

## Research Article

# Building Research Collaboration Across University Departments: A Swot Analysis

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** To challenge the collaborative process in a young research team with evidence on building research collaboration in university departments.

**Methods:** A structured literature review was combined with a hermeneutic analysis of data from a double survey conducted during a one-week seminar. Eight Norwegian participants provided data through a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) template.

**Results:** The literature review revealed two themes 1) Building a research network, and 2) Networking across university units. A naïve reading of the double survey data showed that participants enjoyed collaborating in research networks. A structured interpretation provided a contextual report on collaborative research processes across university units working to build research collaboration.

**Conclusion:** Excellent research collaboration emerges through focus, flexibility, trust, persistence, and leadership. A successful research group is dependent on positive engagement between members, the acknowledgment of individual contributions and ideas; and supportive team leadership which is especially facilitated through dialogical leadership.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutic analysis, Literature review, Leadership, Competence development, Qualitative, SWOT

## Introduction

Research collaboration refers to “the working together of researchers to achieve the common goal of producing new scientific knowledge” [1]. In this context, occupational professionals who work in research and development are strategically managed [2] to improve knowledge transfers through transformational leadership [3]. This process is critical, as research collaboration is fundamental to scholarly research success. However, it is often difficult to build a collaborative research team [4]. To clarify the characteristics of such an endeavor, this study reviewed the literature on building collaborative research teams, then compared the results using a collaborative process experienced by a young, publicly funded healthcare research team that spanned multiple university units.

## Background

Our initial literature review yielded 443 articles, of which we retained 394 after removing duplicates (Figure 1). Two of the authors then conducted independent screenings, resulting in 23 for potential inclusion. After reviewing the full texts of each, the authors excluded 15 for focusing on collaboration between international teams or separate universities rather than intradepartmental collaboration. Thus, the final sample contained eight articles, with various settings in the United States, Canada, Greece, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. One article

introduced a new method for developing strategic research plans [5], while another investigated several issues at a specific research center, including collaboration, multidisciplinary approaches, support, and dissemination [6]. The remaining six articles primarily discussed the experiences of their respective authors and offered relevant reflections [7-12]. No article in our final sample provided a substantial literature review on the process of building a collaborative research team across different units within the same university department. Based on the evidence from these articles, we identified two main themes, including 1) Building a research network and 2) Networking across university units. An additional literature review conducted by two of the authors, in July 2023, did not result in new publications being included, so this topic does not appear to have had recent international research focus.

## Building a Research Network

Organizational factors are essential for building research collaboration. To achieve success, three such factors are particularly important: leadership [5-7,9,12], mentorship [5-7,9,12] and cultural background [12]. In this regard, team leaders should promote team learning, serve as role models, support a favorable climate for cooperation, explain rational decisions, and help team members attain self-efficacy [9]. Thus, skilled team leadership and support are critical provisions for a thriving collaborative research team [6]. In a specific example, Best et al. [5] found that the research community was more

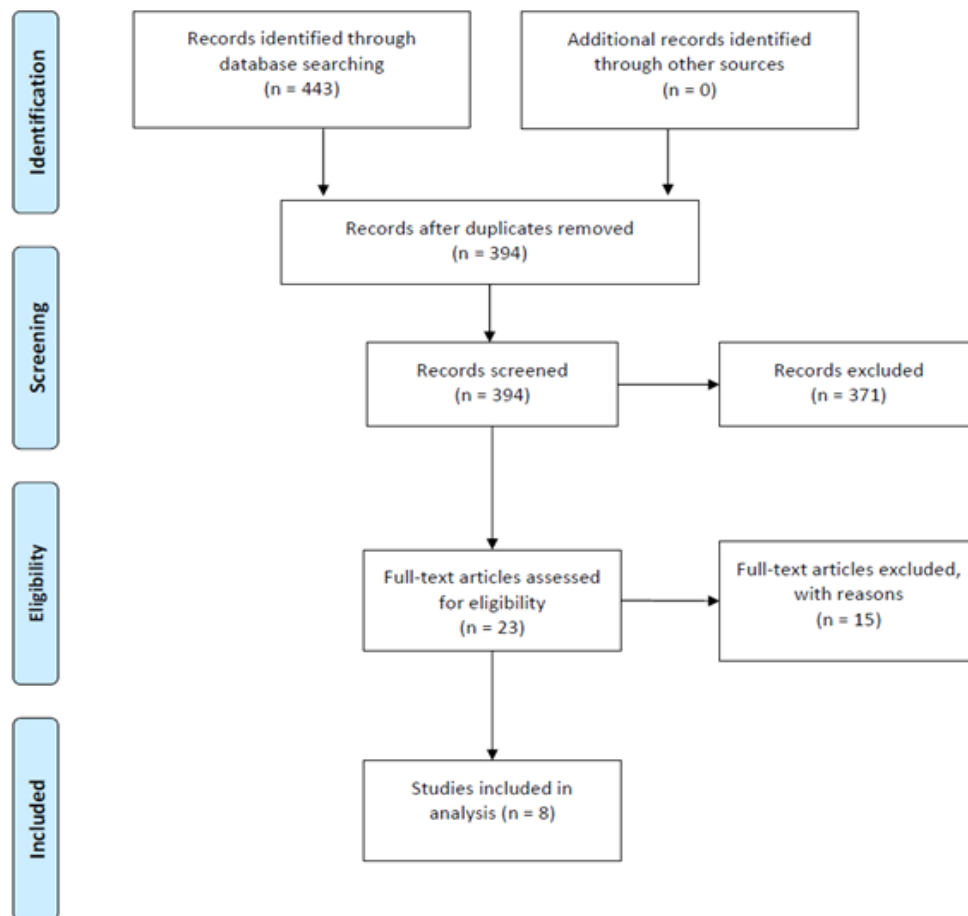


Figure 1: Flowchart of the literature review process.

likely to remain engaged and informed when the team leader frequently sent informative and humorous emails. A collaborative research team provides a platform of interaction for junior and senior researchers, thus facilitating training and mentorship. In the university context, team membership also helps individual researchers avoid isolation, while providing them with more opportunities to complete their own research [6]. According to Davis et al. [12], various challenges may arise when attempting to build a university-based collaborative research team, especially given the existence of different cultural backgrounds, heterogenous responsibilities, various academic practices, cultural factors, and politics. To establish an excellent, research-intensive environment, teams should help all members discuss their methods and struggles in ways that can unite them toward common goals [6].

### Networking Across University Units

A researcher's ability to network across university units depends on their individual values [7-8,10,12], the time available for research [5-7,12] and computer technology [7]. Meanwhile, an excellent collaborative research team requires focus, flexibility, trust, persistence, and leadership, which are developed through combined personal interests and common purposes. Thus, team success requires mutual respect for individual ideas and contributions as well as transparency during each step of the process [7]. Regarding issues faced by individual researchers, four articles mentioned the challenge of finding time to contribute to research teams [5-7,12], while another

noted the constraints associated with simultaneous involvement in several international projects [7]. Under such conditions, it is crucial for both the whole group and individual team members to accept varying degrees of participation at different stages [9]. Based on their experiences in the healthcare field, Best et al. [5] explained how successful research collaboration could increase individual involvement in team aims while facilitating knowledge transfers to students and patients. Three articles emphasized that computer technology is essential for maintaining cooperation across university departments [6-7,9]. In one study, Steinke et al. [7] pointed out that personal computer skills are likely to vary among team members, which may create difficulty. Moreover, the strength and quality of the internet connection may pose challenges in cases where team members need to travel or communicate from different time zones during meetings [7]. Overall, these reports suggest that managers must remain aware of how research collaboration is influenced by personal values, contextual management, mentorship, and the time needed to conduct research. At the same time, the interpersonal elements of the research process depend on mutual trust, focus, and flexibility. In addition to the literature review, we conducted a qualitative study [13] based on a double Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. Specifically, the SWOT analysis employed a modified standard tool among Norwegian members of a university research team to identify key factors that influenced group performance; these factors were further examined to enhance strengths, optimize opportunities, improve weaknesses, and attenuate threats [14].

## Method

### Literature Search

We initially gathered evidence on collaborative research team building by searching databases with the assistance of a university librarian, including CINAHL, Medline in PubMed, and PsycInfo. We created search terms using different combinations of the following words: scholarly activities, research, nursing/nursing research, national relation/national cooperation, teamwork, cooperative behavior, and collaboration. For returned articles, we set the following inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed studies with abstracts/full-text articles from 2010 to 2020. These were searched using the Boolean/phrase technique. We repeated the initial literature search in July 2023 for the time period 2020-2023 and added no new articles to our analysis and findings.

### Participants in SWOT Analysis

The SWOT participants included eight members of a university research team established in 2017. Specifically, the team was comprised of four scholars, two lecturers, and two Ph.D. students, with an age range of 35 to 65 years.

### Data Collection

We distributed the SWOT template on the first day of a weekly winter summit in 2019, with responses collected shortly after (100% response rate). As the survey took approximately 40 minutes to complete, it is assumed that participants gave their answers spontaneously. We repeated the data collection process on the last day; that is, after the program had ended, but before the evaluation session. Before the distribution of the SWOT template, the participants were informed about the study's aim, the anonymity of their contribution, and their right to withdraw their written consent anytime. Each participant signed an informed consent form before data collection started. No participant withdrew their participation. In this paper, we have ensured their anonymity by using numerical designations when quoting any statements.

### Data Analysis

We analyzed and interpreted the responses from participants with reference to Ricœur's [13] theory of interpretation. This consisted of a three-level process: a naïve reading, followed by a structural analysis, and concluding with a comprehensive discussion. All authors read and reread the data from the SWOT templates [13], thus identifying a naïve understanding. In the structural analysis, we gathered sections of text (consisting of text portions across the SWOT templates) into larger units of meaning [15]. Finally, we comprehensively discussed the meaning of the text in reference to the selected theory and outcome of the initial literature search.

## Results

### Naïve Reading

The naïve reading indicated that the participants were responsible, cheerful, and helpful. In general, they enjoyed research collaboration. However, some participants found teamwork burdensome when

certain members did not fulfill their obligations. They described new technology as exciting, noting that it streamlined their work. At the same time, good leadership was mentioned as inspiring, while the lack of leadership negatively influenced their ability to work effectively with colleagues. Participants also reported that the process of applying for research funding required too much time when compared to the research outcome, and also affected their ability to attend conferences and meet with the research team.

### Structural Analysis

Our structural analysis focused on 311 statements taken from the two surveys (161 and 159 from the first and second rounds, respectively). In both surveys, dominant strengths emerged from statements the participants made about their individual characteristics (35 of 58 and 36 of 50 from the first and second rounds, respectively). On the other hand, weaknesses also emerged. For example, some participants emphasized the challenges of navigating additional tasks (19 of 42 statements from the first round), while others mentioned insufficient knowledge about methodology and scientific factors (14 of 34 statements from the second round). In both rounds, participants highlighted a major opportunity derived from the benefits of being part of a research group (15 of 28 and 19 of 32 from the first and second rounds, respectively). They also identified some threats, including those pertaining to the relationship between their aims and obligations (20 of 33 statements from the first round) and challenges between individuals and their participation in the research team (18 of 34 statements from the second round). Ultimately, we summarized the structural analysis into two themes, including 1) strengths, weaknesses, and threats to building research collaboration and 2) collaborative processes across university units. To keep track of individual statements, we assigned a unique number to each participant (i.e., numbers 1 through 8). Thus, all statements and quotations in the two following subsections are connected to the numbers of relevant participants; to further distinguish between the two rounds of SWOT template completion, we also attached the letter "b" in cases where those statements and quotations were from the second round.

### Strengths, Weaknesses, and Threats to Building Research Collaboration

Frequently noted strengths included the ability to work effectively under time pressure (3, 5, 8, 4b, 5b, 6b, 8b) and adopt personal responsibility (2, 4, 7, 8, 2b, 3b, 6b, 8b). One participant stated: "Accountability is an integral part of me as a person" (2). Meanwhile, relevant qualities included courage (2), determination (6, 8, 5b, 8b), curiosity (3, 7, 6b), and commitment (2, 4, 7, 8, 2b, 3b, 4b, 6b). Another strength was the ability to both cope with deadlines and respect the deadlines of others (1, 6, 7). In both surveys, half of the participants said that too many tight deadlines could lead to issues such as pressure (1, 2, 7, 8, 8b) and sleep deprivation (1). Consequently, time pressure was considered a threat to their research activities (1, 1b, 2b, 4, 5, 8, 8b). Some participants wanted their work to be more systematic (2, 7b). For example, one said: "I'm not delivering well under strong pressure; then, I'll be a little paralyzed" (6b). Only one participant said that she had become better at prioritizing over time (5b). Possessing competence in a specific research method was also considered a

strength. In this regard, two participants said that they had extensive research competence (3b, 7b). At the beginning of the seminar, only two participants said that they lacked broad research experience (3, 8); however, four participants mentioned relevant personal weaknesses at the end of the seminar, in terms of either general research competence (3b, 6b, 8b) or a specific lack of expertise linked to quantitative methods (8b) or scientific theories (5b, 8b). Of note, half of the participants identified weaknesses in their own contributions to the research team (4, 5, 6, 8). Some also identified insufficient knowledge about methodology and a lack of fluency in speaking (1) or writing academic English (4, 5, 6, 8). One participant said: "I don't feel that academic writing comes easy for me" (4). Three participants perceived opportunities regarding new technology, explaining that such provisions could facilitate research collaboration (2, 3, 6, 6b). While one participant said that new technology could enable more efficient work (6b), only one said that technology was an integral part of their field (2).

### Collaborative Process Across University Units

As a theme, the collaborative process was focused on interpersonal relationships between participants. For example, they said that they enjoyed collaborating with others (3, 4, 2b, 4b, 8b), and had become more open-minded about each other's perspectives through teamwork (5). They also perceived themselves as honest (7), loyal (2), and good at listening (5). One participant said that her personal weaknesses were speaking more than listening and losing patience with pessimists (7). Moreover, specific collaboration skills (4, 8, 2b, 6b, 7b, 8b) were considered essential for the development of positive collaborative processes and research networks, particularly including openness to ideas presented by other team members (1, 2, 4, 5b). When describing elements they believed were central to team collaboration, the participants used words and phrases such as encouragement (8), support for progress (8), and the ability to motivate others (6b). Openness to ideas proposed by other people was also a factor that contributed to new perspectives (7b). The participants identified multiple benefits of building research collaboration (1b, 3) and sharing experiences (1b). By jointly collecting data and writing articles, team members developed relationships that helped them enhance their research and produce high-quality publications (8, 8b). They considered research collaboration with both internal and external research partners to be desirable (2b, 8, 7b), noting its contribution to professional development (2, 7b). Other participants said that they received more advice from experienced researchers by building relationships in the research group (3b, 4, 5b), which became an arena for inspiration and support (4b).

Through these relationships, the participants gained access to a "room" where they could be open about their shortcomings and needs (7). There were also threats to building effective collaborative processes, including instances in which others dominated the group

(2, 7, 1b, 2b, 4b, 6b, 8b), late (or no) responses from research group members (4, 6, 4b, 7b), the lack of ambition among participants (7, 8), and the absence of mutual trust or respect (5, 4b). Six of the eight participants said that the lack of participation from others was a possible weakness in the collaborative group process (1b, 2b, 3, 3b, 6, 6b, 7, 7b, 8b). For example, one said: "The worst thing when working in a team is when someone says they are going to do something, but they do not do it, or does it badly" (3). Five of the eight participants said that effective team management played a major role in building good collaborative relationships (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 2b, 8b). As a point of emphasis, leadership was said to motivate and inspire relationships between group members (3, 7). By contrast, individual participants felt discounted when they believed that their leaders did not listen to them (2b, 8b). The ability to establish and maintain local, national, and international networks (7) was considered necessary for group collaboration. Other essential aspects were efforts to include (4) and connect people (2), guide and teach students (7), and teach others how to perform. For example, a phenomenological analysis was mentioned (1). One participant said that it was essential to become involved in research conducted by other members (7b).

### Discussion

This study critically reviewed the recent literature on building research collaboration, then compared this evidence with the collaborative process experienced by a publicly funded healthcare research team that spanned multiple university units, as collected via a SWOT analysis. The literature review revealed two main themes: 1) building a research network and 2) networking across university units. The structured SWOT analysis also identified two themes: 1) strengths and threats in building research collaboration and 2) collaborative processes across university units (Table 1). In the following subsections, we incorporate a theoretical perspective to provide a comprehensive discussion that is relevant to our study aim.

### Building Research Networks

Evidence from the eight reviewed articles indicated that organizational factors could form barriers to research collaboration in the context of publicly funded specialized healthcare research teams. The SWOT participants mentioned similar issues. For example, their faculty leadership did not understand that tight time schedules influenced their ability to conduct research. As a specific hindrance, time pressure threatened their research activities because it reduced opportunities for sleep. In a previous study, Maslach and Leiter [16] found that burnout was more likely to occur when organizational demands exceeded individual capacities. Although work management abilities vary between researchers, they are still affected by relationships between the researcher, group leader, and faculty leadership [17]. Here, leadership styles matter. Autocratic leaders simply dictate group activities and work tasks [18], thus deciding how much group members should contribute

Table 1: Themes identified from the literature review and local SWOT analysis.

Theme	From: Literature review	From: Local SWOT analysis
1	Building research network	Strengths and threats to building research teamwork
2	Networking across university units	Collaborative processes across university units

without asking for their input [18]. This diminishes agency within the team, which can be solved through a more democratic leadership style that allows collaborative decision-making [18]. Our data analysis also showed that autocratic management styles could threaten research collaboration, especially when leaders demanded rapid solutions, as this further tightened the time schedule. In the literature review, four articles reported that insufficient financial support was a potential barrier [5,7,9,10]. The same problem was mentioned by three of the SWOT participants. Without funding, it can be much more difficult for researchers to test their ideas [19]. This also creates publication hardship. For example, Malhotra [20] found that most academicians in India faced considerable expenses when attempting to gain journal publication, especially in periodicals with high impact factors. However, our SWOT participants did not mention this barrier, perhaps because public universities in Norway offer publication funding.

### Networking Across University Units

The SWOT analysis revealed that personal values, transformational leadership, mentorship, and access to financial resources could influence research network collaboration across university units. Interpersonal elements of the research process were also important, including mutual trust, consistent focus, flexibility, and the ability to find time for group collaboration. Previous research has also shown that collaboration groups can more easily work toward common goals when they are situated in excellent research-intensive environments (6). However, the ability to work effectively under time pressure varied considerably among our SWOT participants. Some expressed feelings of stress when navigating multiple tight deadlines, while others reported improved prioritization ability with increased experience. Mentorship can prevent burnout by helping inexperienced researchers learn how to balance different work tasks [6] and develop new skills [21]. This makes provision of mentorship especially important for young academicians. For nursing scholars, mentorship can encourage positive relational, attitudinal, behavioral, career, and motivational changes [22]. Our SWOT participants mentioned some additional barriers to research collaboration, including limited research experience and difficulties with academic English.

Of note was that four participants emphasized that their weaknesses in both research experience and academic English skills hampered their contributions to the research group, neither of which factors clearly emerged through our literature review. Nevertheless, Dorsey et al. [9] and Cohen et al. [6] said that collaborative group leaders and experienced researchers should jointly serve as role models. Functioning in such a capacity entails facilitating interactions with junior researchers, who can therefore benefit from better training and mentorship for life in academia. Differences in computer skills and internet access can affect availability, thus impacting the degree to which team members can collaborate [7]. As such, researchers should develop and employ technology to improve communication between team members who are geographically distant (Dorsey et al. [9]; Cohen et al. [6]). Moreover, collaborative groups can contact their university's information/computer technology departments to ensure that necessary computer and web technologies are available [9]. Finally, Steinke et al. [7] recommended a backup plan if videoconferencing

fails, including email correspondence or other free internet software applications. In the modern technological environment, numerous tools support collaboration and the development of professional skills in the university setting [23]. In fact, none of our SWOT participants mentioned computer technology as a barrier to the research process or group collaboration, suggesting that they worked in a technology-rich environment. At the same time, personal computers have become increasingly common in research environments.

Motivation is also essential for international collaboration [24]. In this regard, Bass et al. [25] argued that inspirational leadership with a motivational focus on personal behavior could provide meaning while challenging team members to efficiently achieve future goals. According to Anselmann and Mulder [26], transformational leadership can further help leaders identify potential areas of change and encourage necessary adjustments. However, an open-minded view of other perspectives can be interpreted as a wish to view collaborating partners as equals, which may be challenging when team members possess different skills and experiences [27]. According to our findings, mentorship can reduce problems related to time pressure and the lack of academic skills. This is greatly beneficial for inexperienced researchers, who can realize personal development, increased research productivity, and better career opportunities [28]. As a practical example, our SWOT participants expressed the desire to develop skills in writing applications under the guidance of senior members. Based on our experiences in this study, we envision opportunities for research group leaders to employ SWOT templates. Such an approach will clarify team strengths and weaknesses, which can help them customize their mentorship accordingly.

### Study Strengths and Limitations

As regards strengths, this study conducted a preliminary comprehensive literature review, which became a benchmark when discussing our analysis and findings. However, there were also some limitations. First, the participants were exclusively invited to participate in the research seminar, and may have therefore been more positive and open toward both their own development and SWOT factors in general. However, the group was also comprised of novice and expert researchers, who addressed a situation that similar research teams may experience, which constitutes a strength. Second, the participants were required to complete the SWOT template within a limited time, which may have elicited superficial answers to the four explored areas. However, they were also able to build on their initial answers during the second survey round, which thus constitutes a strength in data collection, as evident in the enhanced development of their responses.

### Conclusion

This study found that supportive leadership and active mentorship between experienced and inexperienced team members could facilitate the research process and increase collaboration in the context of a publicly funded specialized healthcare research team. Of note, supportive leadership is highly essential. Our SWOT participants said that their ability to motivate and support other team members depended on whether the team leader offered the same provisions. Our

perception is that supportive and motivated team leaders can serve as positive role models for the entire team, thus creating a group culture that prevents non-participation or late responses from members. In most scientific endeavors, the establishment and maintenance of a collaborative research team are fundamental to success.

### Implications for Nursing

- Supportive leadership is highly essential for nurse researchers to flourish.
- Nurse managers may not have research experience or necessary insight into the working conditions that support research collaboration
- It is important to adopt a transformational leadership style in which a dialogical practice can support specialized healthcare research teams in their positions.

### Conflicting Interest

None.

### Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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### Ethical Approval

No ethical approval was required for this research. The study is registered at Nord University (FSH by j.no 24.04.20).

### Author Contributions

Study design: LU. Data collection (Literature search); quality appraisal and data analysis: MCH, LU, KI. Data collection (SWOT analysis): MCH supervised by LU. Manuscript preparation MCH, supervision, and critical review by LU, KI. All authors critically reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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