International Best Practices for Researcher Collaboration in Universities of Applied Sciences

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In today's interconnected research ecosystem, international collaboration is not only beneficial but essential. For universities of applied sciences (UAS), whose missions often emphasize practice-oriented research, regional impact, and industry engagement, participating in international researcher networks can open new avenues for innovation and relevance. Yet, successful collaboration across borders requires careful planning, shared values, and structured practices. This article outlines key international best practices for researcher collaboration in a UAS context.

Defining Shared Objectives and Roles from the Start

Effective collaboration begins with mutual understanding of research goals, expected outcomes, and the practical application of results. UAS typically work closely with industry, public sector actors, and SMEs. Therefore, research collaborations—especially in international settings—must be grounded in real-world relevance while aligning with academic objectives. Early in the project lifecycle, it is crucial to define clear roles and responsibilities for each partner institution and researcher (Bozeman & Boardman, 2014). Tools like Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) or project charters can provide structure, ensure accountability, and enhance mutual trust.

The South Ostrobothnia Tourism Forum is a good example of how common goals and roles can be defined from the outset. The Tourism Forum was established in 2019 to address the need to develop cooperation and activities in the tourism sector (Järvinen et al. 2020). The objectives of the Tourism Forum include, for example, profiling the tourism industry as a significant industry in the region and developing a common tourism image. A wide range of regional actors participate in the Tourism Forum, which meets several times a year, and its activities are designed to be continuous and interactive between the industry and tourism professionals.

Ensuring Transparent and Ongoing Communication

Smooth communication is the backbone of any successful international collaboration. This includes both structured meetings and informal exchanges. UAS researchers, who often juggle teaching, applied projects, and external partnerships, benefit from asynchronous communication tools (e.g., shared drives, Trello, MS Teams) that allow flexible participation.
Regular check-ins, clear documentation, and cultural awareness training also support a shared understanding, especially in diverse teams spanning multiple countries (Cummings & Kiesler, 2005).

For example, communication can be improved by strengthening cooperation between researchers and UAS dissemination and marketing experts (Rauhala, in press). The communication kick-off meeting for the newly started project helps the researchers implementing practical communication. At the same time, the themes and needs of the project are reviewed, and the communication responsibilities are agreed upon. The meeting facilitates the initiation of communication and establishes a foundation for goal-oriented and impactful communication throughout the project.

Embracing Interdisciplinarity and Cultural Diversity

Applied research in UAS settings often addresses complex, real-world problems—climate adaptation, aging societies, smart manufacturing—that require interdisciplinary expertise. International collaboration offers an opportunity to combine complementary competencies across sectors and cultures (Wagner et al., 2015). Promoting inclusive participation, recognizing language differences, and respecting regional innovation contexts can significantly enhance the quality and relevance of the collaboration.

Embracing interdisciplinarity and cultural diversity is generally important in international projects that combine expertise from different fields and cultural perspectives. Additionally, trust can significantly improve the quality and relevance of collaboration. Considering cultural diversity can also reduce the language barrier that often arises in cooperation between UAS and businesses.

Implementing FAIR and Open Science Principles

As UAS increasingly participate in EU-funded projects such as Horizon Europe and Interreg, the adoption of FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) data principles and open science practices becomes central. Open access publishing, data sharing through repositories like Zenodo, and transparency in methodology foster credibility and reuse (Wilkinson et al., 2016). Given the applied nature of UAS research, open practices also support knowledge transfer to SMEs, municipalities, and civil society organizations.

In Finland and also elsewhere in Europe, Open Science is a significant issue that is closely related to research. The Finnish research community has just updated the Declaration for Open Science and Research 2025-2030, which describes the operating environment of open science (Open Science Coordination in Finland, 2025). The guiding principles for promoting openness are: 1) Collaboration and participation, 2) Diversity and multilingualism, 3) Transparency and accountability, and 4) Sustainability and common good.

Leveraging Funding and Mobility Opportunities

Funding instruments such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ KA2, Interreg, and COST Actions provide tailored mechanisms to support international cooperation and mobility. For UAS, engaging in these programs enhances institutional visibility and builds capacity. Moreover, staff exchanges, joint supervision of theses, and participation in European University Alliances can foster sustained research ties and enrich institutional strategies for internationalization.

Seinäjoki UAS (SEAMK) is actively involved in several international projects. In fact, 15 % of the 142 externally funded projects received international funding in 2024. Through these projects, SEAMK has been able to enhance international networking, improve educational development, and increase opportunities for both staff and student mobility.

Building Long-Term Strategic Partnerships

Rather than relying on ad hoc collaborations, UAS benefit from developing long-term institutional partnerships with like-minded universities, research institutes, and innovation ecosystems. This includes joint labs, shared research infrastructures, and co-created RDI agendas with regional and international partners. Such approaches are evident in the European Universities Initiative, which aims to deepen cross-border cooperation in education, research, and innovation (European Commission, 2022).

HEROES alliance is an excellent example of how long-term strategic partnerships can be developed. HEROES (Higher Education Roaming Opportunities and Engagement for Society) is part of the European higher education cooperation funded by the Erasmus+ program. The alliance started at the beginning of

2025, and its goal is to focus on smart and digital innovation to make regions more resilient. The HEROES alliance includes several higher education institutions from different countries, such as Thomas More University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), Fontys University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands), Deggendorf Institute of Technology (Germany), Halmstad University (Sweden), Mendel University (Czech Republic), Polytechnic University of Beja (Portugal), University College Northern Denmark (Denmark), and Vilniaus Kolegija (Lithuania). Together these HEROES partners have formed thematic pods in the areas of agriculture and food; care and wellbeing; circular economy; digital transformation; education, learning and inclusion; and regional development. The aim is to set up joint research agenda and procedures to share human resources and laboratories.

Practicing Responsible and Ethical Research

Ethical issues are increasingly central to collaborative research. In UAS settings—where research often involves end users and real-world testing—attention must be paid to GDPR compliance, data security, research integrity, and co-creation ethics. International partnerships should also adopt common understandings of authorship, data management, and intellectual property rights (ALLEA, 2023). Clear, shared guidelines support both ethical conduct and trust.

Responsibility, ethics and research safety are taken into account in Seinäjoki UAS's projects by adhering to ethical guidelines, ensuring data management and privacy, and promoting sustainable development principles at all stages of the project. Additionally, ethical pre-assessment of a new project is employed if needed, and research data has been handled in accordance with data protection requirements, for instance, interview data is anonymised or pseudonymised.

Evaluating and Learning from Collaboration

Effective collaboration is dynamic and evolving. Building mechanisms for self-assessment, peer review, and stakeholder feedback helps partnerships learn and adapt. For UAS, which often operate at the nexus of education, applied research, and regional development, this reflective approach ensures that collaboration remains meaningful, impactful, and sustainable.

In Finnish UAS, the evaluation and learning of collaboration are realized through regular feedback surveys, self-assessments, and development discussions with partners. For example, in RDI projects, feedback is collected both internally and from external stakeholders, and the results are used for the continuous improvement of project activities. Additionally, peer reviews are used to learn from the best practices of other UAS. This systematic evaluation work supports sustainable and impactful collaboration at the interface of regional development and education.

Conclusion

For universities of applied sciences, international researcher collaboration represents a strategic opportunity to enhance relevance, impact, and innovation capacity. By adopting best practices grounded in clarity, transparency, openness, and ethics, UAS can position themselves as agile and valued partners in the global knowledge ecosystem.

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Anne-Maria Mäkelä is a leading expert in international research collaboration within Universities of Applied Sciences, combining strong experience in external funding, project coordination, and strategic internationalisation. Her work emphasises building institutional support structures, fostering participation in European alliances and networks, and promoting collaboration based on shared values, regional impact, and industry engagement. Mäkelä's approach highlights how structured support, strategic alignment with funding instruments, active networking, and peer learning can enable UAS researchers to succeed in international collaboration.

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