

Coordination in the social sciences

“ *The NORFACE consortium is looking forward to learning from the experience of the pilot programme to gain knowledge for the planning and implementation of the Transnational Research Programme opening in 2008.* ”

NORFACE sets out to develop a lasting partnership between 12 national agencies responsible for funding research in the social sciences. The aim is to encourage transnational research coordination – intensive communication and analysis of national systems will pave the way for national agencies to work together and achieve convergence. Participating agencies will develop common strategies for areas such as the setting of research priorities and project evaluation, leading to jointly funded transnational research programmes in specific social science disciplines. The ultimate aim will be to extend this level of co-operation to other European countries and scientific disciplines, thus making a substantial contribution to the European Research Area.

The 12 national agencies together provide over €500m a year in support to social science research. NORFACE builds on the success already achieved by the co-operation between social science research funding bodies in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK. NORFACE began in 2004 with Iceland and Ireland joining the five others and, 18 months later, the relevant agencies from Estonia, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovenia all joined the project. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada became a NORFACE associate partner at the same time.

Shared responsibility

The primary objective of NORFACE is to develop a durable partnership for research funding policy and practice between 12 participants, raising the standards of research activity and encouraging transnational programme co-operation. The network addresses the “fragmentation, isolation and compartmentalisation of national research efforts” highlighted by the European Commission in its 2000 Communication on the European Research Area (ERA), resolving the problems of cross-border application of human and financial resources. Every NORFACE member organisation has a place both on the joint

management team and on the executive network board – such shared decision-making will mark a significant step towards the convergence of European research.

Stepping up a level

The project’s three-stage work plan will encourage new degrees of co-operation. The first stage will be to improve understanding, communication and trust between the participants, with exchanges among programme managers and the creation of a NORFACE website on which to publish findings. The network is conducting comparative analyses of the partner organisations, their evaluation and peer review systems, priority setting and gender equality, and knowledge transfer mechanisms. The participation of ethnic minorities and the effects of language differences on international research co-operation will be a particular focus. It is vital to ensure that the use of an imposed common language in cross-border research does not restrict any partner country. Secondly, the systematic exchange of information and identification of best practices will be the basis for NORFACE’s strategic planning. Tasks include an analysis of the legal barriers to cross-border research funding, a process of strategic planning, and the agreement of common methodologies



Coordination Action NORFACE



“ The ERA-NET scheme has provided an opportunity for research funding agencies to develop new mechanisms for co-operation, creating new contacts and new experiences of working together. ”

Full title:

New Opportunities for Research Funding Co-operation in Europe – A Strategy for Social Sciences

Research field:

Social science

Co-ordinator:

Finland: Academy of Finland

Partners:

- Denmark: Danish Research Agency, Research Council for Social Sciences
- Estonia: Estonian Research Foundation
- Germany: German Research Foundation
- Iceland: Icelandic Centre for Research
- Ireland: Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences
- The Netherlands: Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research
- Norway: Research Council of Norway
- Portugal: Foundation for Science and Technology
- Slovenia: Slovenian Research Agency
- Sweden: Swedish Research Council
- United Kingdom: Economic and Social Research Council

Associate partner:

Canada: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

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to manage joint research programmes.

The network will also investigate how to improve the mobility of PhD students and postdoctoral researchers between participating countries, and develop common policies for research infrastructures such as databases.

The third stage is the launch of a new, joint co-operative research programme, following two pilot studies. A common framework will be needed for assessment and decision-making on research proposals. This must be clear and open, building on existing best national practice, and with the potential both to encourage work of high quality and originality and to support future innovation and socio-economic development. NORFACE will also seek partners from other countries; eventually becoming the basis for a transnational network of research councils that can live on in variable compositions for different forms of co-operation after the lifespan of NORFACE.

Not just social

NORFACE involves at least a quarter of the staff at the 12 partner organisations – raising awareness about the European context of national social science research. A proportion of their combined funding will be devoted to joint activities and programmes, enabling them to avoid duplication of projects and investment.

NORFACE has even larger ambitions. It is building a close partnership between national research agencies with significantly different structures, budgets and missions, and covers research programmes involving a broad range of scientific disciplines. It will act as a test bed for the ERA-NET scheme, and pave the way for co-operation between funding agencies in other fields. It will also be a major building block of the European Research Area.