

NORFACE EVALUATION FOR THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



Authors: Rachel Abudu, Prof Kathryn Oliver and Dr
Bridget Sealey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

NORFACE responds to grand societal challenges and is part of a suite of ESRC investments that support international collaboration aiming to deliver against the funder's mission, strategy and priorities, including broader social impacts. NORFACE explicitly supports knowledge exchange activities and thus is a source of learning about how research creates change. It is an internationally collaborative funding scheme, and relatively unusual in its support of comparative primary research in different countries.

EVALUATION AIMS

Aim 1: Determine the impacts created from the NORFACE portfolio from years 2017 to 2023¹.

Aim 2: Determine how the NORFACE programme design may have contributed, in part, to impacts created by the portfolio, when compared to other ESRC funding instruments such as Trans-Atlantic Platform and the Open Research Area producing similar types of projects.

Aim 3: Describe the research contributions the NORFACE projects/programmes have made to their respective fields.

APPROACH

Our approach to this evaluation was informed by a systematic review conducted by Transforming Evidence Limited (TEL) ([Abudu, Boaz and Oliver, 2022](#)), which looked at the most appropriate frameworks, data and methods used by funders to assess impact methodically.

We sampled 40 projects from six NORFACE programmes, taking data from the project final reports, supplied by ESRC. For the DIAL programme data was taken from impacts reported on the [DIAL Programme website](#) as the final reports were not available. To gain additional rich insights and stress-test our conclusions from the desk review, we conducted interviews with relevant stakeholders. These included:

- ESRC programme staff: To gain insights into the management and design of comparative funding instruments.
- NORFACE grantees. We selected a subset of projects (n=20) to identify a sample of PIs to invite to interview.
- NORFACE programme coordinator. Two were approached for interview and one responded.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

¹ Note: Because this evaluation has been requested by ESRC to inform a broader international grants strategy refresh, projects in this evaluation will have limited lag time for impacts to accrue beyond the project completion date. Lag time for projects will range from 3 - less than a year post-project completion; less than the minimum of five years of follow-up time post-project completion that is recommended within research impact evaluation literature.

Table 1: Summary of findings

<p>NORFACE Evaluation Aim</p>	<p>Summary of findings</p>
<p>Aim 1: Determine the impacts created from the NORFACE portfolio from years 2017 to 2023</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>NORFACE projects delivered a very high publication productivity rate</i>, with an average of 34 publications/project. ● <i>Projects using co-production approaches and that drew upon longstanding, 'built-in' partnerships with non-academics tended to be more successful</i>. This is consistent with the broader evidence base which suggests that these are the most effective means to mobilise knowledge. ● <i>A broad spectrum of policy and practice impacts</i> that ranged from changes in awareness and decision making, through to contributions to major policy decisions at Prime Ministerial level. ● In addition to these examples above <i>the most significant, documented impacts we observed related to the following three projects</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Human capital and inequality during adolescence and working life (Institute for Fiscal Studies, DIAL programme). (See Appendix 2 for case study). ○ Waterproofing Data: Engaging stakeholders in sustainable flood risk governance for urban resilience (Warwick University, T2S programme). (See Appendix 2 for case study). ○ Misty: Migration, Transformation and Sustainability (University of Exeter, T2S programme). ● <i>Most programme interviewees reported that knowledge exchange activities and arising impacts were primarily delivered within the national setting</i> of the individual researchers. ● <i>Sustained funding collaborations</i> beyond the project lifecycle, with further funding leveraged from COST, and ERC Consolidator and Advanced awards or through national funding schemes.
<p>Aim 2: Determine how the NORFACE programme design may have contributed, in part, to impacts created by the portfolio, when compared to other ESRC funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The emphasis on capacity-building within NORFACE and its interpretation by most research teams as a mechanism to support and develop researchers has led to <i>extremely positive outcomes and impacts vis a vis early career development</i>. ● NORFACE specifies particular participating countries, encouraging some researchers to work with academics in countries in which they have not worked previously. In the majority of cases, research teams brought in at least one new country partner. Often these new relationships, formed through NORFACE, were with <i>countries with less developed research systems</i>.

NORFACE Evaluation Aim	Summary of findings
instruments producing similar types of projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The majority of researchers were positive about the coordination activities.</i> • The T2S scheme, which as we have noted was particularly positive in terms of outcomes and impacts, was <i>specifically designed to value knowledge exchange and co-production.</i>
Aim 3: Describe the research contributions the NORFACE projects/programmes have made to their respective fields.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The 40 projects which we reviewed produced on average more than 30 publications each, with a total of 1062.</i> • Across all programmes there was some evidence that <i>networks were extended through the NORFACE programmes (i.e. beyond pre-existing relationships)</i>. Moreover, nearly all researchers reported that their research partnerships had continued following the formal end of the NORFACE funding period. • Researchers reported that relationships had been continued through the <i>successful acquisition of additional funding</i>, including from the European Commission. • Project partners, particularly those in the more recently completed T2S and Democratic Governance schemes <i>continue to publish together.</i> • Two researchers from the Migration programme reported that <i>their work continues to have a ripple effect through the methods or data developed</i> through the NORFACE-funded programme that is now used by a wide network of researchers.

FEEDBACK FROM RESEARCHERS

- NORFACE programme coordination across projects was mixed. Fewer references were found to the impact of this role in relation to knowledge exchange, than in relation to research partnerships. Delivery appears to have been inconsistently experienced within and across programmes.
- NORFACE has been responsive to programme changes/professional to work with. However, there was inconsistency in the recognition of NORFACE as an entity and of the ESRC's role within in it from researcher community.
- NORFACE could be improved if finances could be tailored to local contexts.
- NORFACE could have benefited from a longer project duration. Furthermore, several researchers reported inconsistency in funder approaches to project extensions.
- NORFACE reporting template could be improved (especially in relation to knowledge exchange). We also noted inconsistencies in the approach and reporting format across schemes which presents challenges in relation to evaluation.