



# **Building Sustainable Partnerships in Higher Education: Key Factors in Partnership Creation**

Bachelor's Thesis  
International Business  
Autumn 2025  
Sami Laaksonen

Degree programme in International Business

Tekijä Sami Laaksonen

Vuosi 2025

Työn nimi Kestävien kumppanuuksien muodostuminen korkeakouluissa: Avaintekijät  
kumppanuuksien luomisessa

Ohjaaja Mukhammadyusuf Shaimardanov

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Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli selvittää, miten korkeakoulut voivat luoda kestäviä kumppanuuksia ja mitkä asiat vaikuttavat kumppanuuksien syntymiseen. Aiheen idea syntyi erään opiskeluprojektin yhteydessä, jossa Hämeen Ammattikorkeakoulu toteutti koulutusmoduulin kenialaiseen peruskouluun. Tehtävämme oli kestävästi, tavalla tai toisella, auttaa koulua.

Teoriaosuudessa käsiteltiin korkeakouluja yleisluonteisesti Suomessa, kestävyyttä, korkeakoulujen roolia kestäväen kehityksen edistämiseksi sekä yliopistojen ja yritysten välisiä kumppanuuksia, erityisesti kansainvälisessä kontekstissa. Lisäksi tarkasteltiin, miten koulut ja korkeakoulut voivat toimia kehitystyön välineinä matalan tulotason maissa sekä millaisia hyötyjä ja haasteita korkeakoulujen kansainväliset kumppanuudet tuottavat. Lisäksi analysoitiin suomalaisten ammattikorkeakoulujen motiiveja kansainväliseen yhteistyöhön ja strategisten allianssien merkitystä korkeakoulujen ja elinkeinoelämän välillä.

Opinnäytetyössä pääpainona oli tutkimus ja opinnäytetyön tekoa varten lähetettiin kysely, joka todettiin riittämättömäksi tarkemman analyysin saamiseksi. Luotiin vielä toinen kysely, kohdennetuilla ja vapaavalintaisella vastausmahdollisuudella. Kyselyiden linkkejä jaettiin korkeakoulun sisäisissä Microsoft Teams -kanavissa ja erilaisissa sosiaalisen median palveluissa, viestipalveluissa ja sähköpostilla. Alkuperäiseen kyselyyn vastasi kuusi vastaajaa ja toiseen kyselyyn viisi eli yhteensä 11 vastausta. Kyselyillä tutkittiin suomalaisten korkeakoulujen henkilöstön mielipiteitä korkeakoulujen kumppanuuksien syntyyn vaikuttavista tekijöistä, kumppanuuksien ylläpidosta ja haasteista. Tutkimuksessa selvitettiin myös, mitä pitäisi ottaa huomioon, kun kumppanuuden kohteena on yritys, voittoa tavoittelematon organisaatio tai toinen instituutio.

Tulosten perusteella voidaan päätellä, että uusien kumppanuuksien muodostumiseen vaikuttavat rahoitusmahdollisuudet, sekä henkilökunnan omat verkostot että tarkka kumppanin valintaprosessi, jossa keskeistä on yhteisten arvojen ja tavoitteiden määrittely. Opiskelijoiden osallistuminen ja pitkäaikainen sitoutuminen on myös keskeisessä roolissa kumppanuuksien syntymisessä. Korkeakoulujen kumppanuudet keskittyvät pääasiassa yrityksiin ja toisiin oppilaitoksiin, kun taas yhteistyö kansalaisjärjestöjen kanssa on harvinaisempaa.

Avainsanat Kumppanuus, kestävä kumppanuus, korkeakoulu yhteistyö, korkeakoulu

Sivut 36 sivua ja liitteitä 11 sivua

Degree programme in International Business

Author Sami Laaksonen

Year 2025

Subject Building Sustainable Partnerships in Higher Education: Key Factors in Partnership Creation

Supervisors Mukhammadyusuf Shaimardanov

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The objective of this thesis was to examine how higher education institutions can create sustainable partnerships and what factors influence the formation of such partnerships. The idea for the topic originated from a school project in which Häme University of Applied Sciences implemented a business lab module in a Kenyan primary school. The task was to support the school sustainably in one way or another.

The theoretical framework covered higher education institutions in Finland in general, sustainability, the role of higher education institutions in promoting sustainable development, and partnerships between universities and businesses, particularly in an international context. Furthermore, the study explored how schools and higher education institutions can serve as tools for development in low-income countries and what benefits and challenges international partnerships bring to higher education institutions. Additionally, the motivations of Finnish universities of applied sciences for international collaboration and the significance of strategic alliances between higher education institutions and businesses were analyzed.

The main focus of the thesis was research and a questionnaire was initially distributed for data collection. However, it was deemed insufficient for a more detailed analysis. Therefore, a second questionnaire was created, featuring targeted and open-ended response options. The questionnaire links were shared via internal Microsoft Teams channels within the university, as well as through various social media platforms, messaging services, and email. The first questionnaire received six responses, while the second received five, resulting in a total of 11 responses. These surveys examined the opinions of Finnish higher education staff on the factors influencing the formation, maintenance, and challenges of partnerships. The study also investigated key considerations when forming partnerships with businesses, non-profit organizations or other institutions.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the formation of new partnerships is influenced by funding opportunities, personal networks of staff members and a thorough partner selection process, where defining shared values and objectives plays a crucial role. Student involvement and long-term commitment are also essential in the establishment of partnerships. Higher education institutions primarily focus their partnerships on businesses and other educational institutions, whereas collaboration with non-governmental organizations is less common.

Keywords Sustainable partnership, sustainability, partnership creation, higher education partnership

Pages 36 pages and appendices 11 pages

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# 1 Introduction

Sustainable partnerships as long-term, value-driven collaboration, which is built on mutual goals and trust, are becoming increasingly central in the way higher education institutions interact with society (Kumari et al., 2019, pp. 13-14) (Arbo & Benneworth, 2007, pp. 57-58). The role of higher education institutions is evolving, with growing attention given to innovation, social inclusion, and sustainability alongside education and research. Partnerships with businesses, non-governmental organizations, and communities may offer higher education institutions opportunities to reflect on their societal role and engage in practical collaboration. Yet, building such sustainable partnerships may evolve a complex task, while political changes around the world, may decrease institutions' leeway. (Brooks, 2025)

There are less or if any studies, which are comprehensively researching in the same study, how higher education institutions create sustainable partnerships with other education institutions, non-governmental organizations or companies, especially in Finnish context. However, practical instructions and models or frameworks for how to establish, develop, and maintain these partnerships in a sustainable manner or which issues impacts to creation of partnerships, are not easily available or systematically studied and this is creating a research gap. Highlighting this gap is timely and important as higher education institutions having a significant role in society and creating new innovations in quickly changing and evolving world.

The inspiration for this thesis originally came from a practical Business Lab -module, involving an international collaboration between Häme University of Applied Sciences and a primary school abroad, in Kenya. While that project is not the focus of this work, it served as a motivating example of how education institutions could contribute to meaningful cooperation beyond academic boundaries. This sparked the author's interest in understanding what makes a partnership truly sustainable and how partnerships are created.

The commissioner of this thesis, Häme University of Applied Sciences, creates over 10 000 peoples' community, having across the following fields of study: bioeconomy, business, design, education, health and technology. There are seven campuses, and the main campus is located in Hämeenlinna, Finland. (HAMK, n.d.-a) The Business Lab of sustainability -module, which was mentioned in the Introduction section, is module which forms from three courses, and it is based on a design-based education model, where

students take part in real-life sustainability projects. They collaborate with case companies to identify complex problems, conduct research, and develop practical solutions while enhancing key professional skills such as critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving. Finally, the solutions will be tested, improved and finalized. (HAMK, n.d.-b)

This thesis seeks to answer the question: *How can higher education institutions build sustainable partnerships?* The results provide insights for both academic decision-makers and practitioners looking to enhance their institution's collaboration strategy and impact. The purpose of this thesis is to create recommendations and give instructions as guidelines to Häme University of Applied Sciences to establish a long-term partnership, whether the partner is company, non-governmental organization or other higher education institution. The literature review synthesizes, inter alia, research on school-university partnerships and cross-sector collaborations as analysing gaps to justify the focus of the study.

The first survey investigated the key factors involved in creation of partnerships at higher education institutions, focused on both the opportunities and challenges institutions face. It explored the types of organizations that institutions typically prioritize for partnerships and how students can influence the partnership-building process, particularly through specific courses. Additionally, the integration of sustainability principles into partnerships and the importance of sustainability in the selection of partners are examined. Most of the questions in this section were multiple-choice, allowing for a structured exploration of these factors.

The second survey examined the factors influencing the creation and development of partnerships from the perspective of higher education institutions. It explored the considerations necessary when establishing collaborations with various stakeholders, including companies, non-governmental organizations and other education institutions. The section also analysed the practices that support the establishment of effective and sustainable partnerships.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Higher educational institutions in Finland**

The Finnish National Agency for Education defined higher education institutes in Finland as university of applied sciences and universities. (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d., -a) Similarly the law about university of applied sciences defined that universities of

applied sciences and universities together form the higher education system in Finland. (Universities of Applied Sciences Act 932/2014 chapter 1 § 2, 2014)

According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d., -b), universities of applied sciences conforming and emphasizing to regional needs of labour market, with professional training and applied research. Universities are focused on scientific research and higher education (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d., -c). Both universities and universities of applied sciences, offer bachelor's and master's degrees and they have some criterial differences. (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d., -a)

The law of universities specifies the mission of universities in Finland; The mission of universities is to advance independent research, scientific and artistic scholarship. Also, in the same law it is instructed to offer the highest standard research -based education and to raise students to serve Finland and humanity. (Universities Act 558/2009 chapter 1 § 2, 2009)

The Finnish Ministry of Education created alignments for the years 2017-2025, and it argued that Finland has a strong reputation of being an education country that has quality, researched -based teacher education, higher educational institutions' working life connections are strong. Also, alignment believed that Finland could strengthen its global responsibilities by offering teacher education and new learning methods around the world. The report agrees that higher educational institutions in Finland must be able to compete outside of their comfort zones and environments. (The Finnish Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 37) Based on this information, there are qualities that Finland can and should improve, to keep itself at the top in the future.

According to alignment, a publication, from Finland's scientific papers 27% in 1990s' were made with international partnerships and in 2011-2014 it was over 53% and publication reported that research with international cooperation is scientifically impressive, and this makes Finland more attractive for research, development and innovation -funding. (The Finnish Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 38)

### **2.1.1 University of Applied Sciences**

According to Osmo Lampinen (2001), the history of the universities of applied sciences in Finland was based on the idea in 1990, that alongside universities, there would be another branch of higher education and instead of academical of universities, universities of applied sciences would focus more on professionalism teaching. (Lampinen, 2001, p. 230) As an

example, paragons for this new education model were Fach Hochschule in Germany, Polytechnics in United Kingdom and HBO -institutes in the Netherlands, but Lampinen reported the education model was built newly in Finland. (Lampinen, 2001, p. 230)

Under the Finnish Ministry of Education in 2025, there are 22 universities of applied sciences in Finland which all are limited liability companies and in addition, two other universities of applied sciences. The first is based in Åland and the Police University College, which is under the Finnish Ministry of Interior. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, n.d.) Additionally, according to the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, universities of applied sciences have broad autonomy and freedom in both education and research. They do independent decisions related to their internal administration matters. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, n.d.)

Each of 24 universities of applied sciences are engaged to follow group of commitments by The Rectors' Conference of Arene. In the program, universities of applied sciences are committing to take several actions related to sustainable development of United Nation's Agenda 2030. (Arene, 2020, pp. 9-10)

### **2.1.2 Universities**

There are 13 universities running under the command of the Finnish Ministry of Education at present. Two of the universities are foundation based, under the law of foundation. The others are working as limited liability companies. Degree of higher education in the military sector are conferred by the Finnish National Defence University, which operates under the Finnish Ministry of Defence. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, n.d.) Moreover, universities Act prescribes that universities have autonomy, which secures freedom of education (Universities Act 558/2009 chapter 1 § 3, 2009).

Unifi, the Council of Rectors of Finnish Universities, set a working group where all 13 universities and the Finnish National Defence University together with National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) created theses to enhance sustainable development driven by United Nation's Agenda 2030, Sitoumus2050 and Paris Agreement. (UNIFI, 2020, p. 4) There are 12 theses, and they are delt to five categories followingly: Sustainable and responsible research, Education as a promoter of sustainable education, universities own operations and governance create a responsible and sustainable world, social impact and collaboration as drivers of change and requirements for responsibility and sustainable development are formed through collaboration. (UNIFI, 2020, p. 3)

### **2.1.3 Other institutions**

Other significant institutions aside with universities and universities of applied sciences are, The Research Council of Finland and The National Archive. Among other smaller institutions there are four institutions that works abroad: Finnish Institute in Athens, Japan, Rome and in the Middle East. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, n.d.)

The Research Council of Finland is funding and providing expertise for the Finnish science and scientific research. Researcher training and improving research framework is funded by The Research Council as well. (Research Council of Finland, n.d.) In addition to, The National Archive's main mission is to secure and store the documents of national cultural heritage. The archive is advising public and private customers related to national heritage's documents and matters. (The National Archive of Finland, n.d.)

## **2.2 Sustainable partnership**

### **2.2.1. Definition**

United Nations has defined sustainable partnership as following: Its effectiveness is dealt in three sections, business, society and environment (United Nations, 2022, p. 12). In addition to, partnership is not just quick project, and they require plenty of time and efforts from all stakeholders. The term "partnership" in United Nations, is understood to build to constant engagement, inclusivity, co-creation and deepening collaborative relationships and fostering trust (United Nations, 2022, p. 6) Furthermore, it is defined also as "...combining their complementary resources and competencies and sharing risk, to maximise value creation towards the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver benefit each of the partners." (United Nations, 2022, p. 23)

### **2.2.2 Basic fundamentals**

The organization hypothesizes three different types of partnership: first is leveraging or exchanging resources between each other, second is combining and integrating, so that together with their expertise partners can achieve development in traditional way more effectively and in third transformational development, as several partners bring together their own expertise, which fulfills development. In this type, no one alone could achieve development. Each partner connects their own strengths, which unites the ensemble. The United Nations described situation by following example bringing farmers, suppliers and

purchasers together to enhance supply chains to create healthier food. (United Nations, 2022, p. 24)

Puonti & Puhtimäki (2018) mentioned in research “Why higher educational institutions reach international partnerships?” different kind of forms for partnerships; outsourcing, subcontracting, infrastructure arrangements, different kinds of collaboration forms and companies. The partnership could be strong or weak and the main idea is that both get mutual benefits. (Puonti & Puhtimäki, 2018, pp. 258-259)

## **2.3. Previous research**

### **2.3.1 Italian Community-University partnership**

A collaborative co-project was examined with a local foundation and The University of Parma, in Italy, as the project aimed to strengthen group of local farmers’ supply chains in Italian Apennines. It was found that to gain farmers’ trust, it was crucial to engage in long-term relationships with practical outcomes. Secondly, one of the key benefits for universities was the student involvement, where they could develop their soft skills and learn experience in real-life context. (Mancini et al., 2022, p.13)

The study concluded that long-term relationships including tangible results require academic social engagement and the third mission is included in universities’ core functions (Mancini et al., 2022, p.13). The third mission could be described followingly; universities involve engaging in activities that address societal needs and promote sustainable development, beyond traditional research and teaching. It focuses on collaboration with non-academic partners to drive positive social impact. (Mancini et al., 2022, p. 2) Students are seen the power of change, who could make social impacts and same time benefit from the real-world challenges (Mancini et al., 2022, p.13). This research could give valuable insights related to university’s and students’ experiences on real-life context and how productive partnerships could be in this kind of projects, which has not only theoretical or merely conceptual project but brings meaningful upthrust to community.

### **2.3.2 Using school – university partnerships as a development tool in low-income countries: The case of Myanmar**

Partnerships between schools are important tool of improving the quality of education and according to Halász and Thant Sin, there could be various forms in school-university partnerships including knowledge exchange among the schools or engagement multi-

stakeholders such as governmental, non-governmental or enterprise. (Halász & Thant Sin, 2023, p. 1401) Expanding on the previous point, practical experiences from the case of Myanmar e.g. curriculum reform, shows, that school-university partnerships could support educational reforms. The article also observes that teacher-learning and professional development are succeed and rooted in Myanmar after the reform. (Halász & Thant Sin, 2023, pp. 1395, 1402)

UNESCO has awarded the school-university partnership innovations as a recognition of Asia-Pacific area's evolution and growth. The organization acknowledged learning institutions' role was significant in enhancement of education quality. (Halász & Thant Sin, 2023, p. 1403) However, the article found that there were some negative aspects besides the positive findings; school-university partnerships usually have not written contracts. A military coup in Myanmar, in 2021, made a stop for the development of education and it cannot continue until country turns back politically stable. (Halász & Thant Sin, 2023, p. 1402) The article was chosen as a source due to its direct relevance to the thesis, which explores how higher education institutions can build sustainable partnerships. The case of school-university collaboration in Myanmar provides practical insights into how such partnerships can support large-scale educational reforms, promote professional development, and enhance the quality of education. Furthermore, the article highlights both the opportunities and challenges inherent in these partnerships. These perspectives offer a balanced understanding of the complexity involved in building and maintaining sustainable international education partnerships.

### **2.3.3 Educational involvement in innovative University – industry Collaboration**

In this case study, Kunttu (2017) researched university-industry collaborations and those had four forms: student projects, thesis projects, tailored degree courses and jointly organized courses. The data proved that the most effective knowledge transfer was based on long-term and close relationship between the enterprises and universities. (Kunttu, 2017, p. 17)

The study states that the most significant expertise transfer is thesis. But the thesis project had remarkable restrictions; it is sufficient only when students can get good quality of supervision both university and enterprise. (Kunttu, 2017, pp. 17-18) Additionally, joint courses with students and company's R&D have been gainful for every party, reported by the study (Kunttu, 2017, p. 18). Moreover, the study concluded that in perspective of universities that knowledge sharing, joint working and integration of knowhow was two-way and benefited both universities and industries. Transferring new skills and researched information and data to industries. (Kunttu, 2017, pp. 20-21) The study emphasizes that

successful collaboration requires active involvement from both sides and highlights the successful student's role in collaboration. These elements are closely aligned with the focus of this thesis.

### **2.3.4 Constructing Sustainable International Partnerships in Higher Education: Linking the Strategic and Contingent Through Interpersonal Relationships in the United Kingdom and China**

The research observed two universities and made semi-structured interviews to examine how individuals understood the process of building sustainable partnerships through social partnerships. The study also revealed that there are differences between these two countries.

Interviewees in both countries highlighted that sustainable partnerships are based on common interests and ethical values. Human relations are seen the core of partnerships, because Academics are naturally interested in own field of study and in these meetings emerge collective trust, respect and understanding. Ma & Montgomery (Ma & Montgomery, 2019, pp.11-12) reported that mutual understanding across two universities can be considered to transcend international and institutional differences, which is understood to create sustainable partnerships through human relations.

In United Kingdom building international relationships are based almost entirely on human relations and interviewees felt strong mistrust towards Institutions, which interviewees felt only focusing to earn money. In contrast, for one thing in China, the creation of sustainable partnerships were dependent on senior -level academics, who were crucial to create and maintain human relations and partnerships. (Ma & Montgomery, 2019, pp. 11-12) One interesting reason why the study was picked to this thesis was the findings related to personal relationships and similar interests, and how significant roles they were in the process of building new partnerships.

### **2.3.5 Finnish higher education institutions enhancing sustainable development**

A group of Finnish professionals, Puurula et al, made literature review-based study and researched data from qualitative material. The study was focused on Finnish higher educational institutions' strategies and sustainable developments' matters. (Puurula et al., 2022, pp. 34-35)

The study recognizes that it can't fully be researched with the analyzed data, that how higher educational institutions obey their own social development strategies, which they publicly create and announce. (Puurula et al., 2022, p.35) The study mentions, that

collected data for the study were gathered from websites of Aalto University, University of Tampere and from Applied sciences of Häme and Turku. (Puurula et al., 2022, p. 38)

Researchers came to conclusion that every researched institute engaged to United Nations Agenda 2030, but they found out that comparison between the institutions were not relevant as they were followed by either doctrine of Arene, Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities Applied Sciences or thesis of Unifi, Council of Rectors of Finnish Universities. Puurula et al. concluded that programs are relatively new and couldn't be assessed. (Puurula et al., 2022, p.43)

As the study refers Velasquez et al (2006) research, when they concluded that program of sustainable development is one criteria of sustainable higher educational institute. However, Puurula et al. outlined that missing sustainable development program in higher educational institute itself, is not a sign that institutions wouldn't act responsibly. They described that sustainability is nowadays integrated part of society's acts and missing a program might not be an issue. But researchers concluded that nothing appears to be resultant of disregard towards sustainable development. According to data sustainability were included to educational, research and campus -activities but were almost fully or completely missing from management of operations, organization and quality control. (Puurula et al., 2022, p.43)

According to study's analysis, Aalto University is resembled like open university and is a proactive actor relating to sustainable development. University of Tampere is analyzed to be sustainable according to their material, but researchers concluded based on material from the website, that the university is little bit distant from society. It is assumed to be because of the past fusion. Study evaluated that University of Applied Sciences to highlight cooperation with business and regional basing, which are creating tension between economy and sustainable development. (Puurula et al., 2022, pp.43-44) Regarding on this analysis, an important observation is that according to Puurula et al, higher educational institutions might not tell everything aloud, but researchers assumed that the image they create is close to institutions acts. (Puurula et al., 2022, p.44) Referenced study might give valuable data for the motives of higher educational institutions to create international partnerships and possibly support their sustainable development goals. That could create a positive reputation for higher educational institutions and build a ground around partnerships, for example unitive themes or projects.

### **2.3.6 Why Finnish universities of applied sciences pursue international partnerships, a study on leadership perspectives**

This article examined middle and top management from Universities of Applied Sciences and their insights of international partnerships. The research was executed by using contingency theory and data was collected from structured interviews by surveys, which were electronically sent to institutions. (Puonti & Kohtamäki, p. 261, 2018) With theory, Puonti & Kohtamäki observed if international partnerships are advancing success of institutions and how environment effected to organizations and how organizations reacted it's occurrences. (Puonti & Kohtamäki, p. 257, 261. 2018)

The research reports that institutions, specifically top management, want to improve their operations, strengthen research, development and innovation, and operation's quality and effectiveness. Moreover, existing partnerships, developing and deepening them, were a remarkable rise from interviewees. The study mentions that international partners tend to have similar profile with the Finnish institution, so strategic partnerships feel comfort to interviewees, and specifically mid management was highlighting this. (Puonti & Kohtamäki, p. 262, 2018)

The results of the partnership's goals and the most common opinions, in order of the most responses and overall votes, included the development of RDI, teacher and student mobility, educational cooperation, and developing own operations and quality. (Puonti & Kohtamäki, p. 262-263, 2018)

With selected research theory, Puonti & Kohtamäki concluded, that institutions actively tried to affect their operation environment. The size and location of possible partner was a neutral question for both groups of interviewees. Instead, culture was an important factor for senior management, whereas middle management perceived it as neutral. (Puonti & Kohtamäki, p. 263, 2018)

An interesting observation was that 16 of 20 interviewed individuals from different universities of applied sciences had international partnerships, but four of 20 hadn't any partners. One university of applied sciences had 12 partners, and the most general amount was three. (Puonti & Kohtamäki, p. 265, 2018)

This research differs from Ma & Montgomery's (2019) study, where the interviewees reported that international partnerships are fully based on personal relationships as the Finnish colleagues in Puonti & Kohtamäki's (2018) research interviewees didn't mention anything about personal relationships, but still closely the similarities between higher

educational institutes was the most significant issue which mattered when institutions are creating partnerships and which Ma & Montgomery (2019) reported also, but in personal level, that academics have similar interests and that helps to build new partnerships.

### **2.3.7 Creating and Sustaining Community College -University Transfer Partnerships**

Carrie Kisker (2007) examined processes when creating and sustaining community college -university transfer partnerships and complexities around the question. The researcher has herself created the term 'transfer partnership' to describe partnerships between community colleges and bachelor's degree -granting institutions to ease access baccalaureate to as many students as possible. (Kisker, 2007, pp.283-285)

She used network embeddedness theory to research organizational behaving from both sides to understand social networks of relationships. One of the benefits is mentioned in study, that the theory reveals opportunities and barriers from creation of partnerships and these things could be identified by investigating five themes, inter alia formation and development of partnerships and performance. (Kisker, 2007, p.285)

As study method was used to one public research university and nine community colleges, in Southern California, United States of America. The chosen ones were purposely selected as they had already existing partnerships and 5-year history to gather valid data and semi-structured interviews were used by having one-to-one interviews. (Kisker, 2007, p. 286)

The challenges which the study reported were inequity between the partnerships, for example at early stage of relationship participants felt the university staff had the power in the partnerships, because they were controlling funds and an employee which coordinated the partnership activities. Student mobility from one college to university was not trouble-free as there weren't transferred enough students to university and the college decided to speed up the process by arranging supportive courses for students but the faculty in university felt students still were missing basic skills of studies. (Kisker, 2007, pp. 289-290)

Positive findings were reported about the value of faculty influence being the front line with students and persuasion in their department, but at the same time few interviewees felt that there were attitudinal and organizational barriers around the transfer system, and which restricts faculty's time for transfer activities. (Kisker, 2007, pp. 292-293)

The study concluded that transfer partnerships raise student's awareness of undergraduate studies can contribute to communication and outreach initiatives. The study reported the

possible most important thing was creating a transfer culture of employees between the institutions. (Kisker, 2007, p. 297) Concluding the results and interpreting is that equity and need for seamless collaboration in partnerships are important to make collaboration successful. Another noteworthy aspect of the study is the multi-stakeholder collaboration and the experience of its management. The findings provided valuable insight into context of United States of America and contributed to the development of sustainable practices inside the education system.

### 2.3.8 Benefits of transnational collaborative partnerships in higher education

The European Expert Network on Economics of Education examined research about benefits in higher education at macro as regional or national, meso as institutional and micro as individual level, and from both, economic and non-economic perspectives. The results of benefits analysis are seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Analysis of benefits, effects are categorized. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, p.12)

		LEVEL OF ANALYSIS		
		MACRO (regional/national)	MESO (institutional)	MICRO (individual)
TYPES OF BENEFITS	ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education system</li> <li>- Contribute to the economic development of the community</li> <li>- Alleviate scarcity of work force in strategic sectors</li> <li>- Improve quality of human capital</li> <li>- Increase rate of technological innovation and use</li> <li>- Economic growth</li> <li>- Brain gain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increase institutional revenue: more and better patents, fees from international students and scholars, research grants, access to/exchange of financial resources,</li> <li>- Increase efficiency in using time and resources</li> <li>- Enhance competitiveness on the global/national educational market</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- International scholarships and grants</li> <li>- Improve labour market outcomes (higher employment rates, lower unemployment rates, higher earnings)</li> </ul>
	NON-ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve and diversify knowledge</li> <li>- Promote the reputation of the higher education system abroad</li> <li>- Increase quality of education</li> <li>- Improved higher education standards</li> <li>- Contribute to the country's influence on the international scene</li> <li>- Improve country image</li> <li>- Improve diplomatic relations, foreign policy, national security, peace and democracy</li> <li>- Increase linguistic diversity</li> <li>- Increase access to education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide additional uses for educational content</li> <li>- Develop and/or internationalise the curriculum</li> <li>- Enhance the diversity of programmes/expand educational offerings</li> <li>- Offer mobility opportunities to students, faculty and staff</li> <li>- Enrich library holdings and e-learning platforms</li> <li>- Diversify faculty, staff and student body</li> <li>- Increase research output and quality</li> <li>- Reach and recruit more and better international students</li> <li>- Develop/strengthen institutional capacity</li> <li>- Advance campus internationalization</li> <li>- Improve standing in global rankings</li> <li>- Knowledge about operating in foreign jurisdictions</li> <li>- Consolidate partnerships, academic research collaborations and alliances</li> <li>- Gain prestige and reputation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access wide range of online &amp; offline academic resources</li> <li>- Enable faculty to improve their teaching and research skills</li> <li>- Exposure to world-class facilities, faculty and staff</li> <li>- Increase research productivity</li> <li>- Mobility capital</li> <li>- Developing international cooperation and collaboration skills</li> <li>- Enhance intercultural experience, awareness and understanding</li> <li>- Improve foreign language skills</li> </ul>

This research has analyzed thoroughly the literature of the topic and examined clear tables to results. Remarkable notice is that there is a considerable difference between the findings in non-economic favor. Non-economical had 31 facts versus economic had 12. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, p.12) In addition, Craciun & Oroz (2018) used systematic literature review for the research and the data were selected from world's largest educational database *ERIC* and *Econlit* which are used in the fields of economics. The selection criteria included only studies utilizing quantitative or mixed method approaches to examine the causal impact of

transnational cooperation in higher education for relevant outcomes. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, p.14)

This study concluded 10 findings of picture 1 listing, that had reported evidence of positive connection to transnational partnerships. Few to be mentioned inter alia at macro level positive attitudes towards open borders and democracy, at meso level strengthened research and teaching capacity and at micro level higher likelihood of employment at home and abroad. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, p. 38) Overall, Craciun & Oroz (2018) did important research, when comparing their findings to Twins Bright Academy -case and thus far, no other studies, which were found, have rigorously examined the benefits and costs of partnerships while simultaneously considering multiple layers of effectiveness to the same extent.

In the Figure 2, analysis of costs, each sector had the same number of notices. The study observed the main challenges that arose relating to inequity in power relations between counterparts, which totally same observation as in Kisker's 2007 study, another partner has the dominant status compared to other side. Also, students had met cultural difference - aspects, while they had been in exchange on other continents, for example different kinds of studies offered in curriculum, which were not supporting their own studies at home country. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, pp.33-34)

For academic staff, communication challenges and absence of a common language led to face barriers. Additionally, differing goals in teaching materials, lack of openness to experimentation and projects which were time-resourceful to execute, were reported significant obstacles. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, p. 36) This study offers along with benefits also a possibility to examine challenges of partnerships, which are also asked in this thesis' survey. It is interesting to compare if the benefits are same in Craciun & Oroz, (2018, study than this thesis finds.

Figure 2. Analysis of costs, effects categorized vertically in macro, meso and micro -level, economic and non-economic effects categorized horizontally. (Craciun & Oroz, 2018, p.13)

		LEVEL OF ANALYSIS		
		MACRO (regional/national)	MESO (institutional)	MICRO (individual)
<b>TYPES OF COSTS</b>	ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Subsidies to domestic and international students, faculty, staff and joint degree programmes</li> <li>- Direct and opportunity costs of competition</li> <li>- Brain drain</li> <li>- Costs of registration, licensing and recognition of foreign degrees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Operational and administrative costs of maintaining partnership</li> <li>- Costs of providing services for domestic and international students, faculty and staff; additional costs of services (beyond what would have been spent in a non-collaborative scenario) on domestic, students, faculty, and staff</li> <li>- Costs of training staff to manage international collaboration programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tuition and fees</li> <li>- Living and housing expenses</li> <li>- Forgone earnings</li> </ul>
	NON-ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Crowding out of local students and faculty</li> <li>- Loss of cultural/national identity</li> <li>- Loss of linguistic pluralism</li> <li>- Loss/diversion of traditional higher education mission (commercialization of higher education)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loss of autonomy due to partnership power imbalance (e.g. setting research agendas)</li> <li>- Time and effort spent on securing stakeholder support for partnership</li> <li>- Time and effort spent on negotiating differences between institutional cultures, policies, and practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Worse academic results due to studies in a foreign language</li> <li>- Recognition and transfer of credits earned abroad</li> <li>- Emotional costs/stress</li> </ul>

### 2.3.9 An overview of strategic alliances between universities and corporations

This study researched and analyzed strategic alliances between higher educational institutions and companies. Elmuti et al. (2005) examined previous research and discovered four main components for creation of strategic alliances which consist of research support where companies are funding universities by donating. Cooperative research is focused on close cooperation working with groups and it is based on official contracts. Knowledge transfer is continuous communication, education and student mobility and technology transfer is bringing together university -research and commercialization of new products. (Elmuti et al., 2005, p.116)

Elmuti et al. (2005) discussed the reasons they found for strategic alliances and noticed several matters that are important when observing the perspective of companies. A need to speed up new technologies to markets, while technology developed quickly, and competition tightened globally. Increasing demand for innovations, businesses expected that new innovations raised their income. Even though innovation happened inside the companies, companies didn't trust only their processes but trusted more inter-organizational partnerships. Lower R&D expenditures were found to be lower in biotechnical companies engaged in university collaboration, and this was observed to potentially encourage companies to deepen their partnership with universities. Lastly, technology transfer -programs, which benefit both companies and universities, to collective research and to bring university research able to develop and commercialize new technologies. Including providing technical expertise, form specific research questions,

assisting entrepreneurs in start-ups and providing services related to patent and licensing. (Elmuti et al., 2005, p. 118)

The research article recognized as risks or problems between alliances, that were similar to findings, which Craciun & Oroz (2018) made. For example, cultural differences between universities and companies could lead to miscommunication because of differences in goals, time approaches, languages, assumptions and organizational culture. Companies are focused on short-term engagements while universities are operating on long-term focus. This affected partnerships negatively while partners always don't understand each other's working habits. Differences in goals are one of the problems, when companies aimed on applied research to get marketable products or services and innovative processes, universities enhanced to discover new concepts, models, empirical findings or measurement techniques. Elmuti et al. (2005) also concluded that there are other external factors that could affect both partners, but specifically mergers, acquisitions or economic turmoil are targeted at companies. Suggest for stable relationships is at least five-year commitment to support long-term research. (Elmuti et al., 2005, p. 118-119)

Even though this study is not fully made from higher education institution's perspective, and it is done in early 2000's, it gives information which benefits and expectations are directed to higher education institution, related to partnerships. When comparing Elmuti et al. (2005) research to Thomas & Al-Hasan's (2024) recent study, the findings are very similar and so far, any radical findings is not found, which could be mentioned. (Thomas & Al-Hasan, 2024, p. 1180)

### **2.3.10 Equipping graduates for the future: The need for higher institutions to collaborate**

The study researched partnerships between higher education institutions and the construction industry and why higher education institutions need to make collaboration with industry and how graduates could solve arising troubles in Nigerian construction industry. Authors examined quantitative method survey to collect data from the Nigerian industry professionals.

Several important findings were made regarding the developmental demands of higher education institutions. According to the study, higher education institutions should support and create opportunities for faculties to access the construction industry and advance personnel exchange possibilities between higher education institutions and the industry. Additionally encourage personnels to participate in research and development and consultancy activities. Adopting new technology by arranging workshops, seminars and training programs, designing specific professional development programs to secure, that

industry will be updated of new discoveries and scientific research. (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2018, p. 770)

From the perspective of the students, the study found the following benefits; opportunities to participate in industry activities, develop students' expertise and proficiency, the industry could improve students working possibilities after graduation and also provide facilities on real-life environment for hands-on training. (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2018, p. 770) In alignment of this, these findings fully support Craciun & Oroz's (2018) vast findings of partnership benefits in meso and micro level, in this case consists of higher education institutions I and student level.

### **2.3.11 Building sustainable industry partnerships that engage faculty and prepare job ready students**

Angolia et al., 2014, examined in The University of East Carolina how College of Technology and Computer Science leverages industry partnership model to enhance student preparedness for the future workforce. It was recognized that there was pressure to find external resources to retain top students, because of the declining budget and expectations to ready the workforce for the market. The study focused on four strategic initiatives: faculty-industry collaboration, continuous feedback from professionals, student development programs, and real-life learning opportunities in work life, such as internships and capstone projects.

First, universities' faculty members are working as consultants for companies which strengthens networks for business and creates possibilities for students. (Angolia, 2014, p. 24.246.13) Secondly, experts bring valuable advice to education and help universities develop their courses more to skill-demanded. Furthermore, in third, development centers evolve students as more job ready and increases their personal responsibility. Development centers offer to gain professional work experience, service-learning courses, guest speakers, leadership speakers and networking events. Lastly, universities must actively organize possibilities for students to internships, co-ops, and capstone projects with industry partners. (Angolia, 2014, p. 24.246.14)

This study specially researched how universities could build relationships with industry and how faculties and students could enhance their skills and especially how students gained real-life experiences and a real path to working life. This information might be valuable for

thesis, because it is existing and workable model, there seems to be win-win situation for the university, including students, and also for the industry.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction of methods selection**

The surveys made for this study, included both quantitative and qualitative methods. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to leverage the strengths of both methodologies while compensating for their limitations. The research method was chosen, since mixed-methods -research approach combines qualitative and quantitative approaches in single research to enhance understanding and corroboration. (Venkatesh et al., 2023, p.16) Moreover, a key reason to use mixed-methods approach is when using multiple data-collection methods, it strengthens a study by balancing the limitations of each approach, it will result in supplementing strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses. (Venkatesh et al., 2023, p. 13)

Here Venkatesh et al. describes the strengths of method:

Given mixed-methods research has the flexibility of employing a wider variety of data collection strategies, the data collected are generally a combination of at least numerical and qualitative (narrative) data. To analyze such types of data, researchers rely on multiple techniques (e.g., using statistical and content analysis techniques). As a result, they yield a more complete picture, as the data from the different methods complement each other. (Venkatesh et al., 2023, pp.13-14)

Still there might be a risk when using standardized scales and measures, it could end to unclear data results because of misunderstanding survey questions (Venkatesh et al., 2023, p.14). The mixed -methods approach enabled the authors to gain deeper understanding of how partnerships are formed by incorporating open-ended responses. This was particularly important because multiple-choice questions, with their predefined answer options, may not have captured the full range of responses that participants wished to provide. The inclusion of open-ended questions allowed respondents to articulate their perspectives more freely, ensuring that valuable insights were not constrained by the limitations of fixed response options.

In this study, the author wanted to gather easier handled data with quantitative method, which focus on numeric comparison and it should be easier to handle. As the first survey

didn't offer enough deeper data, earlier mentioned qualitative method was picked to understand the phenomenon more closely. It is nonstatistical and is focused on describing texts and characteristics. (Mistry, p.522, 2012)

As above mentioned, after the first survey was published, the author observed that the initial data collection did not fully address the intended research questions, and as a result, author decided to create an additional, more focused survey to gather further insights and ensure comprehensive data collection. In an additional survey, the author aimed to allow respondents to freely describe how they would establish partnerships. Furthermore, the survey was structured into separate questions, asking respondents to outline the key factors that need to be considered when building relationships with companies, non-governmental organizations and other educational institutions. For the sake of clarity, later in this study, the first survey will be called "Survey1" and it is the quantitative part of the study and the second survey will be called as "Survey2".

### **3.2 Survey administration and data collection**

The surveys to this study were created by using Google Forms -software, a common software to examine surveys. The software is web-based, and it facilitates easy and efficient data collection. Survey1 was conducted on February 11th, 2025, and the second survey was published on February 23rd, 2025, and both were open till March 9th, 2025. Distribution was executed by sharing survey links via Microsoft Teams, email, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. Survey1 link was made publicly accessible; however, the introductory text specified that the survey was intended for academic faculty, administrative staff, researchers, student services staff, or other persons from higher education institution -staff, working for the Finnish higher education institution. Survey2 link was distributed internally on Häme University of Applied Sciences' Teams channel.

In Survey1, questions number one to four were statistical, designed to allow for potential comparisons between higher education institutions, answers depended on the role or primary field at the higher education institution, provided that a sufficient sample size was obtained to draw meaningful conclusions. Question number five aimed to explore whether respondents were aware of if their institution had partnership strategies or policies related to building partnerships.

Questions number six, seven and eight aimed to collect insights into the key factors and challenges involved in establishing partnerships at respondents' institutions, as well as to identify the types of organizations that the higher education institutions primarily seek to collaborate with.

Next questions were categorized as Maintaining and Developing Partnerships, and questions number nine, ten and eleven aimed to understand how higher education institutions ensure the sustainability of partnerships, evaluate their effectiveness, and explore how students might influence the creation of new partnerships through their coursework.

The last questions, number twelve and thirteen, examined how respondents thought that higher education institutions incorporate sustainability principles into their partnerships and significance of sustainability in criteria of partner selection. The last part of the survey was dedicated to the study related to examine data of higher education institutions and companies collaborating to support educational development in developing countries.

In Survey2, questions one to three were the same statistical questions than in the main survey and questions four to eight were exploring the key factors influencing the creation and development of partnerships and the essential considerations when establishing relationships with companies, non-governmental organizations and other educational institutions.

The quality of data could say to be reliable and up to date, as professionals have responded to surveys. Despite the highly limited sample size, the results can be considered reliable due to the specificity of the respondent group. Also, some of the respondents might not be native English speakers, and this might restrict their expressive ability and possibly everything was not said what possibly could have been wanted to express.

All the responses were provided in the appropriate manner, and there were no indications of answers being misplaced. The survey combined both quantitative and qualitative components, combining multiple -choice and open-ended questions to collect various types of data. Questions were conceived to be neutral and non-biased, ensuring that no preconceived notions were introduced to the respondents when answering the questions. Answers were treated anonymously and collected data is stored safely in accordance with data protection regulations to ensure confidentiality. For additional details regarding both surveys, please refer to the full surveys in Appendix 1.

#### **4. Results and analysis**

The number of respondents in Survey1 was six. Five individuals were from working at university of applied sciences, while one respondent was employed at a university. The respondents were from Häme University of Applied Sciences, Humak University of Applied

Sciences, Satakunta University of Applied Sciences and University of Helsinki. One person was administrative staff, the rest were academic faculties.

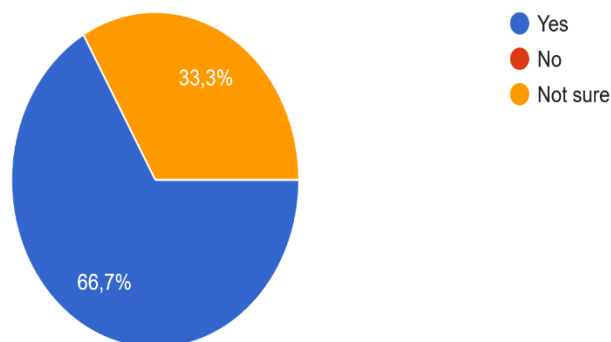
Survey2 got five answers, all were from Häme University of Applied Sciences, and all respondents were academic faculties. For the purpose of this analysis, the author determined that a response rate of 50% or higher would be considered a significant indicator of a notable trend among respondents.

#### 4.1 Results of Survey1

In this section the author provides an analysis of the survey results and findings. The fifth question in the Figure 3, explored whether respondents were aware of an official strategy or policy for partnership building in their higher education institution. Approximately 67% were aware of a strategy or policy and approximately 33% were not sure. This may be attributed to the respondents' lack of involvement to collaboration practices or possibly limited awareness of the internal communication in institution. Generally, it could be said that major of respondents are at least aware of their institutions' existing strategy or policy for partnership building.

Figure 3. Institutional Partnership Strategy. Survey1 (Author's made survey, 2025).

5. Does Your institution have an official strategy or policy for building partnerships?  
6 vastausta



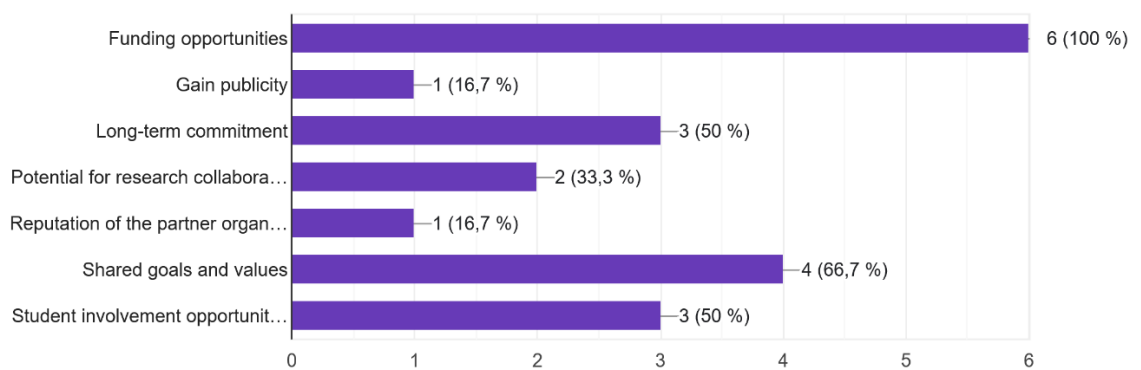
In the next question were asked, which respondents found the most important factors when starting a new partnership and it was possible to select all that applied. As seen in Figure 4, funding opportunities were unanimously the most important factor in establishment of new partnership. Other significant factors are goal and value -sharing, long-term commitment and student involvement opportunities. This finding is supported by Elmuti et al. (2005),

who highlighted the importance of companies funding universities as a key component of strategic alliances. It appears that creation of partnership funding opportunities have crucial role and it could be cautiously inferred that funding opportunities are central motivation for partnerships or it is possibly requirement for beginning of partnership or partnerships might be significant funding source to institutions.

Figure 4. The most important factors in new partnership. Survey1 (Author's made survey, 2025).

6. What do You think are the most important factors when starting a new partnership in Your institution? (Please, select all that apply)

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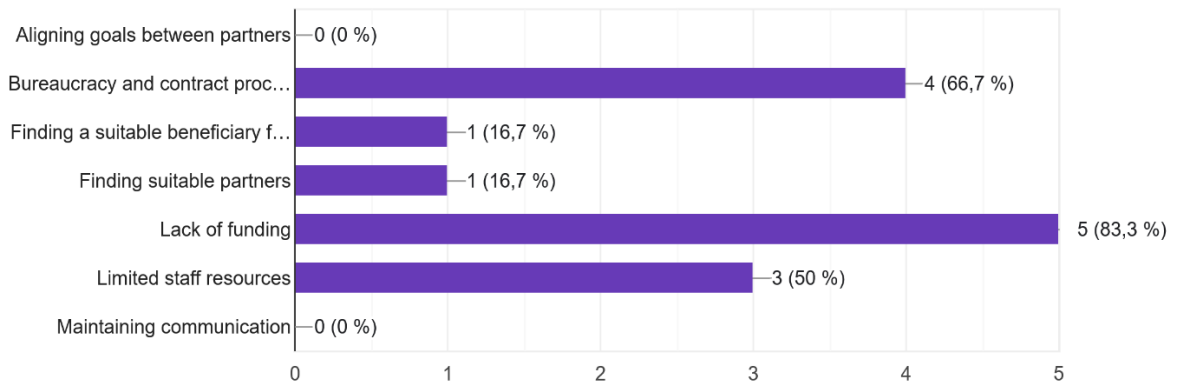


In the Figure 5 it is shown a question, where respondents had to answer about facing the biggest challenges while creating partnerships and the key factor of challenges was lack of funding opportunities as approximately 83% respondents answering to this option. Which supports analysis in previous question that funding opportunities could be remarkable source of money to institutions, and this could lead to be the crucial challenge in partnership creation. Bureaucracy and contract processes with approximately 67% answers and limited staff resources with 50% responses were seen as major barriers. Limited staff resources could link strongly to findings about lack of opportunities.

Figure 5. Partnership building challenges. Survey1 (Author's made survey, 2025).

7. What do You think are the biggest challenges Your institution faces when building partnerships?  
(Please, select all that apply)

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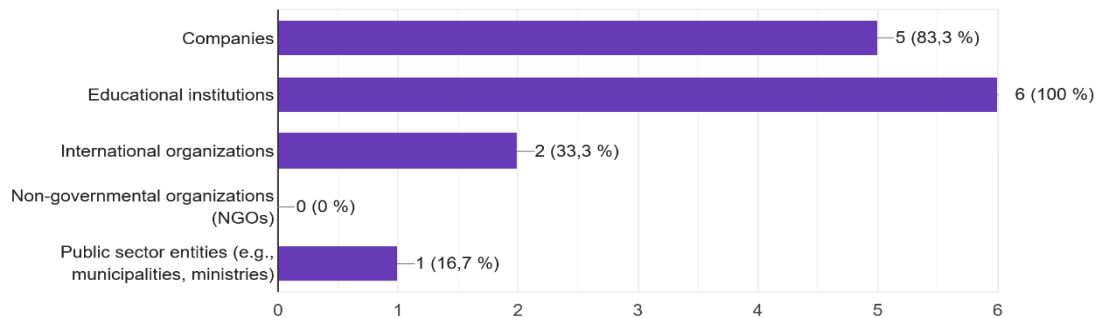


Question eight in Figure 6, aimed to examine whether the respondents were aware of the types of organizations with which their institutions primarily seek partnerships. Based on the responses, educational institutions with 100% response rate and it seems likely that higher educational institutions are willing to the most preferably collaborate with similar organization type. As companies with approximately 83% response rate, this could be suggested that companies are remarkable source to funding. According to responses, non-governmental organizations got no response, this may cause different goal and value alignment between partners or non-governmental organizations might not be good source of funding as typically non-governmental organizations are receivers of funding. Public sector entities having 16,7% of votes and this could occur because of bureaucracy, which were seen of the main challenges in the previous question.

Figure 6. Partner seeking. Survey1 (Author's made survey, 2025).

8. To Your knowledge what types of organizations Your institution primarily seeks to partner with?  
(Please, select the most relevant)

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In section “Maintaining and Developing Partnerships”, question nine aimed to explore how the institution of respondent ensures the sustainability and long-term success of its partnerships and question 10 examined evaluating of existing partnerships.

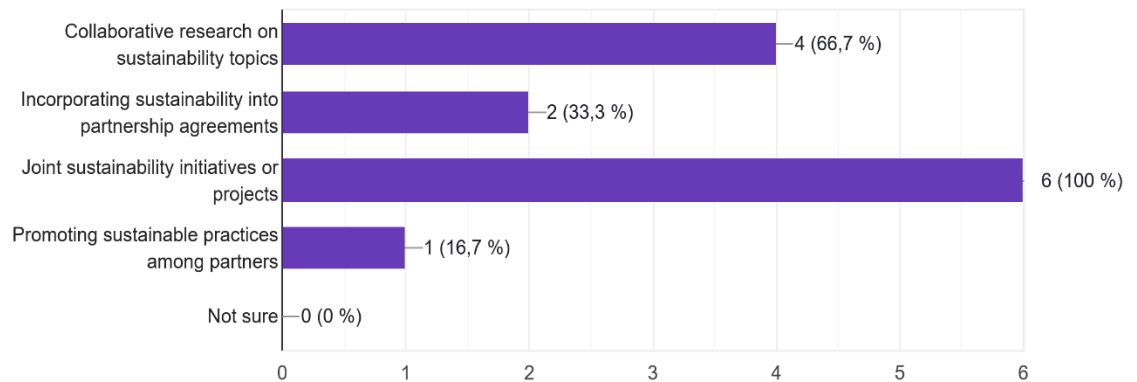
The question 11 seeks to explore in which kind of courses students could influence to build new partnerships. This was an open-ended question and four responses were given. Project working was mentioned in three responses and was the most frequent response, although in slightly different forms, such as “project working”, “managing business network” and “business labs”. This may reflect the importance of project working and its opportunities for adaptability. Other mentioned courses were, internationalization, research and development, international business, sustainability, innovation, communication and thesis writing. This may indicate that internationalization is seen as a valuable form of partnership creation in higher education institutions.

In the Figure 7, question about integrating sustainability principles into institutions’ partnerships, joint sustainability initiatives or projects got 100% responses. Kunttu (2017) found that joint courses between students and the company’s research and development departments were mutually beneficial. This aligns with the results shown in Figure 7, where joint sustainability initiatives or projects received 100% of responses. Both findings emphasize the importance of collaborative initiatives, reinforcing the central role of joint efforts in fostering successful and sustainable partnerships. and another crucial response was collaborative research on sustainability topics with approximately 67% response rate. Similarly, the findings from Aliu & Aigbavboa (2018) support the idea that collaboration between higher education institutions and industry not only benefits the institutions but also provides students with real-world training opportunities, echoing the importance of joint sustainability initiatives as reflected in the Figure 7 responses.

Figure 7. Sustainability in Partnerships. Survey1 (Author’s made survey, 2025).

12. How does Your institution integrate sustainability principles into its partnerships? (Please, select all that apply)

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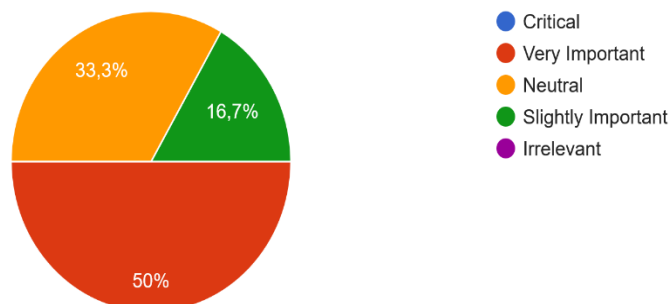


In the next question, in Figure 8, respondents evaluated the importance of institutions' partner selecting and no one found sustainability as critical or irrelevant criteria. 50% of responses were saying criteria to be very important and the rest 50% neutral or slightly important. This may indicate that sustainability is not the most important key factor in partnership criteria but still could be understood as one of the essential factors, which cannot be neglected when seeking partners.

Figure 8. Importance of Sustainability in Partner Selecting. Survey1 (Author's made survey, 2025).

13. In Your opinion, how important is sustainability in your institution's criteria for selecting partners?

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#### 4.1 Results of Survey2

To collect more detailed data, the author created a new survey that allowed respondents to answer questions more in-depth, in order to determine whether other influencing factors

emerge and to compare previous findings related to partnerships concerning higher education institutions.

In the fourth question, in Survey2, respondents were asked about the factors influencing the creation and development of partnerships. Two of five respondents emphasized the signification of in-person interactions, pointing out face-to-face connections and physical visits as key factors.

One of the respondents answered:

Partners should think beyond short-term goals and look toward long-term sustainability. This includes planning for the future and addressing challenges that might arise over time. Strong leadership from both sides, with a commitment to supporting the partnership, is a critical factor in making the collaboration sustainable and successful. I believe open and transparent communication builds trust between partners. For example, regular, clear discussions about expectations, challenges, and progress are essential for maintaining strong collaborations for a long run.

This response indicates that persistence and sustainable cooperation forms with planning the future and examining challenges. Strong leadership and support to partnership is seen as a critical factor. Open and transparent communication with regular discussions respondent sees crucial for sustainable partnership. Two of five respondents highlighted students' opportunities; Engagement in work life and support in student development were emphasized.

Overall, the results highlight that long-term planning, committed leadership, and open communication are key factors of sustainable partnerships, while student engagement is seen as an important added value. What is surprising, that no one did mention about funding-opportunities when compared to Survey1 answer, where it was unanimously voted the most important factor as partnership creation. This may imply that respondents view funding as fundamental.

In question five were asked how respondents would establish partnerships. The respondents had multiple approaches on how to establish partnerships and one of the respondents highlighted inter alia supporting attending conferences and events, expanding social networks, contacting potential partners and engaging in online and in-person discussions.

Another respondent would form partnerships by identifying organizations with aligned goals and values. The respondent found understanding of the core values as important for sustainable collaboration. The way it is done according to respondent; by researching organizations or individuals that share similar missions or complementing strengths, mentioning strengths such as resources, expertise or networks. After identifying potential partners, regarding respondent, there will follow open conversations for trust building and clarification of mutual needs and expectations.

Third respondent investigates own network and if not finding any, the respondent identifies relevant companies in their field of study and seeks to connect them on LinkedIn. After finding a possible partner, would the respondent explain projects and interview them to find out if respondent's institution could offer value.

The fourth respondent described the process shortly by seeking common interests and meeting the potential partner to gain a deeper understanding of them. Last and fifth responded, that by finding world widely like-minded staff members from other universities and repeating same from business world. These responses indicate that respondents' personal views on how they would establish partnerships are occurring by researching own personal networks first, carefully seeking possible partners by interviewing them and aligning mutual values and goals. Specifically, findings and of personal relations and its signification is similar and indicates to be supportive to Ma & Montgomery (2019) study, where findings indicated partnerships to be created with personal relations. But it has to be highlighted that no one didn't mention their dismissal towards higher education institutions in partnership creation processes, which was key reason to findings in Ma & Montgomery (2019) study.

In question number six, it was asked in respondent opinion, what should be considered when building relationships with companies. The first respondent described that willingness to participate in development, potential for internships and thesis topics and readiness to work with international students. Respondent also highlighted reputation and diversity, equity and inclusion -practices. According to the second respondent, transparent communication and regular check-ins for trust building, early challenges addressing and keeping partnership on track. The respondent outlined that continuous dialogue supports ongoing improvement and flexibility, and opportunities for growth and adaptation as the partnership evolves.

The third respondent described presenting a clear view on the project opportunities, establishing more network opportunities to create long lasting relationships. The fourth respondent described common goals and availability of resources in both institutions. From

the fifth and last respondent mentioned trust developing and a win-win partnership. Regarding answers, it indicates that building relationships with companies requires trust, shared goals, transparent communication, and opportunities for mutual growth. Key themes include different kinds of project working, long-term collaboration, and aligning resources and values.

In seventh question was asked which factors should be considered when building relationships with non-governmental organizations. One respondent wrote that potential for partnership, reputation, willingness to mentorship and diversity, equity and inclusion - practices. Another respondent thought that the field of operation and region of the non-governmental organization matters and how students could contribute to the project.

One of the respondents emphasized cruciality of aligning their own goals and missions with the non-governmental organizations. Also, the respondent mentioned that it is important to consider how institution's partnership with non-governmental organizations can strengthen or complement existing partnerships between non-governmental organizations and local communities.

The fourth respondent highlighted genuineness and the experience of non-governmental organization's activity in the region. The last of the respondents said that influencing factors are understanding the work of non-governmental organization and the value creation of both parties, needed timeframe and documentation of the work. This suggests that building relationships with non-governmental organizations inter alia relies on shared goals, mutual understanding, reputation, and alignment of values whereas some of the key factors are community commitment, and clear roles for both parties.

The eighth question, which was the last, was asked what should be considered when building relationships with other educational institutions. The first respondent responded following factors; shared values, similar curriculum and pedagogy, sustainable practices, openness for partnerships, part of Erasmus+, location of institution, English as instruction language, enough courses offered in English and attractiveness for students.

The second respondent mentioned that understanding each institution's priorities, culture, policies and operating procedures is crucial for the partnership. Recognizing differences in size, governance and decision-making structures helps avoid friction and ensures solid partnership, according to respondent. The respondent also wrote that, when education institutes collaborate, it is crucial to consider how students and faculty will benefit and participate. Offering opportunities for student exchange, internships and joint research can enhance the impact of relationships on the broader academic community.

One respondent wrote in response that diversity, exchange of knowledge and expertise, multicultural and multidisciplinary value. The fourth respondent enumerated common goals, resources and pragmatics, explaining pragmatics as how difficult it is to visit each other and cultural similarities and differences. The last respondent explained the factors that brought value for both institutions and the learning outcome gained from it. The responses indicate several key factors in building relationships with other educational institutions, such as shared values, compatible curricula, and opportunities for student exchange and joint research. Additionally, understanding each institution's priorities, culture, and operating procedures are crucial for establishing a successful and sustainable partnership.

### **4.3 Analysis of Survey1 results**

Survey's results highlight few key indicators; how higher education institutions and their staff consider sustainable partnership creation. First, one of third respondents are unaware of their partnership strategy and this might occur insufficient communication among the institution. Another reason might be that, respondents are not working with partnerships or institutions are not taking along faculties, who were the only respondents group, to strategic planning.

One of the most significant findings is the key role of funding opportunities being same time a crucial factor and also lack of funding being a significant barrier in partnership creation. This might be derived from economic challenges among higher education institutions or Finnish society. Also, this brings a question, if higher education institutions are binding its' partnerships too heavily on funding rather than common values and strategies or social impacts?

Meanwhile, shared values and goals, long-term commitment and student movement are seen important, these opinions abolish the idea that higher education institutions are building its' strategies based on funding and unilateral benefit. And also these things are raising the question, if the funding is private, can higher education institutions stay objective in front of scientific research?

What becomes to partnership type, it can be concluded that other institutions are easy to cooperate with, because of similarities and companies brings funding, developing and innovation opportunities. Total lack of non-governmental organizations in responses may reflect that, values and goals are not similar with higher education institutions and also possible non-governmental organizations' lack of funding opportunities could be the key factor. In the other perspective, it could be asked, does the Finnish higher education institutions really understand how non-governmental organizations works and is there

possibly some kind of unknown potential, which they got bring to partnerships? Barriers and challenges in partnership creation are, along with funding opportunities, bureaucracy and contract processes and limited staff resources. This could be understood that respondents see authorities, decrees and laws too rigid for higher education institutions, that it's affecting to partnerships. Staff resources could be directly seen a reflection of economic situation in institution. Overall, it can be concluded that sustainability is not the most important factor at the moment to higher education institutions, even though it is one significant factor in strategic planning in higher education institutions.

#### **4.3.1 Analysis of Survey2 results**

According to responses, it could be concluded that in era of technology, interpersonal skills and face to face meetings are still understood as key factors and this indicates that physical meetings are still important in relationships building. Also it concluded that institutions' commitment and strategic planning are vital in sustainable partnerships building and higher education institutions should focus on clear objectives, long-term partnership strategies and clear communication with an active leadership.

When respondents got an opportunity to free answers in Survey2, funding was not mentioned as a crucial factor in partnerships building, instead it seems that quality of relationships and long-term mutual benefits are seen as primary value drivers, and this provides higher education institutions an opportunity to develop shared values and strategic perspective. In partnership development, shared values and strategic alignment were primary focus and it could be concluded that it could be possibly potential competitive edge to higher education institutions invest to their personal networks and have systematic process to identify and evaluate their potential partners. Clearly it can be concluded that non-governmental organizations are partly unknown partners, or it is not easy to build partnerships between these sides, having bigger differences in their operations. Across all partnership types; companies, non-governmental and other educational institutions, following same themes are included in responses: shared values, trust, transparency, communication and strategic alignment. Partnerships are seen as long-term engagement rather than opportunistic benefitting without strategy.

## **5. Recommendations**

This section of thesis offers recommendations to commissioner, the Häme University of Applied Sciences, and is supported by research data from academic personnel. The

recommendations are not in any specific order, they are based on findings from this study and previous studies, and they offer guidance for sustainable partnership creation.

1. Use your personnels' and institution's contacts and networks to seek a possible partner. Have meetings with them and discuss and get to know each other. Make clear to potential partner HAMK's values and goals and define such for the partnership. Set clear expectations and a plan for the future. According to Ma & Montgomery (2019), personal relationships and networks could have remarkable effects on relationships creation.
2. Prioritize long-term collaborations, it is researched to be the best option for partnership. (Kunttu, 2017, p. 17) Make sure that both HAMK and partner are committed to the collaboration and that both sides have enough resources and funds for it. Funding opportunities, even though this was according to survey, a critical part of the partnership creation, it should not be the most important factor as other interests together could be more valuable for the partnership.
3. Include sustainable priorities in the partnership, focusing on joint research, projects, and exchange programs for both personnel and students. These methods may be effective together with long-term collaboration, particularly in university-industry collaborations, where joint research initiatives have been proven mutually beneficial in Kunttu (2017) study.
4. Student involvement. Creating student participation in the beginning of planning and maintenance process are important and these could give valuable experiences to students for the future. Internships possibilities, different kinds of projects or learning experiences and international programs, such as Erasmus+. While reflecting results of Mancini et al., (2022) and Angolia et al., (2014) study, real-life experience could make huge impact to students themselves in their future career, and it could even make remarkable acts for industries and society. Especially Angolia et al. (2014) study researched the University of East Carolina's model and it could be worth to take closer look, if there is something, how to improve HAMK's operations.
5. Recognize the possible challenges in partnership. Discuss and define inside HAMK and with potential partner about the known challenges and how to act, if possible, challenges have emerged through the journey of partnership. Craciun & Oroz, 2018 study has examined deeply the possible challenges in partnerships.

6. Notice the differences in partnership characters. Concluding the results of this thesis, creation of partnership with different instances differs and should be noticed when planning the mapping of partners and partnership. Define the key factors for each background, own requirements for companies, non-governmental organizations and institutions. Also pay attention to cultural understanding and make sure you understand each other and that both sides understand and manage diversity, equity and inclusion - values and other important factors that come up.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the key factors in establishing partnerships and to provide insights to Häme University of Applied Sciences and results of the study are supposed to give guidelines to form partnerships in general level. Future studies could possibly focus to specific data about partnerships with different instances. According to the findings in this study, it can be concluded that funding opportunities, shared goals and values, student involvement opportunities and long-term commitment are the key factors, which should be considered while institution is planning to create new partnership. Long-term partnership with both beneficial symbiosis is the most effective form of partnership, and it can be concluded that thorough preparatory work and a deep understanding of the partner are crucial for fostering a partnership that is both equitable and valuable.

Particularly noteworthy in the study was the fact that funding opportunities are expressed to be a critical part of new partnerships, and it should be strictly considered if it is justifiable to be the most important factor as not all partnerships are based to funding opportunities. Although, funding opportunities could arise, even if it is not set to be the most important factor in partnership. It is not that big surprise that, when choosing or seeking potential partner, sustainability is not crucial. Maybe this could be because of there are some other factors that are more important, for example funding or lack of resources, cultural differences et cetera. In Finland, where higher education institutions and specifically universities of applied sciences are constantly under threat of budget cuts (Arene, 2023 and Arene, 2025), financial interests might get higher priority than sustainability considerations among the decision-makers in higher education universities.

A remarkable finding was that higher education institutions are mainly willing to have partnerships with either companies or other education institutions but not with non-governmental organizations. It could be concluded that higher education institutions primarily consider commercial opportunities and similar values and goals might not be aligned with non-governmental organizations. This could be also a potential research topic

in the future, are the results similar in wider surveys and if they are, why higher education institutions do not want to collaborate with non-governmental organizations or municipalities.

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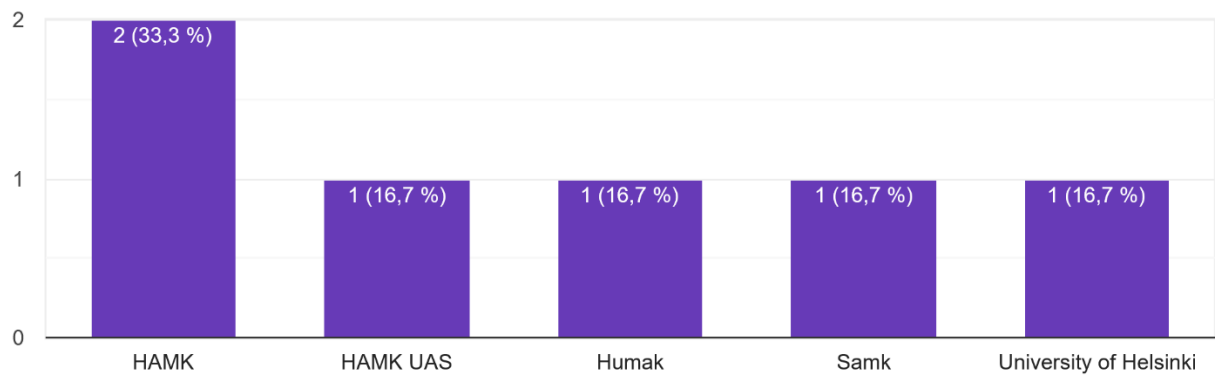


## **Appendix 1. Survey1.**

In this Thesis, it is discussed about questions number 1-8, 11, 12 and 13.

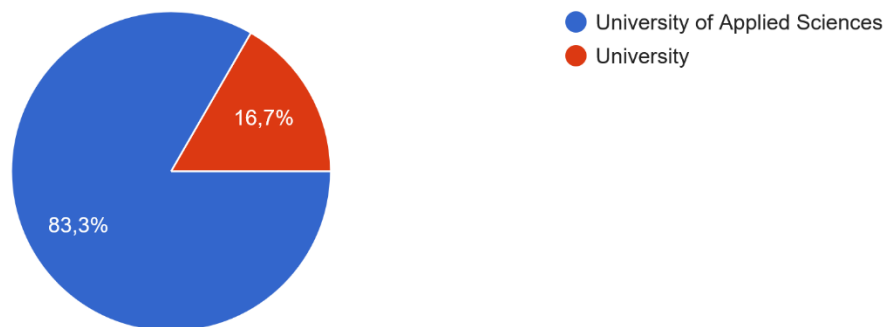
### 1. Which higher education institution do You represent?(e.g. HAMK)

6 vastausta



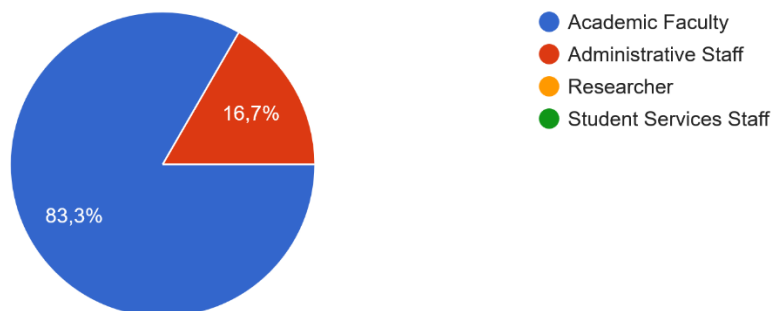
### 2. Which type of institution do You represent?

6 vastausta



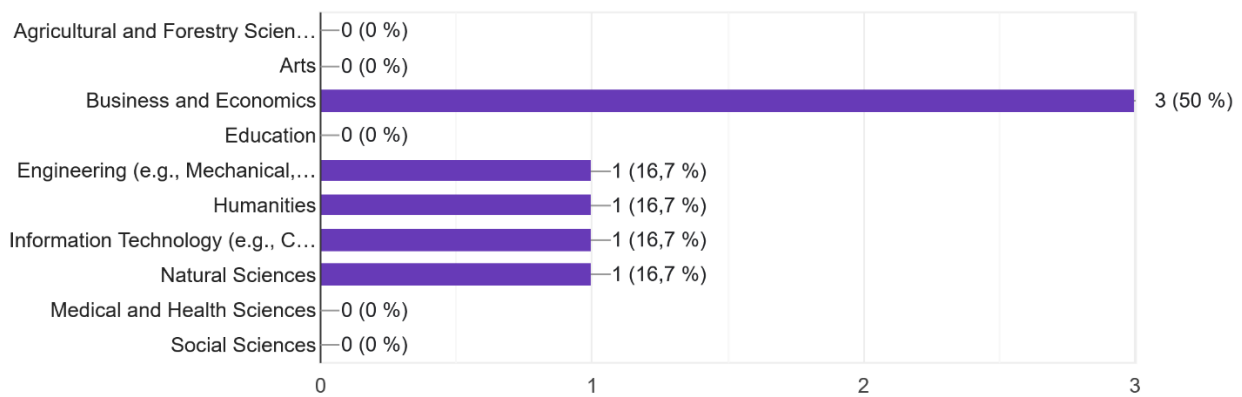
### 3. What is Your role at the institution?

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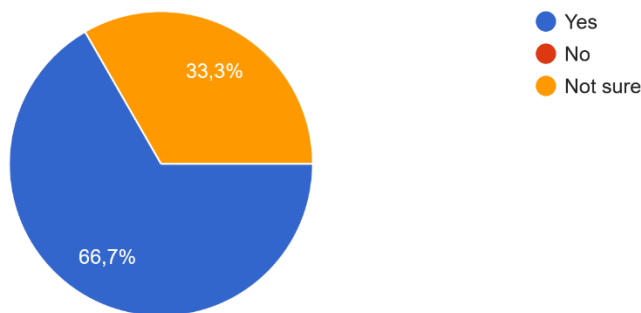
#### 4. What is Your primary field of teaching or influence?

6 vastausta



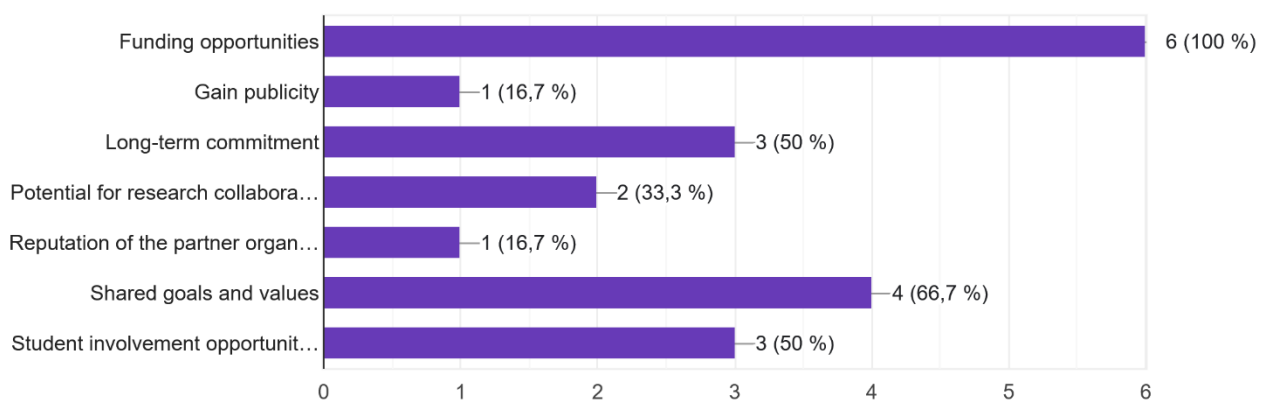
#### 5. Does Your institution have an official strategy or policy for building partnerships?

6 vastausta



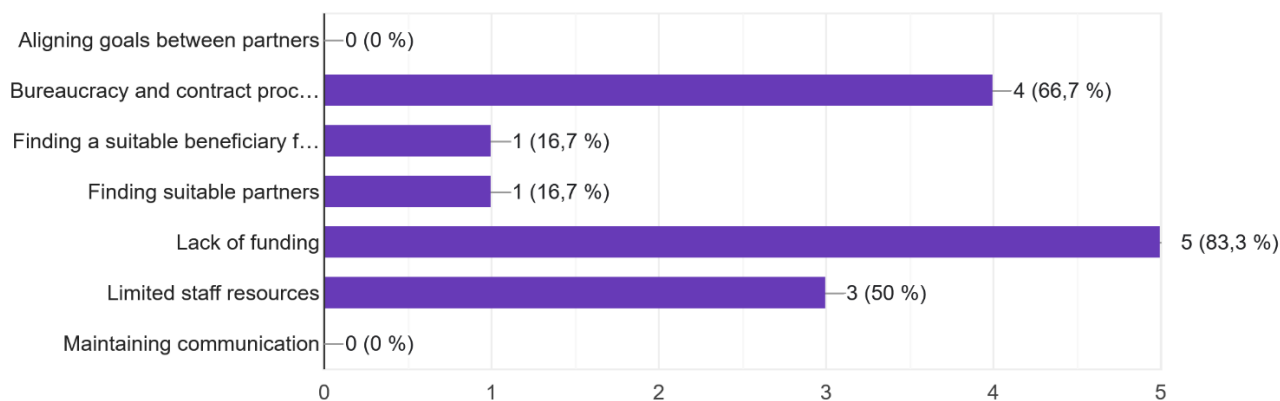
#### 6. What do You think are the most important factors when starting a new partnership in Your institution? (Please, select all that apply)

6 vastausta



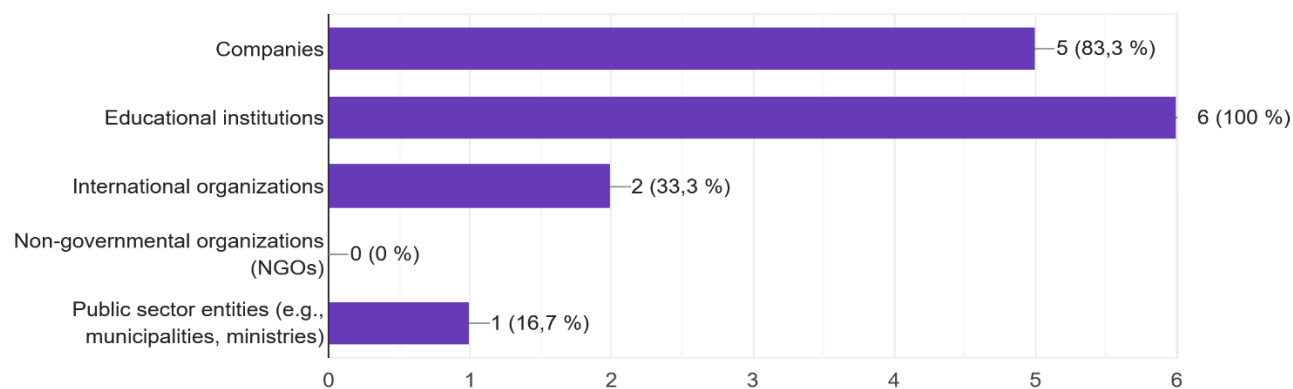
7. What do You think are the biggest challenges Your institution faces when building partnerships?  
(Please, select all that apply)

6 vastausta



8. To Your knowledge what types of organizations Your institution primarily seeks to partner with?  
(Please, select the most relevant)

6 vastausta

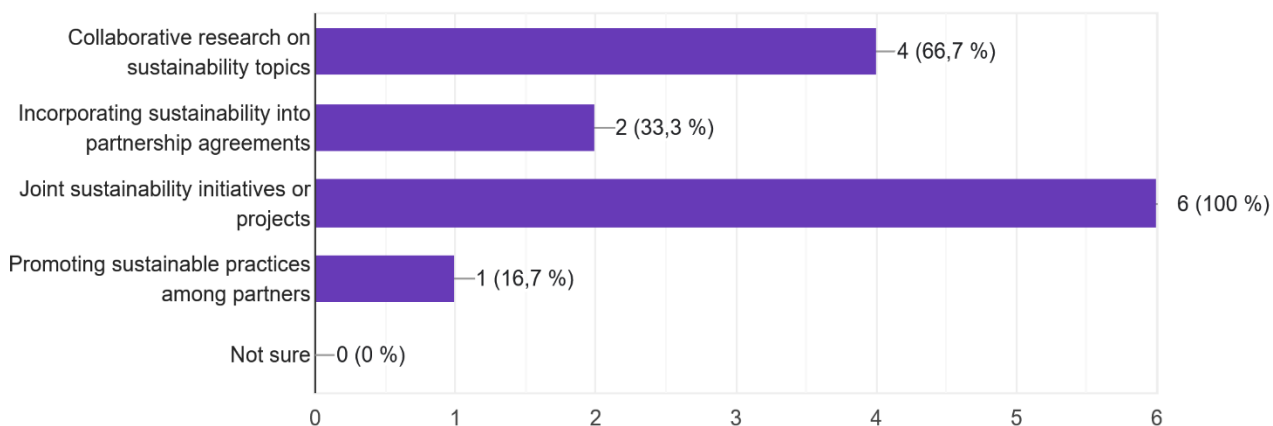


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11. In your opinion, in which kind of courses could students influence building new partnerships?

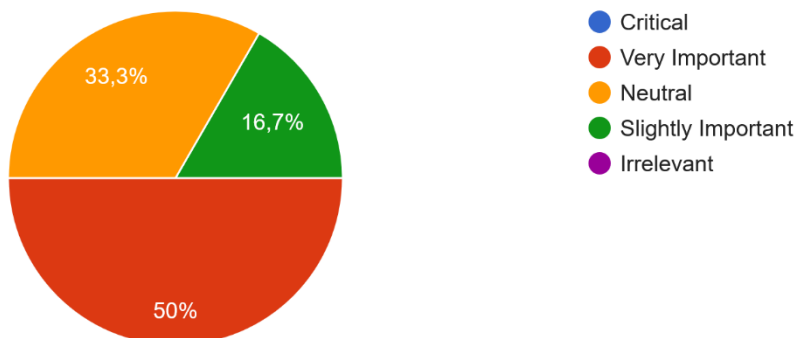
12. How does Your institution integrate sustainability principles into its partnerships? (Please, select all that apply)

6 vastausta



13. In Your opinion, how important is sustainability in your institution's criteria for selecting partners?

6 vastausta

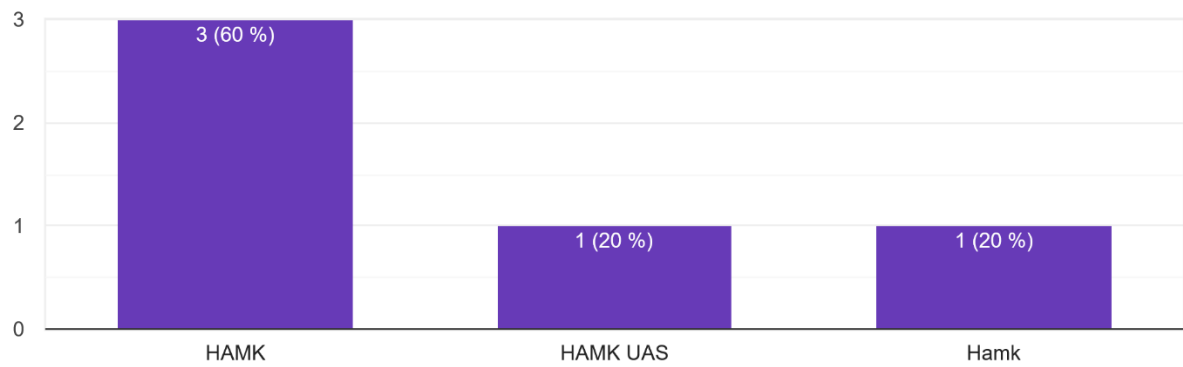


## **Appendix 2. Survey2**

In this thesis, all the questions were discussed about.

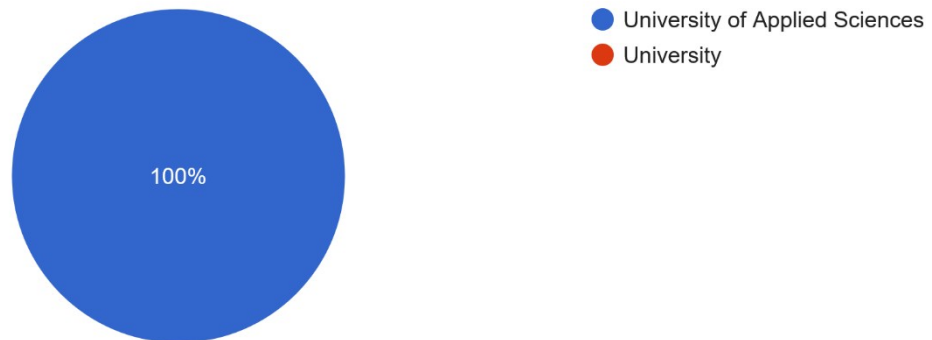
### 1. Which higher education institution do You represent? (e.g. HAMK)

5 vastausta



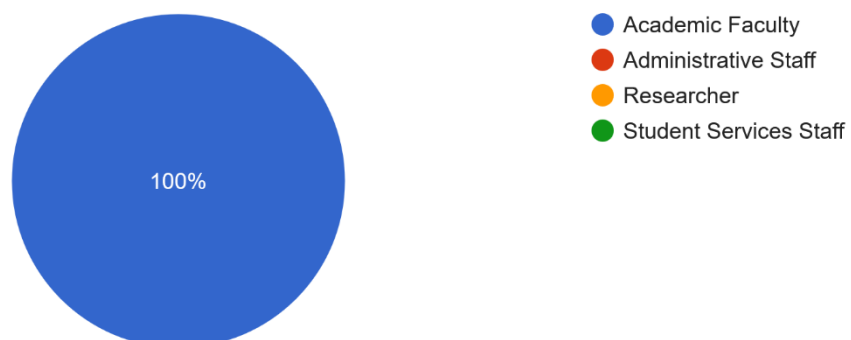
### 2. Which type of institution do You represent?

5 vastausta



### 3. What is Your role at the institution?

5 vastausta



### 4. Which factors do You think that influence the creation and development of partnerships?

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**5. How would You establish new partnerships?**

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**6. In Your opinion, what should be considered when building relationships with companies?**

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**7. Which factors should be considered when building relationships with non-governmental-organizations?**

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**8. What do You think should be considered when building relationships with other educational institution?**



# **Thesis Data Management Plan**

**Thesis title: Building Sustainable Partnerships in Higher Education: Key Factors in Partnership  
Creation**

**Thesis author: Sami Laaksonen**

## **Description of thesis research data**

The Research data includes data of two surveys, which were shared to employees of Finnish higher education institutions. The surveys were created in Google Forms - application and were shared via Microsoft Teams, email, LinkedIn and WhatsApp - applications. The surveys includes both quantitative and qualitative data. The data, which is used in thesis, is analyzed in text form

## **Management and storage of the research data**

The data will be stored and processed on the thesis author's own password-protected computer. Backups of the data will be saved in a separate folder, which will be kept apart from the files being analyzed. In addition to the thesis author, the thesis supervisor may also handle the data.

## **Processing of personal data and sensitive data**

No personal data is contained or collected in this thesis.

## **Ownership of research data**

The author holds ownership of the research data and the thesis results.

## **Further use of research data after the completion of the thesis**

The thesis author is committed to safely keeping the data for a period of one year after the thesis is approved, to enable any necessary verification of the findings. After this period, the data will be permanently and securely deleted.