

# The rhetoric and practice of business research collaboration among High North universities

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## ABSTRACT

International research collaboration and business development in the High North have become hot topics at the governmental policy level in many countries. However, despite prior research on cooperation between Nordic universities, there is a dearth of research specifically addressing the practice of High North research collaboration in business studies. We ask the following research question: how are the prospects for business research collaboration among High North universities portrayed in national policy documents and to what extent is business research in the High North collaborative in practice? We address this question by analyses and comparisons of publicly available governmental Arctic strategies and bibliographic data on joint publications between researchers from High North universities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The empirical results reveal diverging yet far-reaching national aspirations at the policy level which do not match the rather modest research collaboration in practice evidenced by our bibliographic data. Our conclusions suggest that the rhetoric of High North business research collaboration and the practice of actual collaboration among High North universities are decoupled from each other. We theorize about explanatory circumstances behind decoupling in the area of research collaboration and provide suggestions for further research.

**Keywords:** *High North, Nordic Universities, cooperation, business research.*

## INTRODUCTION

We address the following research question: how are the prospects for business research collaboration among High North universities portrayed in national policy documents and to what extent is business research in the High North collaborative in practice?

The Nordic High North region is frequently pinpointed as an important component of the Arctic agenda, where opportunities associated with natural resources and alternative sea routes need to be balanced with human development and environmental considerations (e.g., Iskanius and Pohjola 2016). Arguably, the challenges are especially noticeable because, even in a narrow Nordic sense, the Arctic is a transnational construct. The transnational character of the Nordic High North and the global implications of its development make international research collaboration in this region particularly desirable.

We focus here on the Nordic High North universities located in the administrative entities of Northern Norway, Northern Sweden, and Northern Finland, and concentrate specifically on business research collaboration. Given the transnational and political nature of issues related to the High North, international research collaboration discussions are not restricted to academia. Indeed, policymakers are also keen to contemplate what might be the “best” approach towards a strategic, coherent, and policy-relevant Arctic science (Tesar, Dubois, and Shestakov 2016).

It is apparent to us as the members of the Arctic Council that the governments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland make it their priority to develop High North policies for their respective countries. In these policies, international cooperation and business development are portrayed as important conditions for peaceful and sustainable development in the Arctic. In addition, knowledge-sharing across national borders is emphasized as an important step in the cultivation of regional identities during a perceived time of global challenges related to the economy, the environment, and society in general (Gürüz in Sundet et al. 2017, 1). From a political point of view, business research collaboration between universities in the High North ought therefore to be an essential part of producing and generating necessary knowledge about, and for, businesses in the Arctic. However, the practices of researchers may only be loosely coupled with governmental policies, and research collaboration tends to be habitual and based on strong ties between the collaborators (see, e.g., Trondal 2010). We are therefore interested in understanding whether the practice of business research col-

laboration in the High North corresponds to the lofty ideals that often characterize political visions and national policies.

First, we describe the national policies for the High North regions of Norway, Finland, and Sweden with a special reference to statements related to research collaboration in general and business research in particular (“the rhetoric”). We then present a bibliographic analysis of joint publications by researchers in the universities of the High North (“the practice”). The final section discusses the existing patterns of business research collaboration and explanatory factors behind the results we find. Finally, we suggest promising areas of further research about business research collaboration in the High North.

## THE HIGH NORTH REGION

The High North (in the context of this paper, referring to Northern Norway, Northern Sweden, and Northern Finland) is a cross-border area with its own reasons, purposes, and process dynamics. High North policies are developed on a national level (National Arctic/High North policies), intergovernmental level (Arctic Council, Barents Secretariat), and international level (EU Arctic Policy). We are interested in policies because they provide interesting clues to the kind of research collaboration that policy-makers deem valuable in the High North.

We analyse research collaboration in practice between universities located in the High North: in Norway, Nord University (NordU), UiT – The Arctic University of Norway (UiT); in Sweden, Luleå University of Technology (LTU) and Umeå University (UmeåU); and in Finland, the University of Lapland (UnivLap) and the University of Oulu (OU). We focus exclusively on High North universities and their business research collaboration as we are concerned with their role and involvement in producing and generating knowledge that is needed about, and for, businesses in the High North and the Arctic.

Over several years, some initiatives and common projects (e.g., the Arctic Economic Council, the University of the Arctic) have promoted High North cooperation. In spite of this, there are still those who voice concerns suggesting that “... the process of organizing Arctic research is fragmented. A strong mechanism is needed to steer some of the science agendas toward policy and management” (Tesar, Dubois, and Shestakov 2016, 1369). Our aim is to contribute to the discussion on the nature of the

relationship between policies and practices of research collaboration when it comes to the High North and the Arctic.

## METHODS

To answer our research question we analysed publicly available data sources including governmental Arctic strategies and joint publications between researchers from High North universities. For the analysis of each country's national strategies, we used Nvivo 11 software to measure frequencies and to identify how research collaboration was addressed in the documents. For an overview see Table 1 below.

COUNTRY	GOVERNMENTAL ARCTIC STRATEGY
Finland	Finland's Strategy for the Arctic Region (2013)
Sweden	Sweden's Strategy for the Arctic Region (2011)
Norway	Norway's Arctic Strategy (2017)

*Table 1. National Arctic strategies*

As shown in Table 1, national strategies for the Arctic region are available for all three countries. Interestingly, in the case of Norway, the government published Norway's High North Strategy in 2006, Norway's Arctic Policy in 2014, and Norway's Arctic Strategy in 2017. One interpretation of this is that Norway is particularly active in Arctic-related issues.

To address our research question on how the prospects for business research collaboration among High North universities are presented in national policy documents and to what extent this vision corresponds to the practice of business research in the High North, we applied a bibliometric approach. We used the Web of Science Core

Collection that contains regional citation indices, patent data, specialized subject indices, and an index of research datasets, totalling over 33,000 journals.

## EMPIRICAL RESULTS

In the first section, we present the national policies for development of the High North. In the second, we measure actual research collaboration between High North universities.

### National policies for the High North in Finland, Sweden, and Norway

#### *Finland*

The content analysis reveals that research is the eighth most common word used in Finland's *Strategy for the Arctic region* (2013). Moreover, the concepts of expertise and cooperation emerge from the coding of contexts associated with research.

#### *Expert*

For Finland, maintaining and developing a high standard of expertise and research are of primary importance. The following quote is illustrative: "Finland's ambition is to set an example as an Arctic expert both in research and in the responsible commercial exploitation of such expertise" (p. 17).

#### *Cooperation*

The Finnish Arctic strategy supports communication and collaboration between research institutes and universities involved in research. The strategy also states that the offering of Arctic instruction must increase and improve. Moreover, because of the limited and fragmentary availability of research data on the Arctic, networking and broad-based international cooperation between countries both within and beyond the Arctic region are considered crucial.

The Finnish strategy makes no distinction between institutions located in the Arctic and in the southern areas of the country. Because of Finland's northern location, nearly all areas of research are considered to be in some way linked to cold climate expertise and accordingly to Arctic conditions. Higher education institutions and research institutes engaged in Arctic research and their respective special fields are listed in a publication by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, entitled *Arctic expertise in Finland*.

### *Sweden*

*In Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region* (2011), the word research occurs as the fourth most important word (93 counts, 0.98% of the text).

Sweden's Arctic strategy states that interaction between research, higher education, politics, and society is essential for the Arctic. According to the policy, Sweden will promote and support international research cooperation in areas relevant for the Arctic, such as mineral research, environmental technology, and sustainable natural use (Regeringskansliet 2011). "[C]ooperation among small and slightly larger institutions across national borders in the North is an effective way of ensuring good resource use and increasing the quality of education and research, which can help to secure access to relevant skills in the area" (Regeringskansliet 2011, 40).

Economic development and industrial policy interests are stressed as some of the priorities of Sweden in the Arctic region. Sweden has resources that include experience, skills, and systems that are important for sustainable business development in the Arctic. As part of its Arctic strategy, Sweden aims to improve initiative and responsibility focusing on research and education as the strategy is "...based on the special conditions, opportunities and local knowledge offered in the High North" (Regeringskansliet 2011, 39).

### *Norway*

In Norway's Arctic strategy, cooperation and research are mentioned frequently. Cooperation is the fourth most frequent word with 80 occurrences (1.4% of the text), while research is the 26th most mentioned word with 24 occurrences (0.42% of the text). The Government of Norway assigns high priority to building on the existing expertise in maritime operations, research, and innovation in the High North. The following areas are discussed in the document: international cooperation, business development, knowledge development, infrastructure, environmental protection, and emergency preparedness. For our paper we consider international cooperation and knowledge development, two issues connected to research and the potential for research collaboration.

#### *International cooperation*

The Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Region are considered the most important channels for cooperation in the High North. Here the Norwegian government wants to retain its active role and participate in joint knowledge development

on Arctic-related topics. There is also an important reference to further supporting Barents cooperation and to continue financing cooperation projects via *Arctic 2030*<sup>2</sup>. The intention is to promote Norway's role as a leader in knowledge development in and about the Arctic and the High North, and in particular in the areas of environmental protection and resource management.

Thereafter active participation in broad Nordic cooperation is emphasized as a priority. This includes bilateral agreements, collaboration within the Nordic Council of Ministries in the areas of knowledge and business development, infrastructure, climate change and environmental protection, and security policy and cooperation with the EU.

The Norwegian Government will also promote cooperation on indigenous peoples as part of Arctic Council, Barents, and Nordic cooperation.

Lastly, work on enhancing the legal framework for the Arctic Ocean is stated as one of the priorities of the strategy. The Government of Norway wants to develop knowledge about the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the legal framework for the Arctic Ocean.

#### *Knowledge development*

As the main goal for knowledge development in the High North, the Norwegian Government stipulates that Norway will be “leading in knowledge about, for and in the High North” (p. 35). It also states that access to such knowledge and competence will be improved in order to increase innovation and value creation for businesses in the High North. The following thematic areas are defined as priorities for knowledge development: ocean, climate and environment, and knowledge about business and social development in the High North. Here, the Norwegian Government's High North strategy is to strengthen the capacity and quality of Norwegian Arctic research through the mobilization of Norwegian participation in the EU's research programme Horizon 2020. Also, the aim is to continue research with High North relevance via research programmes and schemes of the Research Council of Norway. It is further stated that the Norwegian Government wants to continue research on climate change in the Arctic as the foundation for environmental management, long-term social planning, business development, and understanding the consequences of global climate change. As one of the goals for High North strategy in knowledge development, the white paper stresses support for Northern Norway's expertise and competence milieus that contribute to the research and innovation relevant for businesses, society, and public authorities.

### Business research collaboration among High North universities

Our analysis of collaboration in practice between universities located in the High North spans the years 2010–2017, when most High North and Arctic-related initiatives emerged in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and in the international arena. We obtained an estimate of recent High North research collaboration by investigating the quantity of joint publications in all fields and, in particular, in business studies.

We analysed the publications on a bilateral basis, studying two pairs of universities at a time. The results include the total volume of publications in terms of article publications in scientific journals, the number of collaborations with each High North university, and the prominence of High North collaboration as a percentage of the total volume of publications (Table 2).

The results presented in Table 2 above reveal that the University of Umeå is at the top with 13,392 publications, followed by the University of Oulu. The University of

University	Total publications (all disciplines)	LTU	UmeåU	NordU	UiT	OU	UnivLap	% of High North collaboration
UmeåU	13 392	216	-	2	440	174	13	6%
OU	10 119	55	174	6	103	-	35	4%
UiT	8396	79	440	108	-	103	13	9%
LTU	3855	-	216	0	79	55	7	9%
NordU	894	0	2	-	108	6	-	13%
UnivLap	420	7	13	-	13	35	-	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>37 076</b>	1251 (total unique collaborations)						<b>3%</b>

Notes: Data: retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection. LTU=Luleå University of Technology, UmeåU=Umeå University, NordU=Nord University, UiT=UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, OU=University of Oulu, UnivLap=University of Lapland

*Table 2. Research output per institution through research collaboration among High North universities, 2010–2017<sup>3</sup>.*



Umeå’s best collaboration partners among the universities in the High North are UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, and the University of Oulu. However, measured as a percentage, the level of High North collaboration varies from 4% of all publications (University of Oulu) to 16% (University of Lapland). In addition, we see that the percentage of unique High North collaboration in all publications among High North universities amounts to 3%.

The next analysis concerns business research publications on a bilateral basis in which two pairs of universities are studied at a time. The search was conducted using the keywords management, business, economics, social sciences, interdisciplinary, and business finance. Again, it yields only 3% for High North collaboration in business studies.

While analysing collaborative articles in business studies between High North universities we had to exclude articles that were not relevant for business studies (three articles), and articles in which one of the co-authors was simultaneously affiliated to two High North universities (e.g., both at LTU and UnivLap) (two articles). This left us with a sample of 26 articles in business studies written by researchers at High North universities.

University	Total Business Publications	LTU	UmeåU	NordU	UiT	OU	UnivLap	% of High North collaboration
UmeåU	313	19	-	0	0	0	0	6%
LTU	217	-	19	0	1	1	2	10%
OU	205	1	0	0	-	-	2	1%
UiT	188	1	0	6	0	0	0	4%
NordU	56	0	0	-	0	0	0	11%
UnivLap	28	2	0	0	2	2	-	14%
<b>Total</b>	1007	31 (total unique collaborations)						3%

*Table 3. Research output per institution through research collaboration in business studies among High North universities, 2010–2017.*

FIELD OF SCIENCE	Cooperative pairs of universities	% of total unique collaborative
Business studies	<b>Unique collaborative articles (26)</b>	
	LTU – UmeåU NordU – UiT	61% 19%
Environmental studies	<b>Unique collaborative articles (69)</b>	
	LTU – UmeåU	30%
	UmeåU – OU UmeåU – UiT	25% 16%
Medical science	<b>Unique collaborative articles (206)</b>	
	UmeåU – UiT	90%
	UmeåU – OU NordU – UiT	5% 2.5%

*Table 4. Comparison between collaborative research publications in business research studies, environmental studies, and medical sciences, 2010–2017.*

It also seemed relevant to compare unique collaboration in business research studies among High North universities with the fields of environmental and medical sciences with a benchmark of the most cooperative publications and most productive pairs of universities (Table 4).

Table 4 reveals two collaborative Swedish universities and two collaborative Norwegian universities within the field of business studies, with no patterns of collaboration between countries. Of 26 unique collaborative papers in the field of business studies, 19 (61%) were produced by researchers affiliated with LTU – UmeåU universities. The Norwegian universities of NordU – UiT had six (19%) unique collaborative articles.

Environmental sciences, however, exhibits stronger patterns of cross-border collaboration, for example between Sweden and Finland, where UmeåU – OU produced 25% of all unique collaborative publications. In medical sciences, a striking percentage of 90% of all unique collaborative publications are pursued within the Swedish and Norwegian universities of UmeåU – UiT. Different research traditions (Kyvik and Larsen 1997), whereby natural sciences are assumed to be generally more internationally oriented than the social sciences, partially explain these findings.

National Arctic policies define business development as one of the priority areas, and the following keywords are identified in all national Arctic strategies when it comes to business: business development, “new Arctic business activities”, and “resource-based business development”. We therefore conclude that, from a policy point of view, these areas ought to be among the topics of joint research articles published in High North universities. However, what is the reality of business research collaboration that is relevant to the High North/Arctic? The empirical results show that only 1% of the articles (including studies where the empirical context involves the whole country) have relevance for the High North and Arctic context (see Table 5 below).

The publication data shows that the unique research collaboration between High North Universities in business studies accounts for only 3% of all publications. This may not be surprising, but when it comes to all the publications, the percentage of unique collaborative articles is the same. Here it can be seen that the High North universities are trying to change from being outsiders to being insiders (see Johanson and Vahlne 2009), hence they are more likely to collaborate with universities that have long scholarly traditions than with other High North universities. In the last ten years the generation of knowledge about and for economic development in the Arctic in the form of research publications by High North universities consists of only 18 articles (1%). Apparently researchers interested in the High North are not necessarily located in High North universities.

	Total business collaborative research publications between High North universities concerning the High North	Total collaborative business research publications between High North universities	Total business research publications by High North universities
Business research articles co-authored by High North researchers	18	26	1007

*Table 5. High North Universities research collaboration in business studies.*

University	Country	Established	Business school (business programme <i>siviløkonom</i> ) / Faculty of social sciences established
LTU	Sweden	1971	1977 / 1997
UmeåU	Sweden	1965	1989
NordU	Norway	1994 / 2016	1985
UiT	Norway	1968	2004
OU	Finland	1958	1959 / 2000 <sup>5</sup>
UnivLap	Finland	1979	1982

*Table 6. High North universities and their business schools/faculties of social sciences.*

## DISCUSSION

In our paper, as we discuss business research collaboration, we focus on schools or faculties with research and education in business studies in the High North universities. Most of these institutions are relatively young (see Table 6), thus they do not have strong research traditions in business studies<sup>4</sup> compared, for example, with their counterparts in Uppsala, Helsinki, or Bergen.

High North universities, being peripherally located, may face some challenges when conducting research collaboration. These universities may encounter problems in the recruitment and relocating of desirable prolific international academics, and difficulties in competing on the world publication stage if they do not team up with more established universities. There is a lack of high-quality scholarly journals that will accept contributions on the High North, and funding for such research is relatively new in the business area, while traditionally strong in environmental or medical sciences. The insufficient attention given to the Arctic and High North has been recognized as one of the challenges in the management sciences (Whiteman and Yamashev 2018).

High North and the Arctic research (including business studies) has been on the agenda of governments, funding bodies, and international research organizations

for several years. In fact, it became fashionable to do research about High North and Arctic issues once global warming and sustainable economic development in the Arctic hit the political agenda. In this paper we are interested in comparing the policy and practice levels regarding the extent of business research collaboration in the High North and the factors which can explain this picture.

Evidently, High North policies, which have been approved by governments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, support and promote cooperation between universities in the High North. Their aim is to widen the store of knowledge about sustainable economic development in the High North. However, as our empirical data shows, most of the co-authored papers in business studies (noted in Table 3) are the result of collaboration between researchers in the same county and only a few of partnerships between countries. It therefore seems that the rhetoric of governmental policies is decoupled from the practice of business research collaboration in the High North.

The discussion by Bromley and Powell (2012) about decoupling as the gap between policy and practice can be a useful framework to understanding what might explain the existing picture of business research collaboration between High North universities. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organizations are deeply interpenetrated by their external environment. Here, the universities in the High North and the Arctic comprise institutions that need to follow not only national (e.g., ministerial) and international (e.g., EU) policies, but also regional ones (e.g., High North and Arctic). In this view, universities then seek legitimacy and are pressed to introduce elements from the external environment, such as research priorities from governmental policies for the Arctic that may yield additional benefits (funding, research positions, etc.). Bromley and Powell (2012) maintain that “studies of policy–practice decoupling make the observation that policies are rarely a strong predictor of daily activities” (p. 489). In our case, one can observe the gap between the current rhetoric on High North issues and the existing business research cooperation pattern. High North policies comprise many statements such as “active participation in knowledge development about High North and Arctic” (Departementene 2017, 19) or “active High North Nordic cooperation [...] within topics such as knowledge and business development” (Departementene 2017, 21). However, our empirical data about collaborative business research publications shows a very different picture, wherein only 1% of all publications concern the High North context. As shown in our paper, some research fields are much stronger in research collaboration than business studies.

In our further research, we would like to study the relationship between external funding opportunities made available to researchers in the High North and the amount of collaborative publications. In addition, we argue that because all the business schools of High North universities are fairly young compared with the old and established Nordic business schools, they need to change from being “outsiders” to being “insiders” (see Johanson and Vahlne 2009). Hence, they are drawn to collaborate with business schools that have long traditions rather than with other High North business schools.

As to the factors explaining the capacity to change the existing pattern of collaboration among universities, one of the factors possibly explaining the decoupling between the rhetoric and practice of research collaboration in the High North universities is the need for more professionals interested in High North issues. Bromley and Powell (2012) state that “professionals often act through informal channels to promote the goals of their respective subunits” (p. 505). In addition, governmental Arctic policies can be deemed one of those factors, as such policies seldom provide additional funding opportunities and thus can be symbolically implemented in the universities without real research cooperation, which causes policy and practice to be decoupled (see, e.g., Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2017). The characteristics and structures of High North universities may be also linked to the degree of policy–practice decoupling. Our research demonstrates that High North universities fail to exploit their northern location and proximity to societal and business processes as strategic advantages for building “Arctic expert” capabilities.

In general, High North collaboration can be considered an established organizational idea, as it is promoted by the regional, national, and international actors. Røvik (2002, 142) lists several factors that can influence the capacity of an organizational idea to flow and gain acceptance among organizations. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on social authorization, timing, and individualizing. Røvik (2002) presents social authorization as “clearly linked to and associated with one or more widely reputed organizations” (p. 142). High North and Arctic issues are of global interest, and the influence of the Arctic Council is an important element in what kind of research topics are deemed relevant. In addition, the High North business schools need to be accepted in the global arena. Research collaboration between High North universities in Norway, Sweden, and Finland is perceived as unproblematic (due to similar research traditions) and easier to perform (language, distance, etc.). However, High North business schools are evaluated according to

the number of publications they produce and their quality. This compels them to seek cooperation with prestigious universities instead of with partners in the High North. When it comes to timing, High North and Arctic issues can be considered as capturing “the spirit of time” (Røvik 2002, 133) and as a “modern and future oriented answer to ongoing processes of environmental changes” (Røvik 2002, 142). Finally, individualizing is an important factor, as research collaboration is done first and foremost by individual researchers. Many individual researchers have their own ideas about what is interesting to study, and many argue that their discretion is key to progress and prosperity. Nevertheless, High North business cooperation can be seen as an “appealing offer of exciting jobs, a career, and personal development” (Røvik 2002, 143). However, as we show here, High North universities, as young institutions, may experience challenges in attracting desirable international academics.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reveals that there are certain explicit national priorities and strategies in the development of the High North and that these differ between Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In turn, it would seem that these national aspirations are likely to have implications for the kind of High North-themed research collaboration between these countries that can be initiated and sustained with the support of the national research funding designated for such purposes. However, we observe that the rhetoric of the national policies and the practice of business research collaboration are decoupled from each other.

As our empirical data shows, most collaborative papers (see Table 3) are joint efforts by researchers in the same county, with only a few the result of partnerships between countries. This shows that international collaboration in business studies is decoupled irrespective of the policies pursued.

In all cases, it would seem that research is viewed as a suitable instrument for the realization of national strategies for the Arctic. Finland appears to be seeking an expert role while emphasizing research cooperation and positioning practically all academic institutions in the nation under the umbrella term of “The Arctic”. The Swedish strategy appears more diverse and perhaps less research-oriented, emphasizing the role of knowledge from the High North in Arctic-related cooperation in research, education, and business development. The Norwegian strategy, for its part, appears comparatively elaborate, stressing international cooperation in general and

cooperation with Finland in particular; regional policy, research and innovation, and knowledge development are its cornerstones. However, as shown here, the governmental policies are decoupled from the practices of existing collaboration patterns among High North universities.

Regarding ideas for further research, it would be interesting to scrutinize the correlation between available research funding for High North business studies and the actual realization of joint publications. The implementation of the institutional strategies of High North universities for research collaboration in business studies on the Arctic, and in the Arctic, would be a promising research idea.

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## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Arctic 2030 (Arktis 2030) – is the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs grant scheme in the High North. More info: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/arktis-2030/id2356599/>

<sup>3</sup> The results obtained by bibliometric analysis are only indicative and provide a gross number of publications without examining their quality.

<sup>4</sup> Here we refer to all areas of business studies in general, without distinguishing separate sub-areas of the discipline.

<sup>5</sup> A professorship in Economics was established at the University of Oulu in 1959, while a fully-fledged Faculty of Economics and Business Administration was only established in 2000.

