

Book voucher

Concept

A voucher that will permit citizens to buy books (print, digital and audio) at their local bookshops. Such a voucher will be an incentive for citizens to have access to more books and will create positive market conditions for the sector, booksellers but also authors, translators and publishers.

Context

The entire book sector has been severely hit by the closure of or limitations in access to bookshops, and by the cancellation of literary events, including book fairs. Among many measures to help authors, publishers, and booksellers, a very effective one would be to provide citizens with book vouchers. Several governments have already implemented such measures or are envisaging this kind of plan, and it would be very helpful to make it a generalised policy across the EU.

The book sector is traditionally privately financed, with little or no public subsidies. With the crisis, the sector has no choice now but to ask for – at least temporary – public support. All cultural sectors are affected to different degrees by the crisis. The book sector asks to the public authorities to assess the impact and to help each of them as much as possible, with targeted measures to limit the damage and kickstart a recovery.

This paper is meant to inform the discussion around the best solutions to help the book sector, and encourage their adoption. The voucher for buying books in bookstores is one important measure that would help revamp the market and inject cash into the system, while at the same time promoting reading; this voucher should be a national programme (ideally supported by the EU Recovery Fund) and will be instrumental to rebuild demand for books. The benefits of reading not only for the cultural development of citizens, but also in terms of improved democratic participation and economic prospects are well known¹; moreover, participation in cultural activities, and especially reading and frequenting libraries, are proven factors of resilience to crises².

Development

The main objective is to help the recipients of the voucher to buy books at their local bookshops (either at their high street locations or online). Belgium (Flanders), France and Italy have positive experience with such vouchers, which are equivalent to cash in hand for the recipient, using the following models: all 18-year olds (France and Italy), distributed for free by public entities, e.g. to young people attending book fairs (France) or with employers or work councils sponsoring part of the amount (Belgium, Czech Republic and France). For the voucher to achieve positive results,

¹ Cfr. Brunello G., Weber G. and Weiss C.T., 2015, "Books are Forever: Early Life Conditions, Education and Lifetime Earnings in Europe", *Economic Journal*, vol. 127(600), pp. 271-296.

² Cellini R. and Cuccia T., 2019. "Do Behaviours in Cultural Markets Affect Economic Resilience? An Analysis of Italian Regions", *European Planning Studies*, vol. 27(4), pp. 784-801.



it must be easy for booksellers to register and get involved and it must reach its intended beneficiaries quickly.

The idea would be to generalise the voucher to either all families, all schooled children, or at least some categories of the population such as all citizens of a certain age, people who are unemployed, etc. We understand that each Member State might assess the needs of its population and how this mechanism can best benefit all.

Even if the measure seems only to be viable to be organised at national level³, we would suggest for the EU to recommend such a measure to Member States under the Recovery Fund.

³ If the EU wanted to organise such a measure, for example for 18 year olds, it is estimated that it would have to deliver 5 million vouchers. The administrative burden would be too important. When the Commission decided to offer Interrail to young Europe it had to select 12.000 18 years old.