

SULSA INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION WITH GERMANY



Report on Programme of Activities from 2021-2024

SUMMARY

This report describes the expanding body of collaborative work between SULSA, the Scottish Government, the Science and Health Ministry of the Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate (RLP), and the [German Research Foundation](#) (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG).

International cooperation with RLP began in 2021 after the Scottish Government and RLP Ministry signed a [Declaration of Intent](#) to intensify their collaboration in the fields of education, culture, higher education, and research. SULSA, alongside colleagues in Scottish Government, and the RLP Ministry for Science and Health have built a programme of activities focusing on life sciences and biotechnology research collaboration which began in 2022.

After a visit to Scotland by the DFG and the [German Academic Exchange Service](#) (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, DAAD) at the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) in January 2023, SULSA began exploring opportunities for collaboration across Germany. These explorations led to SULSA Project Manager, Dr Ally Hughes, securing a placement with the DFG for six weeks to develop relationships with federal agencies and researchers across Germany. A programme of international activity has been scheduled with DFG for 2023–24, and other opportunities with the DAAD and the [Alexander von Humboldt foundation](#) are in development.

This report describes the achievements to date of these collaborations, and a blueprint for future activity planned with the UK's largest research partner in Europe. With closely aligned research priorities and standards of excellence, it is important to continue the rich history of shared ideas, student and researcher mobility, and reputable outputs from these partnerships.

Prepared by Dr Ally Hughes, SULSA Project Manager

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SCOTLAND-RLP RESEARCH COLLABORATION

In April 2022, SULSA and the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU-Mainz) co-hosted an [online conference for Early Career Researchers](#) (ECRs) to share their research around five strategically selected topics: 1) biology of mental health and resilience, 2) novel approaches to understanding, diagnosing, and treating disease, 3) development of vaccines and advanced therapies, 4) understanding the molecular mechanisms of cancer, 5) understanding the molecular mechanisms of neurodegeneration. Opening remarks were given by Scottish Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Jamie Hepburn, and RLP Minister for Science and Health, Clemens Hoch. With a plenary talk from biotechnology giants, BioNTech, and 20 talks from ECRs, the conference attracted 133 attendees who gave the event an average rating of 4.5/5.

The organising team included Universities Scotland, Scottish Government, Knowledge Exchange and Innovation Collaboration Manager Dr Orla Kelly, the Scotland Hub at JGU-Mainz, the RLP Biotechnology Coordination Office, and the RLP Ministry for Science and Health.

A [Scotland-RLP Research Exchange fund](#) was launched at the conference, which was jointly funded by SULSA, the Scottish Government, and the RLP Ministry for Science and Health. This provided a maximum of €10,000 to cover mobility and research costs for a researcher based at a Scottish university to travel to a university or research institute in RLP to carry out a collaborative research project lasting no longer than 6 months.

In July 2022, four researchers were awarded the Scotland-RLP Research Exchange funding:

- **Angelo Joshua Victoria**, University of Edinburgh exchange to Rhineland Palatinate Technical University Kaiserslautern
- **Dr Aida Cardona-Alberich**, University of Edinburgh exchange to the Institute of Molecular Biology in Mainz
- **Inga Schmidt**, University of Aberdeen exchange to the Universities of Applied Sciences Kaiserslautern
- **Dr Louis Dwomoh**, University of Glasgow exchange to JGU-Mainz

The awardees of this funding, alongside SULSA Executive Committee representatives were invited to a reception organised by SULSA to welcome the Minister President of Rheinland-Palatinate, Malu Dreyer, and her Minister for Science and Health, Clemens Hoch, to Scotland in April 2023. This visit saw a huge amount of **press coverage** and has greatly increased visibility of this collaborative work in RLP. During the visit, the Minister President and Minister for Science and Health expressed the ministry's commitment to continuing these collaborative efforts and a second round of Scotland-RLP Research Exchange funding was announced, with bilateral exchanges being offered for the first time. SULSA enabled matchmaking for this round through the **International Coffee Breaks** scheme which has been running since October 2021 and has connected approximately 60 researchers from Scotland and Germany. Matchmaking requests were also carried out by SULSA Project Manager, Ally Hughes, and two of the subsequent applications were a direct result of this targeted approach.



SULSA hosted a reception for the Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry at the Advanced Research Centre, University of Glasgow on April 18th 2023.

Whilst in Germany, Ally visited the RLP Ministry for Science and Health, the Translational Oncology (TRON) research institute, the University of Mainz Medical Centre, JGU-Mainz, the Scotland Hub in Mainz, the Biotechnology Coordination Office, and RLP Technical University Kaiserslautern (RPTU Kaiserslautern). During these visits, plans for a SULSA delegation visit to RLP, an in-person biotechnology workshop on drug discovery and a second Scotland-RLP life sciences and biotechnology conference were discussed. These in-person discussions were great in strengthening relationships in RLP and researchers welcomed the addition of bilateral research exchanges to the second round of funding. There are strong overlaps in research expertise between Scotland and RLP in areas of key strategic importance including healthy ageing/neurodegeneration, drug discovery and development, and green biotechnology. There were several exciting discussions on future prospecting including a multilateral PhD programme and a dedicated position being created to ensure the longevity of this budding cooperation.

In the short-term, a delegation of representatives from each of SULSA's 13 members to RLP will take place from 22nd-28th January 2024 where the delegation will meet with Minister Clemens Hoch, academics across several universities and research institutes, and the biotechnology academy established in 2023. The visit will conclude with a Burns Supper celebration hosted by the Scotland Hub. Coinciding with this visit will be a one-day workshop on biotechnology for drug discovery which will involve a delegation of esteemed academics from SULSA member universities and institutes travelling to RLP for a series of talks and networking with leading experts in RLP. Thus far, approximately €10,000 has been secured through the SusInnoScience project and RPTU Kaiserslautern to support this activity. Following this activity in January, a second life sciences and biotechnology conference, co-hosted by RPTU Kaiserslautern, will be held online in April 2024 and we hope to announce a third round of research exchange funding at this conference.



Attending Rhienland-Pfalz Tag celebrations with Minister Hoch, Scottish Government and Scotland Hub Director in May 2022

WIDER COLLABORATION WITH GERMANY

In January 2023, the RSE hosted an event for the DFG and DAAD that brought together key stakeholders in research and innovation in Scotland. After this event, SULSA organised an [online webinar](#), inviting DFG and DAAD to deliver talks about the research funding landscape and researcher mobility in Germany. DFG works with a standing open application system (only occasionally with calls) which means their grants are always open across all disciplines. Many of their research grants allow the integration of international components and the webinar, held in February 2023, detailed the main research grants in Germany and where international collaboration can be added. This webinar was well attended with 76 attendees from SULSA members and 16 international attendees.

Three research grants in particular were highlighted during this webinar. The lead applicant in all cases must be employed at a German university or research institute and allow the integration of international components:

Initiation of International Collaboration offers mobility funding to support workshops, individual visits, or visits up to three months in Germany or abroad. This is seen as a starting point in building collaborations and gives partners an opportunity to build rapport and trust before applying for a joint project proposal for a longer period of study. There is no upper limit on how much funds can be requested and can involve the travel of several partners over 12 months.

Individual Research Grants should outline a thematically defined research project, typically over the duration of three years and can be used to fund PhD students, staff, direct and indirect project costs, and mobility.

Scientific Network funding promotes multi-year (up to three) scientific exchange and cooperation on a specific topic across multiple locations and can consist of 10-20 researchers from Germany and up to 50% of the network's participants can be from outside Germany. Network funding can be used to cover costs associated with network meetings and mobility of network members.

In order to gain a better understanding of the German research funding system, Ally spent six weeks working in the DFG offices in Bonn, Germany in May and June 2023. This allowed a vast amount of knowledge exchange which included gaining insights into the German research landscape, the differentiation of types of universities and research institutes, how and when to involve the international affairs team within DFG, the research funding review process in Germany, and meeting with external stakeholders involved in research and innovation in Germany. SULSA was also to promote the connected research and innovation landscape we have in Scotland and provide insight into the UK research funding landscape.

As a result of this close working relationship, Scotland has been chosen as the European pilot country for a networking initiative specifically designed to support Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in building their international research reputation and SULSA will lead the organisation of this from Scotland alongside partners in Research Innovation Scotland. A call for abstracts will launch in January 2024 around the topic of One Health. Matchmaking will be conducted during a virtual event in April/May 2024 and the programme will conclude with a delegation visit to Scotland comprising DFG and academics across the Universities of Applied Sciences in September 2024. This programme aims to increase the number of research grants with international components being submitted to DFG by the UAS, using the existing funding schemes.

Since Scotland does not have a national research funding agency, the DFG has been working with UKRI and its councils to increase research collaboration between the UK and Germany. In July 2023, UKRI and DFG signed a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate this which was quickly followed by the launch of a joint BBSRC-DFG research grant in the area of Integrative Microbiome. SULSA are well placed to support Scottish researchers in finding collaborative partners and developing their application as a result of the time spent with DFG.

PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES

SULSA – Rhineland-Palatinate

March 2022 – First Scotland-RLP Life Sciences and Biotechnology Conference (co-hosted by JGU-Mainz)

July 2022 – Funded four collaborative research projects

April 2023 – Announcement of second round of research exchange funding (made during RLP ministers' visit to SULSA on April 18th)

May 2023 – Launched second round of research exchange funding

June 2023 – RLP-funding Information and Networking Session (online) hosted by SULSA

August 2023 – Award second round of funding

January 2024 – Scottish delegation visit to RLP

April 2024 – Second Scotland-RLP Life Sciences and Biotechnology Conference (co-hosted by RPTU Kaiserslautern)

SULSA-DFG Collaboration

March 2022 – DFG/DAAD online information session hosted by SULSA

April 2023 – Consultation to engage potential stakeholders for the UAS initiative

May/June 2023 – SULSA PM, Ally Hughes placement within the DFG (6 weeks)

October 2023 – Stakeholder meeting to define topics for UAS Networking Initiative

January 2024 – Call for posters and abstracts for UAS Networking Initiative

April/May 2024 – Online matchmaking meeting event

September 2024 – DFG and UAS delegation to visit Scottish partners from UAS Networking Initiative

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The DAAD and Alexander von Humboldt organisations both have an alumni network of approximately 100 researchers in Scotland and there was great interest in hosting a networking event in Scotland to bring this community and potential partners together. This will be explored for later in 2024 or early 2025.

The German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, HRK) is an association of 271 public and government-recognised universities in Germany and act as a collective voice for German universities in developing higher education systems and advising policy. They have developed a map of HRK member universities and UAS according to research expertise which can be found [here](#). This is a useful tool for those seeking research collaboration partners in specific disciplines.

SULSA has had a strong working relationship with the Scottish Government office at the British embassy in Berlin since 2021 and we have been closely coordinating with this team to ensure Scotland is fairly represented in wider discussions on research and innovation between the UK and Germany. SULSA, on behalf of Research Innovation Scotland, will be invited to a roundtable discussion organised by the UK Science and Innovation Network in October 2023. The Scottish Government team in Berlin were paramount in creating this placement which has led to several opportunities that would not have been realised otherwise. Through their connectivity with the Scottish Development International in Düsseldorf, SULSA will be featured in the upcoming yearbook of a German business publication, [Spectaris](#).



Visiting Hochschule Weihenstephan (University of Applied Sciences) with the DFG team in June 2023

IMPORTANCE OF PLACEMENTS

This six-week secondment has helped develop a programme of international activity with Germany for the next 18-24 months, with opportunities identified that otherwise would have gone unexplored. Meeting with stakeholders in research and innovation highlighted the great disappointment of German academics and research partners in Brexit and the UK's precarious situation with Horizon funded programmes. It was abundantly clear in discussions that Germany is keen to continue their reputable research collaboration with the UK and see Scotland as a welcoming country for their researchers and a place of highly regarded expertise.

Conversations have already begun on how we can solidify the prosperous relationship between SULSA and our German partners which may lead to creation of jobs, further secondments, and ultimately increased funding and opportunity coming to Scottish universities and research institutes for research and innovation. Mobility of researchers between Scotland and Germany is still cause for concern and German partners have offered support in relieving the barriers to easy travel. However, much of this conversation is outside the scope of SULSA and outwith the powers of the Scottish Government. Until a more agreeable solution is found, SULSA and its partners in Scotland and Germany will continue to advocate for researchers needs and seek opportunities for researchers.

From a professional development point of view, Project Manager Ally Hughes developed key skills in business development, German language, and managing a hectic travel and work schedule. The opportunities arising from this placement is far beyond all expectations and Ally is extremely grateful to the SULSA team and Executive Committee, CENSIS and their CEO Paul Winstanley for facilitating and funding this placement. Ally would like to thank the DFG team for their welcome and help during her placement, in particular Dorothea Fendel in International Affairs for being an excellent host. In a time when many face-to-face meetings have been replaced by video conferencing, it can be easily forgotten how important these interactions are for building rapport and trust amongst partners.

