



Funded by
the European Union

ROAD2EU SUMMER SCHOOL 2026 — LECTURE 8

Implementation Lab: Cohesion Policy 2021–2027, Theory of Change and Light-Touch Evaluation for HE–Region Projects

Dr. Dawid Stadniczeńko

VIZJA University



WHAT THIS LECTURE COVERS

01 Cohesion policy environment

02 Where higher education fits

03 Theory of change

04 Outputs and results

05 Indicators and review

06 Polish context

HE-REGION PROJECTS NEED CLEAR CAUSAL LOGIC AND PROPORTIONATE MONITORING

- **Cohesion policy** is the EU's primary instrument for reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities — and a major funding environment for HE-region projects.
- **HE-region projects** need clear causal logic that connects diagnosed needs to realistic interventions and measurable results.
- **Proportionate monitoring** — not bureaucratic overload — is the standard for pilot-scale and partnership projects.

THE CORE CHALLENGE

Many HE-region projects fail not because of bad intentions but because of weak project logic: activities are defined before needs are diagnosed, and indicators are added after design rather than driving it.



**Funded by
the European Union**

COHESION POLICY 2021–2027: PO1–PO5 AS THE MAIN INVESTMENT ENVIRONMENT



Funded by
the European Union

PO1 A Smarter Europe — Innovation, digitalisation, and SME competitiveness

PO2 A Greener Europe — Energy transition, circular economy, climate adaptation

PO3 A More Connected Europe — Mobility and digital connectivity

PO4 A More Social Europe — Education, employment, skills, and social inclusion

PO5 A Europe Closer to Citizens — Sustainable, integrated territorial development

HIGHER EDUCATION FITS ESPECIALLY WELL WITH PO1, PO4, AND PO5

PO1 — SMARTER EUROPE

Innovation and Digitalisation

Universities as research and innovation hubs; digital skills provision; technology transfer and spin-off support.

PO4 — SOCIAL EUROPE

Education, Skills, and Inclusion

Lifelong learning, adult education, skills development, social inclusion, and equal access to quality education.

PO5 — TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

Closer to Citizens

Universities as anchor institutions in regional development strategies; community engagement; place-based innovation.



**Funded by
the European Union**

FROM NEED TO PROJECT: START WITH A DIAGNOSED PROBLEM, NOT ACTIVITIES

- **Start with a concrete territorial or institutional problem** — a documented gap, barrier, or underperformance that the project will address.
- **Map the problem to a relevant policy objective** — identify which cohesion policy objective or specific objective the project contributes to.
- Only then **define a realistic project response** — activities, outputs, and results that are proportionate to the diagnosed need.

NEED FIRST, ACTIVITIES SECOND

Many weak projects begin with activities: 'we will run training' or 'we will develop a platform'. Strong projects begin with a diagnosed need and work forward from there.



**Funded by
the European Union**

THEORY OF CHANGE: MAKING ASSUMPTIONS VISIBLE AND CAUSAL LOGIC EXPLICIT

- A **theory of change** is a practical planning tool that explains why a set of activities should produce the intended outputs, outcomes, and longer-term contributions.
- It makes **assumptions visible** — the conditions that must hold for the causal chain to work — so they can be tested and monitored.
- A theory of change is not an abstract evaluation concept: it is a **design discipline** that improves project quality before implementation begins.

A PLANNING TOOL, NOT JARGON

Theory of change is often misunderstood as evaluation jargon. In practice, it is a simple question: 'Why do we believe our activities will produce the results we claim?' Answering it honestly improves project design.



**Funded by
the European Union**

A SIMPLE SIX-ELEMENT THEORY-OF-CHANGE TEMPLATE

1 **Need**
The documented problem, gap, or barrier that the project addresses.

2 **Target Group / Territory**
Who or where the project is for; the specific beneficiaries or territorial focus.

3 **Intervention**
The activities and inputs the project will deliver to address the need.

4 **Output**
The tangible products, services, or events delivered by the project.

5 **Direct Result**
The changes expected for direct beneficiaries as a result of using the outputs.

6 **Longer-Term Contribution**
The broader change the project contributes to — the policy objective it supports.



Funded by
the European Union

OUTPUTS VERSUS RESULTS: A FOUNDATIONAL DISTINCTION FOR PROJECT LOGIC

- **Outputs** are what the project delivers — the products, services, and activities completed. They are under the project's direct control.
- **Results** are the changes expected for direct beneficiaries as a consequence of using the outputs — skills gained, behaviours changed, situations improved.
- Confusing outputs with results is one of the most common errors in project design: **delivering a training course is an output; improving participants' skills is a result.**

THE FOUNDATIONAL DISTINCTION

Outputs are necessary but not sufficient. A project that delivers all its outputs but produces no results has failed. The distinction must be built into project logic from the start.



**Funded by
the European Union**

BASELINES, MILESTONES, AND TARGETS: THE MINIMUM MONITORING DISCIPLINE

- **Baselines** establish the starting point: what is the current level of the indicator before the project intervenes?
- **Milestones** mark intermediate progress: what should the indicator show at key points during implementation?
- **Targets** define success: what level should the indicator reach by the end of the project? Not every pilot needs a full baseline study, but each needs a logic of progress.

MINIMUM MONITORING DISCIPLINE

Monitoring without baselines is meaningless: you cannot demonstrate change if you do not know where you started. Even a simple baseline — a number, a percentage, a documented situation — is better than none.



**Funded by
the European Union**

LIGHT-TOUCH EVALUATION: PROPORTIONATE AND USEFUL FOR PILOT-SCALE WORK

- Use **a few core evaluation questions** — not a comprehensive evaluation framework — to focus the evaluation effort on what matters most.
- **Combine monitoring data with short qualitative evidence** — interviews, feedback forms, or brief case studies — to explain what the numbers show.
- The primary purpose of light-touch evaluation is **learning and adjustment**, not accountability reporting.

PROPORTIONATE EVALUATION

Light-touch evaluation is not a compromise — it is the right approach for pilot-scale work. A focused, well-executed evaluation of three questions is more valuable than a comprehensive framework that is never completed.



**Funded by
the European Union**

POLAND AS AN IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT: REAL GAPS JUSTIFY HE-REGION ACTION

- Poland faces documented **adult-learning participation gaps**, with rates significantly below the EU average.
- **Digital-skills and STEM gaps** are concentrated in smaller cities, rural areas, and among older workers — creating clear territorial justification for HE-region projects.
- Project logic should respond to these **real, documented conditions** — not generic EU priorities — to be credible and fundable.

REAL GAPS, REAL JUSTIFICATION

The strongest project applications are those that connect EU policy priorities to documented local needs. Poland's adult-learning and digital-skills gaps provide exactly this kind of concrete, evidence-based justification.



Funded by
the European Union

EXAMPLE KPI SHEET FOR A SMALL HE-REGION PROJECT

INDICATOR	BASELINE	TARGET	DATA SOURCE
Partner organisations	0	4+	Partnership agreements
Participants enrolled	0	100+	Registration records
Completion rate	—	≥75%	Completion records
Skills improvement	Pre-test	+20%	Pre/post assessment
Follow-up participation	0	30%+	6-month follow-up
Stakeholder uptake	0	2+ adopters	Stakeholder survey



Funded by
the European Union

SELECTED REFERENCES

- **European Commission.** *Cohesion Policy 2021–2027: Policy Objectives and Priorities.* 2021.
- **European Commission.** *Cohesion Policy Programming 2021–2027: Country Reports.* 2022.
- **European Commission.** *Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation Guidance for Cohesion Policy 2021–2027.* 2021.
- **European Commission / EVALSED.** *Theory-Based Evaluation Guidance.* 2013 (updated 2021).
- **European Commission.** *Education and Training Monitor 2025: Poland.* 2025.



Funded by
the European Union



Funded by
the European Union

Questions & Discussion

Is the hardest part defining the problem, the indicators, or the review cycle?

Dr. Dawid Stadniczeńko

ROAD2EU Summer School 2026 — Lecture 8

SS LECTURE 18