2024

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Evaluation on ESF support  
for Education  
(2014-2020)



EUROPEAN UNION  
European Social Fund

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# Executive Summary

## Objective and approach

This study assesses the ESF support for education (Lot 2) channelled through four interventions: (i) One Tablet Per Child (OTPC), (ii) Endeavour (END), (iii) Further Studies Made Affordable (FSMA) and (iv) Reach High (RH) funded under the Malta's ESF OP II for the 2014-2020 programming period and implemented under Priority Axis 3. The objective is to: (i) ensure **accountability** for the funds spent, (ii) gain **knowledge** of the effects on the ground of the schemes; (iii) **learn** how to improve the policy design and delivery mechanisms of similar measures in the future by the provision of recommendations.

A **theory-based evaluation approach** guides the assessment of the four interventions. It postulates that a policy intervention works as part of a broader "causal package", comprising the interventions' outputs, a set of incentive mechanisms, and external factors (e.g., the Maltese socioeconomic context, the Covid-19 pandemic). A different mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed to reconstruct and test the theory of change of the interventions. They include desk research, in-depth interviews and focus groups with different people involved in the management and implementation of the schemes, including participants, and counterfactual impact analysis. In line with the Better Regulations Guidelines and the requirements of the Tender Specifications, research was guided by three evaluation criteria to assess the **effectiveness, impact, and efficiency** of the support.

## Background of the study and brief description of the four interventions

At the start of the 2014-2020 PP, Malta faced a number of education related challenges. These included high rates of early school leaving, low participation rates in tertiary education, and low participation rates in lifelong learning, especially at post-doctoral research levels. These issues were further compounded by low investments in research and innovation compared to EU averages, as well as labour market mismatches. To address these challenges, a range of interventions were supported under the European Social Fund (ESF), each targeting different stages of the education cycle. The **OTPC** initiative focused on primary education, **END** and **FSMA** interventions targeted further and higher education, while **RH** initiative concentrated on supporting post-doctoral research.

**OTPC** with an allocation of **€11.2 million** from the ESF OP covered several activities, with the primary focus being the dissemination of digital tablets to pupils from year 4 to year 6 with the aim to improve the education experience through technology. **END** (with a budget of €11.2 million) and **FSMA** with an ESF allocation of €3million (generating a €9 million loan portfolio) facilitated access to further and higher education. **END** through the provision of **non-repayable grants** focused on study programmes at **MQF 7 and MQF 8**; and **FSMA** through the provision of a **loan at favourable conditions** covering study programmes at **MQF Level 5, 6, 7 and 8 as well as other internationally recognised certificates**. The main driver for the interventions focusing on further and higher education was the limited financial support provided to pursue paths at these levels. In the case of END the support was earmarked towards specific priority areas with the aim to address skills mismatches in the labour market, whilst FSMA was driven by the need to increase participation rates in further and higher education. On the other hand, through **RH**, the policy maker was driven to increase human capital supply in **post-doctoral research which can contribute towards Research and Innovation (R&I)**

**investment.** Financial resources of **€5 million** were mobilised to address this challenge through the provision of **non-repayable grants**.

The overall allocation to these four interventions amounted to € 30.4 million covering Investment Priorities 10i, ii, and iii of Priority Axis 3 of the ESF OP. This amount corresponded to close to 24% of the total ESF Operational Programme for Malta (€ 128.8 million, excluding Covid-19 related measures), of which 20% was covered by national funds.

OTPC intervention employed a distinct set of **mechanisms** compared to END, FSMA and RH, although the latter three shared some overlapping mechanisms while incorporating different ones. OTPC focused on mechanisms that improve the educational journey either at the level of the individual (such as individual learning mechanism, better risk recognition) or at the level of the learning experience (such as more relevant content and pre-text for deeper changes), amongst others. END, FSMA and RH shared overlapping mechanism relating to awareness raising campaigns, incentives, accessibility, and participant commitment. Other relevant mechanisms observed across these interventions included needs matching, provision of resources and synergy with other interventions.

## Main findings

### EFFECTIVENESS

**OTPC:** The assessment of the OTPC (One Tablet Per Child) intervention suggests that digital education plays a crucial role in addressing current and future educational needs. The initiative made significant strides in promoting digital access, particularly through the equitable distribution of tablets to Year 4 to Year 6 pupils across all school sectors. This achievement aligned well with the programme's target audience and contributed to greater inclusivity in the classroom.

While the intervention successfully generated momentum for digital learning, its design primarily focused on device distribution and introductory teacher training together with the use of educational software. Although several complementary activities were introduced, their alignment with the core objectives of the intervention was not always clearly defined.

Teachers generally embraced the use of tablets, recognising their potential to enrich the learning experience. However, challenges such as WiFi issues (when they occurred) and device limitations and time constraints limited the effectiveness of integrating technology in learning. The Department of Digital Learning demonstrated strong leadership in leveraging tablets for innovative school-based projects, though support across schools varies due to resource constraints. ,

The role of the tablets during the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly noteworthy. They enabled continuity in learning through platforms like Microsoft Teams. Overall, while the distribution of devices and introductory training were central components, less attention was given to the development of digital teaching competencies, the adaptation of instructional and assessment methods, and the creation of a collaborative culture for sharing digital practices. This contributed to varied levels of integration across classrooms and sectors.

**END:** The END scheme has achieved positive outcomes with a notable number of applicants and beneficiaries, indicating a strong overall awareness despite limited publicity efforts. Applicant responses, though variable, have not significantly impacted scheme indicators, including financial targets. Scholarships were predominantly awarded at the Master's level, reflecting the overall distribution of students. Gender distribution varied between Doctoral and Master's scholarships,

while geographic distribution aligned with population demographics. However, there was a preference for STEM subjects and full-time courses. The analysis highlights a lack of favourable support toward students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Financially, the scheme assumes participants have some form of financial backing, requiring early commitment to university fees and allowances for those studying abroad were in most cases not considered to be sufficient. These findings suggest that enhancements are needed to better support individuals who require greater financial certainty.

FSMA: The analysis indicates a positive overall assessment of the effectiveness of the FSMA scheme in supporting individuals in pursuing further and higher education, considering various situations. Participants commend the well-thought-out and positive nature of the scheme, particularly appreciating loan approval before the course starts to manage upfront fees. However, repayment, poses challenges, particularly for those living abroad, impacting living expenses and entry-level salary repayments. The scheme may not be optimally designed for individuals with challenging social backgrounds or those seeking independent journeys without family support. A blended support approach through FSMA and END proves helpful in such cases. Challenges arising from Brexit, including increased tuition costs and restrictive access, and the limited impact of Covid-19, primarily on pilot courses, are noted.

RH: From the participants' comments, it can be concluded that RH publicity was broadly considered as having the potential of reaching many potential applicants. For a variety of reasons, the possibility of funding postdoctoral research through RH was very attractive to applicants and it was rated as more attractive and more feasible than possible alternatives. Applicants demonstrated a high level of intrinsic motivation for research work. Formally, the participants also corresponded to the intended target group as stated in the OP (researchers<sup>1</sup>) and as stated in the RH project (graduates who have obtained a doctorate degree who choose to conduct research work as a full-time option<sup>2</sup>). Overall, most participants found the application and selection process fair and the questions reasonable, professional, and appropriate to the postdoc research.

## IMPACT

OTPC: The assessment of the OTPC project's impact reveals efforts to enhance the learning experience through digital technologies, despite facing challenges that necessitate a comprehensive approach to digital education. The introduction of tablets has generated excitement among children, indicating a positive direction for the general policy. However, further positive impact requires investment in reliable connectivity, and a robust support system as well as addressing device limitations.

Regarding literacy and ESL, while Malta has shown positive performance over the years, the evaluation could not directly link these outcomes to OTPC. The causal chain to Theory of Change (ToC) for literacy and ESL could not be determined, in particular as beneficiaries are still in compulsory secondary education. The Catch-up Classes sub-activity could contribute, but limited data impedes analysis. Despite challenges, the assessment recognises a positive role during the COVID-19 pandemic, where tablets facilitated the transition to online learning, proving particularly crucial for families with fewer resources and those with other children outside the targeted age range.

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<sup>1</sup> OP II, p. 134

<sup>2</sup> RH Grant Agreement, ESF.03.009

END: The analysis of the impact of the END intervention suggests a noteworthy increase in enrolment and attainment levels in tertiary education, particularly in master's and PhD programs, associated with the education intervention program (END). While cautioning against inferring a direct causal relationship, the positive impact on participants' achievements and employability within short-term and medium-term intervals is evident. Notably, the study acknowledges external factors such as Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, with Brexit affecting course fees and the pandemic posing challenges for full-time students. Overall, the findings highlight the positive outcomes of the END scheme on education participation and employment, acknowledging the evolving landscape influenced by external events.

FSMA: In conclusion, the intervention, represented by the FSMA programme, is positively impacting participants' access to further and tertiary education, as evidenced by a reported 73% likelihood of not pursuing the same educational path without the program. The satisfaction and engagement levels among participants, coupled with loan commitments, indicate a successful combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors facilitating program completion. Additionally, the program shows a positive influence on employment, with approximately 85% of respondents reporting having a job aligned with their aspirations and field of study. Despite challenges in loan repayment, such as job-related constraints and concerns, the program has contributed to a high degree of professional retention in priority sectors of the Maltese labour market. External factors like Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have impacted course fees and created disruptions. Overall, FSMA appears to fulfil its purpose of cultivating new professionals in key sectors, demonstrating a positive impact on education and employment outcomes.

RH: Participants in the research process express positivity about the research itself but harbour negative sentiments towards administrative processes and support quality. A key concern is the lack of clarity in the scheme's terms and conditions, leading to unexpected challenges, notably the obligation for participants to become formally self-employed. Inconsistent support from the Scholarship Unit, marked by late payments and the cancellation of planned calls, exacerbates the dissatisfaction. The prohibition of other gainful activities results in challenges like a lack of professional connections and a sense of isolation during research. Participants commit to publishing one peer-reviewed article annually, a requirement viewed as stringent by some and routine by others. Despite challenges, the intervention offers flexibility, enabling enjoyable research and high-quality publications. While the RH primarily aims at indirectly enhancing academic qualifications, participants who recognise market potential may establish start-ups, applying their research directly. Interviews with unsupported applicants suggest RH support significantly influences scientific careers, with a perceived doubling of scientific output in both quantity and quality. Though the precise effect size is challenging to quantify due to limited observations, the RH is deemed to have a clear positive net impact on participants' scientific performance.

## **EFFICIENCY**

### OTPC

The cost-efficiency analysis found that the OTPC intervention was implemented in line with the planned budget, reflecting effective management and absorption of the funds. Over 90% of the budget was allocated to core components (namely, the procurement of tablets and related software) demonstrating alignment with the intervention's objectives. The average cost of approximately €810 per beneficiary was considered reasonable and consistent with similar large-scale digital education initiatives. Additional activities introduced during implementation, such as catch-up classes and a

Master's programme for educators, had a limited financial impact and did not significantly alter the overall cost structure.

#### END

The implementation of SCOs played a pivotal role in the successful execution of the END intervention, leading to a reduction in error rates compared to previous programs. While simplifications introduced by SCOs streamlined the reimbursement process, reducing administrative burdens and facilitating rapid fund absorption, challenges persist. Stringent documentation requirements in both application and implementation phases, along with inflexibility in contractual terms, negatively impacted the scheme's cost-efficiency. Administrative expenses exceeded the allocated indirect costs flat rate, posing financial challenges. Participants faced difficulties with upfront payments and uncertainty about application outcomes. The overall efficiency assessment is moderately positive, indicating areas for improvement in the intervention.

FSMA: Overall the FSMA process is considered efficient from a client perspective, whilst the financial institutions remarked that the scheme is administratively intensive, more than other loans, mainly because: (a) its EU funded and therefore it generates additional reporting requirements; and (b) it supports people that are not necessarily in employment, in which cases repayments are calculated on potential future income, which generates additional checks. The reporting between the different stakeholders seems to be challenging in terms of the required effort and re-inputting of data is considered as counterproductive and error conducive.

RH: The total costs reported were slightly higher than the updated budget, indicating additional top up funding from the Ministry of Education. Administration costs (both planned and actual) exceeded the provided indirect cost rate. The efficiency of staff costs for administration was deemed limited, considering the problematic level of participant support. Roughly, the costs of €189,357 per participant were associated with benefits such as higher retention of researchers, additional academic publications, more citations, and increased H-index. However, monetisation of net benefits was not possible based on available data.

## Recommendations

The analysis of each scheme concludes with recommendations on how to improve on similar measures in the future, for instance for the 2021-2027 PP. Recommendations are categorised into two groups:

- Recommendations **directly linked to the different interventions**, with the aim of highlighting corrective actions in the design and implementation phase to increase cost-efficiency, and impact in the ground.
- Recommendations to **facilitate the ESF's funds accountability and future evaluations** to ensure a better measurement of the scheme's generated impacts, including the accountability of the funds spent vis-à-vis impacts.