



# Responsible internationalisation: Guidelines for reflection on international academic collaboration



**STINT**

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## Premise

- Internationalisation has a number of positive effects on research and higher education.
- Today, researchers at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Sweden collaborate to a greater extent with a larger number of countries than earlier.
- Collaborations with researchers from countries whose scientific and political systems, culture and laws differ significantly from ours entail other and sometimes greater challenges.
- There is an increased need for informed assessments of the contents and consequences of international collaborations before, during and after a project.
- This document has been drawn up in collaboration between STINT, Karolinska Institutet, KTH Royal Institute of Technology and Lund University. The background to this work is the growing debate on values and ethical considerations in international collaborations in connection to HEIs in several countries.
- The document is intended to serve as support for reflection and as the basis for discussion of strategic decisions on internationalisation. The purpose is to aid researchers, research directors, department heads, and university administration in assessing collaborations and structuring discussions on how the HEI, department or research group should approach international collaboration.

# 1 Responsible internationalisation in academic collaboration

Internationalisation generally generates value for research and higher education. Overall, internationalisation of research aims to enhance quality and improve the dissemination of results. Yet internationalisation needs to be pursued responsibly. Researchers, support services and HEI management need to assess the challenges and opportunities related to international collaboration. This need is particularly pertinent in cases of cooperation with partners in countries with rapidly developing research systems, histories of corruption or human rights violations, or in countries that are not governed democratically. In such cases, there is reason to be more scrupulous than usual when developing collaborations. This document provides support for assessing potential risks and difficulties that should be weighed against the opportunities offered.

A structured process and resources are needed to identify, assess, handle and monitor the opportunities and risks of international collaborations. The advantages to doing this include increasing the awareness of individual researchers and at the HEI of the associated risks and the responsibility for handling them. In addition, such an approach leads to better preparedness for handling and especially reacting to negative events and changes related to the project. As a result, better conditions are created for utilising the opportunities brought about by internationalisation in the long term. Opportunities and risks should be assessed before commencing any larger collaboration, yet far from all possible events or consequences of a project can be predicted. Therefore a preliminary assessment of opportunities and risks is often inadequate. During the course of the project, there should be awareness of potential negative consequences. Periodic controls should be considered in large projects so that collaboration conditions can be monitored and assessed. It is therefore an advantage if areas of responsibility are clearly determined and there is adequate preparedness for supporting the running of a project and addressing the risks that may arise during its course.

Each HEI needs to determine its own procedures for ensuring responsible internationalisation. Such procedures ought to target the research and teaching staff who initiate and develop research and teaching collaborations, as well as the administrative staff and academic leaders designing more strategic partnerships.

Some of the assessments needed for ensuring responsible internationalisation require relatively good knowledge of the geographical, historical, social and political context of the partner institution or project. It is therefore important that researchers, administrative staff and HEI management stay abreast of relevant developments regarding the context of international collaborations.

Courses and active trend analysis could provide and develop relevant knowledge and competences in this area. It may also be necessary to draw on expertise beyond that of those immediately involved in the collaboration, such as that of academic colleagues with experience from the country concerned, or support service or external expertise. It is particularly important that the identified risks are discussed at departmental or even institutional level. An *ex ante* assessment of an international project should aim to produce an overall evaluation of the benefits and risks, and ought to weigh different factors against each other.

Some HEIs already have procedures in place for assessing new collaborative projects. Research on humans and animals is subject to ethical approval in the country where the study is conducted, but laws, regulations and norms may differ widely between countries. In more extensive collaborations, certain due diligence investigations may be needed. Agreements entered into at institutional level are generally scrutinised by the legal staff of HEIs. For some collaborations, intellectual property issues may need to be assessed, while other projects need to be considered in relation to non-disclosure agreements, national security issues and sanctions. Sometimes a media risk assessment is conducted and financial risk assessments may also occur. Therefore certain preliminary assessments of collaborative projects are currently already being conducted.

This document aims to support the process of assessing the opportunities and risks of international collaborations. At HEIs in several other countries with more extensive international cooperation, procedures for due diligence and risk assessment in international collaborative projects are considerably more developed, as for example in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Each country and HEI has its own, context-specific needs. Based on the Swedish context, this document pays attention to and systematises many of the questions that should be asked at different stages of the development of a collaboration that involves partners in the type of countries described above. One of the aims to ask these questions is that they serve as a possible foundation and guidelines for the development of an HEI's own procedures. The questions and guidelines should not be regarded as exhaustive, but rather as exemplification of the areas and issues that need to be addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, <https://www.cpni.gov.uk/trusted-research>.

It should also not be regarded as prescriptive; it is up to each HEI to determine its own procedures. However, we believe that an HEI that chooses not to develop procedures for ex ante risk assessment of international collaborations, as well as for monitoring during the course of such projects, is less equipped to take a proactive approach to internationalisation. Research funders that support international cooperation should also be able to request these types of risk assessments to ensure that the necessary measures are taken to ensure responsible internationalisation. The guidelines might be particularly valuable for research funding organisations that have international programs.

The procedures for assessing international collaboration should be easy to access and implement at institutional level. In addition to their individual responsibility, researchers or teachers should experience such procedures as enhancing their ability and confidence to assess the difficult issues that may arise in relation to partners in new or complicated partner countries. The aim is that individual researchers or teachers experience the HEI as providing a stable, competent and reliable basis for international collaborations. If the procedures intended to offer support are too cumbersome, they may not be used. At the same time, the issues that arise are often quite complex making it difficult to design a simple process to address them.

## 2 Aspects to consider when assessing international collaborations

International collaborations may be assessed on a number of aspects. At first glance, these may appear straightforward, but deeper analysis is often needed. Aspects of international collaboration that are important to consider are detailed below.

### 2.1 Why and how does the collaboration take place?

There are many different reasons to collaborate, such as enhancing research quality, obtaining access to data, resources and infrastructure, or because certain studies can be more easily conducted in certain countries due to for example different legislation or prior relationship building. It is important to identify the benefit of the collaboration and its expected effects at the planning stage. If, for example, the aims are clear, the exchange is balanced in terms of resources, research is integrated into teaching, and both junior and senior researchers are involved, the collaboration is likely to be more resilient and sustainable.

The forms of collaboration should be transparent, and legal advice is needed for some types of collaboration. If a project for instance is financed by the other party and a researcher based in Sweden must be affiliated with the HEI abroad, some conflicts may arise with that researcher's employment in Sweden. In collaborations with colleagues from authoritarian countries,<sup>2</sup> in particular, academic freedom may be restricted and greater control may be exerted over the direction and content of research. It is important that the incentives for international collaboration are weighed against the risks such a project might entail.

- Why does the collaboration take place and which effects are expected in the short and long term?
- Is the exchange balanced? (e.g. regarding access to funding or level of knowledge)
- Is there a plan or objective for further development of the collaboration over time?
- How is the project funded, and what are the chances of completing the project?
- Does the way the project is funded entail risks regarding independence, integrity, ethics, or academic freedom?
- Was the collaboration preceded by informed discussions between all parties on its opportunities and risks?
- Has the responsible head at a level appropriate to the project's ambitions been consulted (e.g. dean, department head, or departmental research director)?

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<sup>2</sup>Academic freedom is also encroached upon in democracies.

## 2.2 Which actors are collaborating?

Collaborations can take place at a number of different levels: from informal collaborations between two individuals in different countries to overall bilateral strategic partnerships between two HEIs. Overall bilateral or multilateral partnerships may also be established through agreements between governments that involve many HEIs in several countries. Collaborations are often symmetric at organisational level, insofar as one party in one country collaborates with a party in another country at an equivalent organisational level (research group with research group, HEI with HEI, etc.). Yet there are also many examples of more asymmetric collaborations where actors serve as intermediaries. Some HEIs have for example entered into agreements with government departments, or individual academic departments collaborate with entire research institutes.

Usually higher-level cooperation is more abstract and less dependent on individuals. However, the ultimate responsibility for all collaborations involving actors from a specific HEI lies with the management of that HEI. An analysis of relationships may lead to improved understanding of the challenges and opportunities that may arise during the project.

- Between which institutions and at which level does the collaboration take place?
- Has the collaboration been approved and established at the right levels at the HEI?
- Is there experience of similar collaborations and how these have been managed?
- Should a formal agreement be signed?

## 2.3 Political, social and cultural context of the partner country

Political, social and cultural contexts can differ considerably between countries. Conditions in a specific country may mean that research subjects, students or researchers are exposed to risks that are greater than or different from those in other contexts. If research subjects, interviewees, students or researchers belong to persecuted ethnic groups, minorities or other vulnerable groups there is special reason to design the project carefully. It is also important to be aware of the fact that some research areas can be uncomplicated in certain parts of a country, while they may expose research subjects, students or researchers to danger in other parts of the same country.

Cultural differences are often a strength in collaborations and may add multiple perspectives. However, cultural or linguistic differences can also lead to misunderstandings.



In some countries, there are hierarchical structures and a respect for seniority that many Swedish researchers are unaccustomed to. This may lead junior researchers to experience difficulties in influencing research environments or results. It is not always easy for researchers in Sweden to handle such conditions. Discussing this with experienced colleagues may increase awareness of the conditions and ensure a certain degree of preparedness for handling differences that others have experienced as significant.

- Do researchers and HEIs have overall and relevant knowledge of the political, social and cultural conditions in the partner country?
- What type of support is offered to researchers at institutional level to help them understand and navigate the context of the partner country?

## 2.4 Legal context

Some research and teaching areas are controversial or even illegal in certain countries. Therefore special caution needs to be taken when developing research, teaching or collaborative projects that touch on controversial areas. Research or teaching that is illegal in the country concerned should not be conducted, because this exposes staff and others associated with the project to great risks. Alternative ways of meeting the aims of the research, teaching or collaborative project should be explored.

There are also certain types of research that cannot be conducted with parties or persons from certain countries because of agreements on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In these cases, it is not the other country's laws that impose restrictions, but Swedish laws and international treaties. Research results or methods that may have dual use present a particularly tricky area. In this context, 'dual use' means that the results may have both civil and military applications, making such research particularly interesting to the military, security apparatus or defence industry of another country. Dual use issues are most common in the fields of engineering, the natural sciences and medicine.

- Are there direct risks for dual use of research results?
- Are there research results that may be regarded as strategic products?
- Could the scientific content of the project be restricted by international sanctions?
- Is there a need to consider the protection of intellectual property rights?
- What is the data protection and security situation in the partner country?
- Can a teaching collaboration be reconciled with the current Swedish legal framework for managing students and awarding degrees?

## 2.5 Institutional autonomy

In many countries, HEIs are public institutions and therefore under government authority, just like in Sweden. It may be particularly important to be aware of the legal status of partners in authoritarian countries. If a collaboration partner is a public institution or has close ties to the government, this may affect any future litigation processes.<sup>3</sup> This may also have a significant impact on academic freedom. The connection of HEIs to and their dependence on the state are sometimes unclear or inconsistent. In some countries, like Sweden, HEIs are formally part of the state, but the government refrains from directly controlling their core activities. In other countries, governments may exert more direct control over core activities, for instance through directives on the appointment and dismissal of staff, or direct control of research. In Sweden, freedom of research is enshrined in both the Higher Education Act and the Constitution.

In some countries, there are other powerful organisations external to the HEIs that may have a strong influence on their inner workings, for example through their representatives in key positions at HEIs. Such organisations may include political parties, religious organisations, or the military.

Research and education organisations of course have a variety of different partner organisations. Some of these are more sensitive than others. If the intended partner for example has close ties to the military or defence-related organisations, conducting a risk analysis before embarking on a collaboration is essential. Risks may also be connected to financial dependence, and, in the past, some collaborations with businesses have for example proven to be sensitive. If the academic freedom or reputation of one's own HEI may be affected as part of or due to the collaboration, these aspects should be analysed by experts.

- Is there a risk that government actors will influence the research topic, content or data collection beyond the scope of what is deemed acceptable in the field?
- Could collaboration with a partner involve a reputational risk (for the researcher, department, or HEI)?
- Could a collaboration affect the independence of one's own HEI in relation to other parties?

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<sup>3</sup> In a litigation process involving a public HEI abroad, the foreign government rather than the HEI would be party to the case.

## 2.6 Ethical aspects

When working abroad, researchers with Swedish affiliations or funding must follow the legal or ethical framework for research and education in Sweden.

In recent years, attention has been drawn to so-called ethics dumping (i.e. researchers from strongly regulated countries conduct experiments and tests in countries with weaker regulation). The fact that some countries have weaker legal frameworks or control and more permissive practices in ethical issues should not be exploited. Both individual researchers and HEIs are tasked with ensuring that ethical conflicts and violation of accepted ethical standards are avoided, as far as possible. This can be achieved by consulting colleagues or by acquiring knowledge regarding regulations in the country where research is to be conducted.

Such preliminary assessments are particularly important when research on animals or human subjects is concerned. Even when ethical approval has been obtained in the other country, regulations and practices may differ. An internal ethical assessment may be needed even if the project is conducted in another country. It is therefore important to be aware of ethical issues and to conduct research responsibly. Further, it may be inappropriate to conduct certain research due to conditions described in the section on political, social and cultural context.

- Does the collaboration involve research on humans or animals?
- Will experiments on animals or humans be conducted abroad as part of the project?
- How does legislation in the country where experiments are conducted compare or relate to Swedish laws and regulations?
- Is the researcher planning to conduct tests on humans or animals that have been ethically approved in the partner country but not in Sweden?
- How will students and doctoral students who are actively involved in the exchange be supported?
- Is research conducted in countries and regions where there is a risk that research may contravene human rights?
- How will the research be conducted in a country that has more permissive research norms? How are differences in incentive structures handled?
- What should be done when academic freedom is restricted? Where should the line be drawn? How does this research affect the project partner?

### 3 Summary

International academic collaboration raises research and teaching quality, increases knowledge and understanding and contributes to relationship- and trust-building. Hence, the increased degree of internationalisation at Swedish HEIs is positive and welcomed. Because HEI management now regards internationalisation as a strategic measure, there are improved possibilities to handle opportunities proactively and to prevent risks. This document includes questions and considerations that highlight several areas in which HEIs and researchers need to show reasonable caution to ensure responsible internationalisation. The content of the document should be viewed as suggestions or guidelines, rather than instructions or prescriptions. They are intended to support HEIs in having structured, relevant and useful discussions on and approaches to internationalisation and academic collaboration.

## Further reading

The suggested further reading listed below provides an overview of the different norms and approaches taken to international research and might be perused in addition to this document.

ALLEA (2017). The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. The European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities.

<http://www.allea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ALLEA-European-Code-of-Conduct-for-Research-Integrity-2017-1.pdf>

ALLEA, the European University Association & Science Europe (2019). Academic freedom and institutional autonomy: Commitments must be followed by action.

<https://www.eua.eu/downloads/content/academic%20freedom%20statement%20april%202019.pdf>

CPNI (2019). Trusted research – Guidance for academics. Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure.

<https://www.cpni.gov.uk/trusted-research>

d'Hooghe, I., Montulet, A., de Wolff, M. & Pieke, F. (2018). Assessing Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research. Leiden Asia Centre.

<https://leidenasiacentre.nl/wpcontent/uploads/2018/11/LeidenAsiaCentre-Report-Assessing-Europe-China-Collaboration-in-Higher-Education-and-Research.pdf>

Magna Charta Observatory (2019). Living values in Higher Education. Guidelines for Universities.

<http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/guidelines-for-universities>

Scholars at risk (2019). Promoting Higher Education Values: A Guide for Discussion

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/promoting-higher-education-values-a-guide-for-discussion/>

Scholars at risk (2019). Free to think.

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Scholars-at-Risk-Free-to-Think-2019.pdf>

Schwaag Serger, S. & Shih, T. (2018) Sverige och Kina - stärkt samverkan för en hållbar framtid: Ett kunskapsunderlag om innovation, forskning och högre utbildning. Government Offices of Sweden.

[https://www.regeringen.se/4aac8b/contentassets/5f0e9147360c4940a8cac5139fa949b3/sverige-och-kina\\_starkt-samverkan\\_-rapport.pdf](https://www.regeringen.se/4aac8b/contentassets/5f0e9147360c4940a8cac5139fa949b3/sverige-och-kina_starkt-samverkan_-rapport.pdf)

The Swedish Research Council (2017). God forskningssed.

[https://www.vr.se/download/18.2412c5311624176023d25b05/1555332112063/God-forskningsse\\_VR\\_2017.pdf](https://www.vr.se/download/18.2412c5311624176023d25b05/1555332112063/God-forskningsse_VR_2017.pdf)





STINT, The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education, was set up by the Swedish Government in 1994 with the mission to internationalise Swedish higher education and research.

STINT promotes knowledge and competence development within internationalisation and invests in internationalisation projects proposed by researchers, educators and leaderships at Swedish universities.

STINT promotes internationalisation as an instrument to:

- Enhance the quality of research and higher education
- Increase the competitiveness of universities
- Strengthen the attractiveness of Swedish universities

STINT's mission is to encourage renewal within internationalisation through new collaboration forms and new partners. For example, STINT invests in young researchers' and teachers' international collaborations. Moreover, STINT's ambition is to be a pioneer in establishing strategic cooperation with emerging countries in research and higher education.



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