

## From Constraints to Capabilities: Overcoming challenges for impactful research in a medium-sized UAS

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Medium-sized Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) across Europe face well-known and structural constraints: comparatively modest research track records, limited internal research capacities, and staff profiles that are often strongly rooted in professional practice rather than academic career trajectories. At the same time, these institutions occupy a crucial position in regional innovation ecosystems, where applied research, knowledge valorisation, and responsiveness to societal challenges are core expectations. In addition, these institutions face rising expectations to attract external funding, while ranking systems, track-records and visibility tend to favour long-established, well-resourced universities.

This breakout session presents how the Fachhochschule Wiener Neustadt (FHWN) has begun to strategically transform these constraints into capabilities by adopting targeted institutional measures that strengthen research performance while aiming for relevance and societal impact. The session will showcase three institutional levers that have the potential to inspire similar efforts at other medium-sized UAS. At the same time, each lever comes with its own set of challenges and limitations. By making these difficulties transparent, the session opens space for a critical dialogue about what works, what does not, and under which conditions such measures can be effective.

- 1. Early-stage research funding and profile building:** FHWN has created two internal financing instruments — the 'START' fund and the 'Profile-building' fund — to lower entry barriers for research-active staff. The START fund provides kick-start support for colleagues with limited prior experience in competitive funding, enabling exploratory work, concept development, and partnership building. The Profile-building fund, in turn, supports experienced researchers in expanding or internationalising research lines, preparing large-scale proposals, and shaping institutional research profiles.
- 2. A new competence-oriented career model for applied researchers:** FHWN is in the process of introducing a transparent, progression-oriented career system that recognises research engagement alongside teaching and practice. Through zones, stages, and quality-point logic, the model provides incentives for continuous development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and research leadership. With the overarching aim to address a core challenge of UAS: recruiting, retaining, and supporting the development of academically ambitious staff. This measure represents a clear intervention in the existing work culture and carries the risk of

making collaboration more difficult, as personal advancement within the career model may become more important than shared motivation.

- 3. Strategic interdisciplinarity as a catalyst for innovation and societal relevance:** Last but not least, we aim to highlight FHWN's efforts to strengthen interdisciplinary, particularly between its economics/business faculty and its engineering/technology faculty. This interface enables technological R&D to be complemented with expertise in business modelling, market analysis, sustainability, user behaviour, and regulatory contexts. Mission-oriented applied research increasingly demands such cross-disciplinary integration to generate socially relevant impact. This strategic thrust also responds to a broader geopolitical and strategic realignment in Europe, emphasizing resilience, cross-domain knowledge integration, and the progression toward higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs). At the same time, it aims to turn constraints associated with modest institutional size into a strategic strength. Smaller institutions offer shorter communication pathways, more agile decision-making and fewer organisational silos. These characteristics can lower the threshold for interdisciplinary cooperation and enable teams to form quickly around mission-oriented research questions and to foster quadruple helix collaboration.

The session thus offers insights into concrete measures and lessons learned, showing how medium-sized UAS can design targeted actions and institutional strategies that build research capacity and ensure societal impact.