

Citizens' Summary: Rapid Assessment of Research Programmes 2004-2009 and 2009-2014

BACKGROUND

The EEA and Norway Grants represent the contribution of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway to reducing economic and social disparities and to strengthen bilateral relations with 15 EU countries in Central and Southern Europe and the Baltics.

Through the Grants, the donor countries have contributed to enhance research-based knowledge development for more than a decade. Research cooperation between donor and beneficiary countries is a key element of the funding.

The main purpose of the EEA and Norway Grants funding for research is to provide support for bilateral research projects, with funding for basic and applied research. Funding includes capacity building in research, and support for early stage researchers.

EEA Grants 2004-2009 provided €82 million to research projects in 11 countries. The EEA and Norway Grants 2009-2014 provided €108.2 million to research cooperation with 6 countries.

This summary draws on an independent assessment conducted by Coffey International Ltd. The main purpose of the assessment was to document and assess the results of the EEA and Norway Grants' support to research, including to the extent to which the Grants are generating sustainable partnership, which support application for EU research-funding. The report focused on three of the eleven grant recipient countries which, combined, provided a large sample size for comparison. These were: Estonia, Poland and Romania.

The full report (including all findings, conclusions and recommendations) with annexes is available here: www.eeagrants.org/Results-data/Evaluations

For any questions regarding the assessment or the EEA and Norway Grants, please contact the Financial Mechanism Office, info-fmo@efta.int.

Key conclusions

The Rapid Assessment confirms that the EEA and Norway Grants are going beyond initial expectations in terms of impact.

Researchers in beneficiary and donor countries are accruing substantial benefits through their collaboration. Grant recipients report added-value in a number of key areas, including increasing research competence and skills and supporting knowhow on how to develop larger funding proposals.

Researchers and research institutions from the donor countries taking part in projects also reap significant benefits, including access to state-of-the-art facilities, new methodologies and networks, and enthusiastic and ambitious researchers who are keen to publish results.

The Grants have had a positive impact on applications for EU research funding. The success of project teams supported by the EEA and Norway Grants in applying for EU funding appears to be high.

Research grant recipients and donor project partners, are generally very satisfied with the collaborations supported through the EEA and Norway Grants. There is a shared strong impetus for partners to work together in the future.

Main findings

The assessment focused on five main themes. The main findings are organised according to these themes:

1. Programme results
2. The link between the EEA and Norway Grants and EU-funded research initiatives
3. Quality of partnerships
4. Transfer of knowledge
5. Good research management support

Programme results

- All of the researchers, who participated in the research survey (representing 53% of all of the grant recipients from the two financial periods) reported that involvement in the programme had resulted in their teams **increasing their research competence**¹.
- Although part of the rationale for these grants is the assumed knowledge transfer from donor project partners to organisations in beneficiary countries, **donor project partners also benefited** from their partnership with organisations from beneficiary countries. Rather than being a one-sided - donor to beneficiary – type of learning relationship, the data suggest that researchers and research facilities in the beneficiary countries also helped to **strengthen the research capacity**² of participating donor project partners' organisations. For example, one project in Romania provided Norwegian researchers **access to state-of-the-art research facilities**, which had been previously funded by EU Research Infrastructure funding.
- Projects also helped project partner organisations to increase **research excellence**³. In the survey, 86% of Estonian, Polish and Romanian researchers, and 72% of donor project partners indicated that the research excellence in their organisations had increased to a "large" or "very large" extent.
- Partnerships resulting from involvement in EEA and Norway Grants projects had a positive impact on both beneficiary and donor country organisations. Almost half of the donor project partners who participated in this research thought that the partnerships had helped them to access internationally renowned research networks. This suggests that partnerships resulted in more cross-over and exchange between partners (as opposed to the expertise being channelled only from donor partners to beneficiary country researchers) than may have been initially expected.
- The most significant programme results overall include the large number of **scientific publications** (mainly for **primary research**) and the fact that most partners **want to cooperate on more projects** in the future.
- Projects that resulted from a **previous cooperation** (albeit informal) tended to be the **most effective**. For these projects, the grant helped to strengthen the bilateral relationship even further, and to enhance the complementarity of their combined scientific and/or methodological knowledge. This result does not undermine the value of new collaborations. **New partnerships** can also be **very beneficial**, even if they take longer to get off the ground. Donor project partners appear to be very keen to develop new partnerships, which confirms that there is scope to promote new partnerships.
- **Interdisciplinarity** is one of the main factors which underpins project success and provides significant added-value vis-à-vis other grants. Unlike other national and international research funding streams,

^{1, 2, 3} For the purpose of the assessment the three concepts were distinguished as follows: *Research competence* refers to the capabilities of researchers and can include e.g. knowledge of new methodologies, tools or approaches. *Research capacity* relates to the ability to conduct research based mostly on external factors, such as access to adequate equipment. *Research excellence* relates to the originality, significance and rigour of the research conducted, and the subsequent peer recognition.

these Grants do not limit the focus of the projects to a single discipline. This allows for greater knowledge-exchange and supports greater innovation.

- Grant collaborations helped to improve beneficiary country organisations' understanding of how to write successful bids. All online survey respondents in Poland and Romania confirmed that as a result of their participation in the project, their research teams had to some extent increased their understanding of how to develop successful research funding proposals.
- Some researchers highlighted the broader societal and political impact of the project results, especially for projects in social sciences. Such projects contributed to developing new strategies, instruments and approaches to **address issues of common concern** (e.g. migration), which also contributed to the first objective of the EEA and Norway Grants: reducing economic and social disparities in the European Economic Area (EEA).

The link between the EEA and Norway Grants and EU-funded research initiatives

- The Grants have had a **positive impact on applications for EU research funding**. From a grant recipient's perspective success with EU research applications could be attributed to their participation in EEA / Norway Grants-supported projects. Donor project partners placed less emphasis on the Grants in their assessment of the success of subsequent EU bids.
- The review of the final project reports suggests that the number of projects that submitted applications to Horizon 2020 and other EU funded research initiatives was **considerable**.
- Overall, from the surveyed grant recipients (representing 53% of all grant recipients in the two funding periods) and donor project partners, more than half were successful in securing EU funding. While this figure does not show how many applications were submitted to secure funding, the fact that half of the respondents received additional EU funding is considerable.

Quality of partnerships

- Researchers from all three case study countries have a **strong appetite for future collaboration**. They were confident that their partnership with a donor project partner had - or would - continue after the Grant period. This finding can be attributed to the overall positive experience of the partnerships. Grant recipients praised Norwegian and Icelandic partners for their flexibility and transparency, and considered that the partnerships had been enriching as well as productive.
- Research projects supported by the EEA and Norway Grants undoubtedly **strengthen research partnerships between participating institutions**, particularly by allowing the beneficiary countries' researchers gain international exposure, opportunity to collaborate internationally and providing additional networking opportunities.
- Most grant recipients had been involved in some form of international collaboration previous to their involvement in the Grant. But only a few had previously formally worked with Norwegian / Icelandic researchers. Based on experiences from the previous funding years, the Grants appear to generate bases for sustainable research collaborations and partnerships that are **likely to continue** beyond the current funding period.

Transfer of knowledge

- Researchers from all three case study countries reported that **there was significant knowledge transfer between grant recipients and donor project partners**. The donor project partners most

often tended to transfer knowledge by sharing raw data, collaborating on scientific articles, and sharing experience and specific knowledge relating to new research methods.

- The transfer of knowledge and good practice takes place both **vertically** (from the Research Council of Norway to Programme Operators, and vice-versa), and **horizontally** (between Programme Operators from different countries).

Good research management support

- Involvement in EEA and Norway Grants research projects **significantly enhanced researchers' management capabilities**, particularly those from beneficiary countries.
- As most of the organisations involved in the Grants were either also simultaneously involved in other externally financed research projects, or had been engaged in externally-financed research projects in the past, it is difficult to attribute any increase in research-support capacity building directly to the EEA and Norway Grants programme. However, undoubtedly, **the Grants contribute to increasing institutions' research-support** capacity, particularly in the beneficiary countries, by providing a good learning exercise for the institutions.

ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

The rapid assessment was commissioned by the Financial Mechanism Office – the secretariat of the EEA and Norway Grants. It was conducted by Coffey International Ltd. from April to September 2017.

Purpose of the assessment

The main goal of the assessment was to document and assess the results of the EEA and Norway Grants' support to research, including to the extent to which the Grants are generating sustainable partnership, which support application for EU research-funding

Methodology

The assessment focused on five main themes:

1. Programme results
2. The link between the EEA and Norway Grants and EU-funded research initiatives
3. Quality of partnerships
4. Transfer of knowledge
5. Good research management support

The assessment focused on research programmes in the years 2004-2009 and 2009-2014 in three beneficiary countries: Estonia, Poland and Romania.

The methodology included:

- online survey of project promoters in the case study countries and of donor project partners involved in their projects;
- in-depth interviews with seven Norwegian and Icelandic donor project partners;
- a review of a selection of project reports;
- site visits to 19 projects sampled from the pool of all projects carried out in the three countries;
- focus groups with a selection of project promoters in each of the three countries.