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Cross-Sector Collaboration in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): A Critical Analysis of an Urban Sustainability Development Program

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Abstract: In the last years, a shift in the promotion of sustainable development in Higher Education from a focus on universities' core areas of teaching and research to "whole institution approaches" with an emphasis on the operational management of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be observed in different countries. With the aim to foster sustainability, HEIs have increasingly built cross-sectoral networks, involving not only academics but also practitioners in order to relate sustainability not only to research but also to outreach activities. Although there is an increasing body of literature evaluating such initiatives according to supposedly objective management criteria and indicators, there is still a lack of studies that investigate how the social meaning of knowledge production is (re-)negotiated in and through these partnerships. In this article, we analyze how individuals engaged in a cross-sector partnership make sense of the organizational dilemmas and ambiguities that stem from the complexity of working together across sectors in pursuit of an integrative approach to knowledge production. With the term "sector" we refer to the professional affiliations of the individuals involved in the partnerships, e.g., higher education, administration, formal education or non-governmental organizations. We focus on an illustrative cross-sectoral partnership: The Institute for Sustainable Urban Development (ISU), a collaborative project between Malmö University and Malmö's city administration to facilitate research and planning collaborations between both organizations in respect to furthering sustainable urban (re-)development and higher education in Malmö, Sweden. By employing a constant comparative approach based on Grounded Theory to analyze data collected with focus groups, semi-structured qualitative interviews and document analysis, we claim that rather than entering a partnership with predefined identities, values and sectoral or professional preferences, individuals engage in a narrative struggle about the organizational character of their partnership. Accordingly, an important avenue for investigating cross-sector partnerships is to explore the constructive dilemma of different organizing principles in a cross-sector partnership, and the way people negotiate the boundaries between them. For the cross-sector partnership studied the constructive dilemma for those engaging in it was to separate and link project, organizational and network organizing principles in their work. Implementing whole institutions approaches in order to promote sustainable development in and through HEIs, would accordingly profit much from a deeper analytical investigation of the process of navigating professional identities and organizational narrative(s) in boundary-spanning, cross-sector partnerships.

Keywords: higher education institutions (HEIs); cross-sector collaboration; multi-professional collaboration; transdisciplinary research; narrative analysis; sensemaking; whole institution approach; organizational networks; constant comparative analysis

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1. Introduction

Cross-sector partnerships of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are in high demand. They promise to produce more excellent and relevant scientific knowledge (e.g., [1], (p. 11); [2], (p. 12)), higher rates and quality of technological innovation in service provision and product development (e.g., [3–7]), more efficient use of resources through collaboration (e.g., [8–11]) and the implementation and diffusion of innovations in Higher Education such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Authors), to name just a few of the anticipated benefits. Cross-sector partnerships are based on a whole institution approach, which considers that universities operate within complex environments and that all parts of this environment need to be considered when implementing sustainability strategies [12]. Hence, when realizing cross-sector partnerships or collaboration initiatives related to sustainability issues, a great variety of actors need to be involved.

While, however, an increasing body of literature evaluates such partnerships according to supposedly objective management criteria and indicators (e.g., [13,14]), there is still a lack of studies that investigate how the social value or meaning of organizing research and education is (re-)negotiated by people engaging in these partnerships. In this article, we seek to address this gap of research by searching for answers to the question: How do individuals engaged in a cross-sector partnership make sense of the organizational dilemmas and ambiguities that stem from the complexity of working together across sectors in pursuit of an integrative approach to knowledge production?

We do so by collecting data through semi-structured qualitative interviews, focus groups as well as documents (i.e., program documents, partner program documents and literature about the immediate context of the cross-sector partnership) and applying an analytical perspective adapted from sensemaking studies into organization. Techniques of open coding and focused coding following Grounded Theory (GT) are used to analyze the data. With GT we apply a qualitative methodological technique which aims at developing theoretical approaches through analyzing qualitative data. The data analysis is conducted in different coding steps and results in the identification of overall theoretical dimensions.

We define cross-sector partnerships as initiatives that aim at improving knowledge production through the facilitation of exchange relationships and processes between actors associated with different sectors. In doing so, we focus specifically on a cross-sector partnership which involves higher education actors and which follows the overall aim to foster sustainability in higher education and urban development in Malmö, in Sweden. Hence, this study is also important for research in the field of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). In the last years, ESD has become an important field for HEIs, not least because it plays a fundamental role in achieving the 2030 Development Agenda and related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also because the concept promises an integration of sustainability into teaching and learning in educational institutions and curricula with the overall aim to empower people to "foresee, face up to and solve the problems that threaten life on our planet" (Authors). As an interdisciplinary approach, ESD supports the skills and knowledge to contribute to sustainable and ethically responsible society. Implementing ESD in HEIs involves pursuing a whole institutions approach which promotes interdisciplinary knowledge and the development of knowledge of local issues and its interrelatedness with global issues. However, our research shows that implementing sustainable development in HEIs not only requires a whole institutions approach, but that such an approach itself should more specifically focus on exploring the dynamic process of negotiating professional and organizational identities within boundary-spanning, cross-sector partnerships.

2. Background: Cross-Sector Partnerships at the Heart of Normative Debates about University Reform in the Context of Education for Sustainable Development

Today, big data, digitalization, climate change, socio-economic globalization and the fragmentation of public spheres have challenged the university's central position in research and (higher) education and its privileged position as an autonomous "republic of science" [15]. Universities are facing

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institutional change and instability, which have forced them to re-examine their identity, rules and norms [16] (p. 7). Universities must defend themselves within public debates about their role in society, how they are to be justified and made accountable, how they are legitimized as sustainable actors in society and what kind of relationship they should have with other types of institutions [16]. Cross-sector partnerships are an important arena for these debates about sense and purpose of the university as a central institution for knowledge production in late-modern societies. This is because what emerges in the discourse of cross-sector partnership or collaboration proponents is often an argument about universities needing to engage in cross-sector partnerships with other societal actors in order to become socially, politically and economically more relevant cf. [17,18]. From this perspective, cross-sector partnerships are considered as a new modus of organizing knowledge beyond the university, to co-design their research and training together with social stakeholders, in order to connect research and teaching to "real-life" experiences cf. [19] and to jointly address common societal challenges or solve current problems such as those related to sustainability. When studying cross-sector partnerships and the way they organize research and education, one has to take into consideration debates around organizing and reforming knowledge production in late-modern societies. According to an influential strand in these debates, it is crucial that the university or academy, is modernized, leading it out of the ivory tower and into the center of a vibrant, innovative 'knowledge society' [4,20–22].

While HEIs have become more and more important in the search for a more sustainable future in the last years, many universities are still tackling ESD in a compartmentalized manner, i.e., confining it to specific courses or teaching practices and treating the topic as isolated from research and practice beyond its own institution. From a whole institution approach, instead, HEIs can optimize their ESD practice and their role as agents of change by involving actors from different fields of activity and building collaborative spaces with students, academics, managers and actors from practice to critically reflect sustainability and the implementation of ESD. This is because the whole institutions approach according to D'Andrea and Gosling is an organization-based approach (as opposed to individual or cultural approaches) towards understanding and inducing change in knowledge production and allows therefore to explore research and teaching as part of a complex, inter-disciplinary institution [23]. Instead of focusing on one discipline or another, it takes the whole HEI as the unit of analysis and allows therefore for an "interdisciplinary critical enquiry" (Ibid.), which highlights not only the interaction between disciplines but also between knowledge and the social context of its production and application in an attempt to conceptualize the ongoing transformation and reform of HEIs as a complex process. At the center of this process are questions about the (re-organization) of internal boundaries between disciplines, as much as external boundaries between the HEI and its organizational environment, both of which are at stake when cross sector partnerships between university and non-academic partners are organized.

In this context, the necessity for university reform in general and organizing research and education through cross-sector partnerships in particular is derived from ideas of grassroots democracy, inclusive ways of knowing and more just and liberating modes of organizing knowledge [24–28]. These reforms imply a re-evaluation of practical knowledge, non-scientific expertise and alternative, collaborative and less formalized ways of knowing and learning [29,30]. Trans-disciplinarity, as a principle for cross-sectoral knowledge partnerships, with a broad inclusion of stakeholders from different disciplines, sectors, classes, communities and cultures is often seen as a welcome strategy to answer current calls for more direct citizen involvement in knowledge production in HEIs [22,31,32].

However, there is also a critical stance towards cross-sector partnerships that argues that through engaging more in so-called collaborative projects across sectors, formerly public organizations such as universities would face the danger of being undermined and colonized by certain social interests and economic or political power [33,34]. From this perspective, cross-sector 'stakeholder participation' are further regarded as a euphemism for clientelist and exclusionary coalitions between elite fractions of society, who marginalize lower-class stakeholders and lack public accountability and democratic representation [35–37]. For these critical voices the normative discourse on cross-sector partnerships

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provide a tool for transforming political societies and class conflicts into a pacified, collaborative knowledge economy where everything is governed by dictates of growth and innovation, and which is accordingly also linked to technocratic ideas of developing administrative and market-based solutions to fundamentally political problems [38,39].

In this article, we investigate how these different repertoires of meaning within the broader debate about cross-sector partnerships are used, understood and acted upon the main stakeholders involved in cross-sector partnerships, or more specifically, how the conflicts, tensions and dilemmas between the several strands in the debate allow them to intersubjectively construct and negotiate a tentative yet workable common ground. Thus, our aim is to better understand how a set of heterogeneous partners create shared meaning through organizing scientific and educational work. Instead of adding to the many studies of cross-sector partnerships that evaluate them according to predefined and supposedly objective evaluative criteria, this study addresses the need for a more specific understanding how social value gets defined in and through cross-sector partnerships [40]. More specifically, we research cross-sector partnerships as process-in-formation, drawing attention to the narrative dimension of organizing in which actors make sense of the organizational dilemmas and ambiguities that stem from the complexity of working together across sectors. In this way we contribute to a better understanding how professional identities and organizational narratives interconnect within a complex institutions such as a HEI, especially when it engages in cross-sector partnerships beyond its institutional boundaries for the sake of promoting an institutional as well as social transformation towards more sustainable futures. Doing so we supply a more precise application of the whole institutions approach in empirical research, as well as we contribute to a better understanding of the institutional change happening in HEIs under the banner of sustainable development.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Orientation

3.1. Constant Comparative Approach Based on Grounded Theorizing

In order to contribute to a better understanding of how individuals engaged in cross-sector partnership make sense of the organizational dilemmas and ambiguities that stem from the complexity of working together across sectors in pursuit of an integrative approach to knowledge production, this study uses a comparative approach based on Grounded Theory. More specifically, it builds upon a further development of Glaser and Strauss' ideas provided by Goldkuhl and Cronholm, who adapted grounded theorizing and their focus on continuous and mutual refinement of research interest, empirical data and existing theories, in order to arrive at a conceptual treatment of the social phenomenon of interest that is context-sensitive (or has a close fit to the data), but still relates its substantive account to the more abstract and general dimensions of formal theory ([41],p. 194).

In the constant comparative approach to grounded theorizing substantive and formal theoretical concepts are related to each other in mutually constitutive ways, so as to form what Glaser and Strauss have called a middle-range theory [42] (p. 33). The notion of middle-range theory is derived from earlier work by Karl Merton [43], who developed his concept of a theoretical middle-range to argue in favor of special theories with limited conceptual range to deal with delimited aspects of social phenomena, because they would provide fruitful hypotheses that guide further cycles of empirical investigation and theorizing, rather than suggesting theoretical closure ([43], p. 448, p. 457; cf.; [44], (p. 628)). In this way middle-range theories would contribute to an evolving body of theorizing that is grounded in empirical investigations as well as incorporating aspects of formal theory so as to formulate hypotheses and analytical frameworks in close dialogue with established theory to contribute to further cycles of observing, analyzing and theorizing (Ibid. p. 448; [45], (p. 8)).

Following this line of research, this article aims to scrutinize the meaning of important concepts related to cross-sector partnerships, such as knowledge, actors/sectors and partnership from a bottom-up or emic-to-etic (context-sensitive to general) approach to theorizing. However, in opposition to classic, inductive grounded theorizing and more in accordance with later refinement of the research approach

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by Corbin and Strauss [46], as well as Fram [47], Charmaz [48] and Goldkuhl and Cronholm [41], we do not develop central theoretical concepts in isolation from prior work, but include them as frame of reference [41].

3.2. Sensemaking

We combine the methodological approach outlined above with the analytical approach called 'sensemaking' developed by Weick [49] and others. More specifically, we apply Taylor and van Every's analytical framework to study cross-sector partnerships in the context of people trying to make sense of their organization by narrating to each other their respective roles, their relationship and modes of exchange around a joint object of value ([50], p. 46).

It is of particular interest how actors use social background knowledge (and the normative weight they carry) to narratively frame and script their communication concerning the organization of their cross-sector collaboration. In order to investigate how actors' personal identities, group relationships and broader social affiliations are linked through communicative sensemaking, we draw on Strauss's [51] conception of organizations as arenas in which actors interact with each other through referencing (and constructing) the broader social worlds they identify with. For the purpose of this study, arenas and social worlds are used as concepts to approach the cross-sector collaboration as an arena in which actors engage each other and make sense of their interaction while linking their activities to a broader social world beyond their immediate situation. However, the broader social world beyond their situation is not understood here as something that exists independently from the situated arena, but is (re-)constructed in and through the interaction and communication taking place within it ([52], p. 207)

Bringing the approach of sensemaking together with Strauss's concepts of arenas and social worlds, a cross-sector partnership can thus be perceived as an arena in which differences and similarities are affirmed, negotiated, contested and/or transformed. This is done by way of actors in the arena interactively, or communicatively negotiating the social meaning of their central objects of value, the modes in which they exchange them, the roles they take or are ascribed within this exchange and the organizational relationships that are constructed to facilitate their interaction and communication.

This meaning-making or sensemaking aspect of organizing a cross-sector partnership is approached within this study as "boundary-making". The very act of organizing a cross-sector partnership helps those involved to define what separates and links the various, conflicting dimensions of their identities (personal, interactional, collective) as part of a broader, normative social story about what separates and links us. Latour [53] called it the story of progress about that "which holds us all together" ([53]). A cross-sector partnership can then be investigated as linked to negotiating the meaning of knowledge (and related objects and concepts) within normative, as well as strategic story-telling about social progress, and the way it aims at affirming and transforming certain conceptual as much as normative boundaries between objects, subjects, modes of exchange, roles and social positions, as well as forms of organizing. In doing so, we consider boundaries as an essential part of keeping the struggle between actors ongoing, so they can keep searching for answers about that which separates and links them in organizing the cross-sector partnership and keeping on organizing it cf. [53]. This struggle about how to define the boundary and communicate about its canonicity as well as their permeability or breakability [54], is what empowers them to think and act socially, as well as to organize. This means to focus the analytical exploration on how organizing a cross-sector partnership enables those involved to draw on conceptual boundaries in and through their interaction and communication about the meaning of their partnership.

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4. Methods

4.1. Case Selection

The Institute for Sustainable Urban Development (ISU) in Malmö (Sweden) was selected to answer the research question because it presents a cooperative project between university and city administration to facilitate collaboration between both parent organizations in respect to sustainable urban development. Based on these general objectives ISU engages in various annual activities, most notably organizing networking events, international conferences, and a thesis matchmaking program in which the university students pick a topic relevant for the Malmö administration for their bachelor or master thesis. The results from these theses are then presented at a so-called Urban Strategic Forum between academics and administrators with the hope to spawn more comprehensive collaborative efforts between research, education and urban planning. Altogether, ISU appears to be an illustrative and typical case study to analyze the way, individuals engaged in cross-sector partnerships make sense of the organizational dilemmas and ambiguities that stem from the complexity of working together across sectors in pursuit of an integrative approach to knowledge production.

4.2. Data Collection

Empirical data was collected through 15 interviews with cross-sector partnership core members and their partners to observe the cross-sector partnerships as a collection of individuals and their accounts of the social reality of the cross-sector partnership. We use references to the interviews throughout the analysis and refer to the different interviewees by using an anonymized acronym for each different respondent followed by a number of the paragraph of the interview transcript we are referencing (e.g., BM P46). Furthermore, two focus groups with all the employees of the cross-sector partnership were conducted with the aim to observe the cross-sector partnership as an organizational community. Focus groups are particularly suited to "explore group characteristics and dynamics as relevant constitutive forces in the construction of meaning and the practice of social life" ([55], (p. 902); cf. [56], (p. 315)). The biggest advantage of focus groups is to enable the researcher to observe collective orientations in the process of formation, because in the group conversation individuals are forced to take positions and defend them vis-a-vis others, which allows the dynamic and interactive character of sensemaking to unfold and become visible to the researcher (cf. [57], (p. 582); cf. [58] (p. 197); [59] (p. 294)).

With respect to the data obtained from individual interviews, focus groups also serve to refine and cross-validate (or contextualize) the preliminary analysis derived from these interviews ([60], (p. 31); [61]). Thus, they address the requirement of inductive, comparative theorizing to gradually build theoretical concepts and categories from continuous iterations between data collection, analysis, validation of preliminary concepts and identification of additional data and collection sites necessary for continuing the research cycle until sufficient plausibility (or saturation) of emerging concepts is reached (cf. [48], (p. 89); [62], (p. 189)). However, the focus groups are not referenced directly within the analysis below (as opposed to the interviews), as they have been used more generally to inform the direction of the research and for validation.

Finally, document analysis was conducted of cross-sector partnership program documents, partner program documents and literature about the immediate context of the cross-sector partnership to observe the cross-sector partnership as an organizational text for internal use and outside audiences and to better understand the cross-sector partnership within its immediate spatial, organizational and temporal context. Some of the program documents have been used below in the analytical section as e.g. [63,64], which are program documents and meeting notes as we also specified in the bibliography more clearly. The document analysis of program documents was coded alongside the interviews according to the coding procedure outlined below. It served the purpose of gaining deeper insights and to validate the empirical results gained with focus groups and interview analyses.

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4.3. Data Analysis: Open Coding and Focused Coding

The coding procedure involves two coding cycles, which build on each other. These cycles are: initial or open coding and focused coding.

During the initial coding, Ryan and Bernard's technique for identifying themes ([65], (pp. 89–93); [66], (p. 139) is applied. Identifying themes and applying more descriptive (than analytical) coding can be regarded as a good starting point for theorizing, because it allows for thinking in more coherent story lines together and getting a feel for the patterns in language use [66]. Concretely this means that during the open coding cycle we look for repetitions, indigenous concepts, exogenous concepts, metaphors, analogies, transitions, linguistic connectors, dilemmas, establishment of similarity and difference, as well as silences, or the de-emphasize of certain issues. The thematic coding strategy after Ryan and Bernard are thereby used as lenses, meaning they informed where to look and what to look for, rather than resulting in direct coding [65]. For the actual coding in this initial open coding cycle, action-oriented and descriptive codes are used that are closer to the text and preferably derived from the text in vivo, so as preserve the narrative meaning of the coded fragments as much as possible, cf. [48], (p. 120). This process generated initial, descriptive codes of relatively large and coherent segments of the texts, which then were further developed conceptually within memos attached to the coded text passages.

Focused coding is as a more systematical approach to gradually build abstract categories out of the initial descriptive or open codes through constant comparison of sections of the data, codes and memos (and emerging concepts therein) with each other and across texts from interviews, focus groups and documents (cf. [67], (p. 96); [66], (p. 159)). This process especially involves assessing codes according to their conceptual value, i.e., their ability to reveal larger patterns in between statements, and to select and consolidate those that are more promising for further analysis and development in memos [48], (p. 144). It also involves consolidation of codes into groupings of codes (or categories) so as to gain deeper insight into their specific properties, as well as their relationship among each other (which then is further developed through memo writing about categories, re-coding statements on the basis of focused codes). By comparing codes and arranging them into categories, the themes and situations initially focused on are compared with each other and allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the data. In this fashion a conceptual system of categories is gradually build out of initial observations and preliminary analyses.

5. Findings

5.1. Malmö: A Story of Collaborative Transformation of an Industrial City to a Sustainable KNOWLEDGE City

The Institute for Sustainable Urban Development (ISU) was officially founded in 2007 as a joint, collaborative project between Malmö University and Malmö's city administration to facilitate research and planning collaborations between both organizations in respect to furthering the sustainable urban (re-)development of Malmö (e.g., [68]).

During the 1990s, Malmö faced a deep economic and social crisis with vast numbers of unemployed, civil unrest in its nation-wide notorious banlieues, such as Rosengard, and the rapid closing down of its traditional manufacturing industries; [69] (p. 50). The establishment of the university in the former shipyards of Malmö's central Western Harbor district was a cornerstone in the transformation strategy of the city administration (OZN P11; ID P21; DD P39) (These acronyms indicate a single interviewee, but in order to protect their identity they have been randomized. The P followed by a number indicates the paragraph in the transcript which is referenced). The city's transformation plan strategically focused on sustainable urban development, which was also ingrained in the statutes of the newly founded university. It was to concentrate its research and teaching on the conservation of nature and natural resources and, consequently, all issues relating to sustainable urban development [70].Through its university, Malmö was to become a "multicultural city of knowledge" that would be "attractive,

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green, resource and ecologically efficient" [70] and able to connect well-educated people through excellent education, innovative employment opportunities and high-quality (sustainable) housing [71] (pp. 16–17). From the beginning, the relationship between the university and city was very close, whereby the university had a clear mission to contribute to the city's development in a very collaborative, applied and vocational manner.

While Malmö's transformation into a smart and sustainable city is closely linked to the economic crisis in Sweden in the 1990s, it is also influenced by the national Swedish research policy. This changed from having a primarily academic focus to become a governance tool in the efforts to develop/transform Sweden into a "knowledge-based economy" [72], (p. 246). In 1997 a string of reforms were undertaken so as to focus Swedish universities on solving concrete social problems in collaboration with social stakeholders and to match their education to the needs of the labor market (DD P97–99; IZ P13) [72]. At the same time, the core funding of Swedish universities was cut back due to austerity policies. It was substituted through external, competitive funding through research council and sectoral funding agencies, such as the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Research (SSR) (https://strategiska.se/en/) or the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research (MISTRA) (https://www.mistra.org/en/). Both are among the largest research funding institutions in Sweden. They fund industrial doctorates, applied research centers at universities and collaborative networks between universities, companies, public agencies and other stakeholders to collaboratively engage in research areas considered of strategic importance for "Sweden's future competitiveness" and its "good living environment", as well as promote opportunities for industrial application of research (SSF, strategiska.se; MISTRA, mistra.org).

5.2. From "Center" to "Institute": Continuously Institutionalizing Collaboration between University and Administration

The history and development of ISU is closely connected to the development of Malmö's transformation story. The idea to institutionalize a collaboration between city administration and university originated with the international exhibition for sustainable housing Bo01 (The name of the exhibition is derived from "Bo", the Swedish word for "to dwell" and the year of its opening 2001 (Austin 2013)) in Western Harbor in 2001–2002 (DD P17, BM P50). This led to the implementation of a project called "Urban Ecological Knowledge and Development Center in Malmö" (called SEKUM) in 2003. Its objective was "to promote sustainable urban development from a local, regional and global perspective as well as to increase cooperation between the different parties [i.e., city administration and university]" ([70] own translation). Its vision was to "gradually develop into a powerful hub and platform for cooperation between industry, universities and colleges, public organizations and other organizations" [70].

This grander vision of facilitating collaboration for making Malmö a smart, successful and sustainable city was accompanied by high hopes for the opportunities that such a center could offer the parties involved. In an internal document [73] it was discussed how SEKUM would enable the city to get excellent knowledge for their city planning (through commissioned theses and later an "Industrial PhD" in cooperation with Malmö University). It would enable the university to increase the quantity of their externally funded research projects, which in turn would increase the quality and relevance of Malmö University College's research and training. It was further hoped that in the longer run SEKUM would gradually develop from a temporary joint project by city administration and the university into a hub and think tank for sustainability in theory and practice. It would not only be financed externally (through selling services, raising membership fees and collecting research funds), but would simultaneously create, finance or support specific development projects by the Malmö administration as well as produce excellent (marketable) research and training about sustainable urban development (Ibid.). After a start-up project phase, it was anticipated that SEKUM would have made major leeway towards the long-term goal of being an independently financed organization that maintained itself by attracting external funding, by providing paid-for training courses and study

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trips [73], and by receiving membership fees from the private sectors that would pay for being included in the network [63].

Yet none of these funding models materialized within the initial set-up period of SEKUM (2003–2005)—no external income was generated at all, according to the budgets of 2003–2005. Thus, the premise for continuing SEKUM within a new framework as the Institute for Sustainable Urban Development was to shift operations from the initial "joint project" towards an "association" (förening) which would be able to continue and scale up SEKUM's activities in the long term [74]. This meant on the one hand that the new institute or association would (gradually) cease to be primarily an internal project between city administration and university and instead open up to outside actors, organizations and businesses active in the field of urban sustainable development. The vision guiding this envisaged change was for ISU to become a "nationally and internationally leading competence center for sustainability, and a key player for the transformation of urban areas in the region" [63]. This would also mean that, instead of being dependent on continuous financing from its founding organizations, it would finance itself through membership fees and selling services [63]. The organizational example that was often mentioned as the future ideal for the new institute was MINC (Malmö Incubator), which was (and still is) a city-run, self-financed but non-profit "hub for startups and entrepreneurs". In later phases of the discussion about the new institute, however, a new strategy emerged that shifted significantly away from a commercially successful incubator with a broad network of actors from the business sector toward "an institution of learning and research for sustainable urban development" [75] that would be financed through public funds (such as EU INTERREG Program) and research grants.

Despite this suggested organizational change, the Institute started gradually in 2006 (and was officially founded in 2007) in the same organizational framework that SEKUM operated in, i.e., as a collaborative project between Malmö City and Malmö University [76], (p. 5)—an arrangement that remained in place until the time of the field research in 2014.

5.3. Organizing the Cross-Sector Partnership

From its inauguration ISU has struggled to define its structural framework. On the one hand, it is organized as a project, meaning it does not have "its own organizational number" (BM P25; LI P42). As joint project without legal entity and own organizational status, i.e., tax number, ISU does not have its own budget, staff or office. Instead ISU's staff and accounting is located at the university's department for Innovation and Development ([68] (p. 15); BM P25–27). This does not mean that the department has any influence on the strategic steering and decision-making within ISU: the department is more or less an administrative "paper boss" (BM P26). The ISU Board, consisting of the heads of university and city departments (six in total, three from department in the city administration and three from university departments) and headed by a chairwoman (linked to the central university administration), decide on ISU's focus and activities. This arrangement is based on the joint partnership agreement that was renewed in 2006 for 5 years, and since then on a 3-year basis (cf. [76,77]). ISU's executive director develops a yearly report on its activities of the current and a plan for the next year (BM P13). Its project structure is congruent with the goal of ISU to facilitate bilateral collaborations between the partner organizations, as is also its employment structure of not having its own employees—except of an executive director. Its other staff, the four part-time positions of the so-called "ISU boundary agents", is employed through ISU funds at their home department in either the university or city administration.

The ISU Board is, according to the partnership agreements, the main steering body of ISU. It meets approximately once a month (ONG P17) and its function is to develop ISU's overall strategic program and decide what kind of concrete activities and projects should be focused on in the annual plan, and how accordingly the annual budget of ISU should be allocated (Ibid.; ID P11). Another important task of the board members is to "anchor" the institute in their respective department in either city administration or university (Ibid.). This task is not clearly defined, but for some of the board members it means to involve ISU within specific projects of their departments relating to sustainable urban development (LL P33), while other board members interpret this role more in the sense of making sure

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that ISU works in a way that fits with the work tasks and style of the department. In a more general way, though, this task of “anchoring” in their respective departments also simply means for the heads of departments to build a tighter network among themselves, to meet regularly as the ISU Board and to exchange information about what the departments are working on or what kind of project funds they are applying for so as to increase opportunities for cooperation between the departments (ONG P25). In this way ISU forms as a “neutral area” in between the departments:

> “And ISU is, I think regarded by us (. . .) as a rather neutral area. So, if in the Board we often say: ‘Let’s leave this to ISU’, I think we are at the same time saying that this is a question of common interest and no one has the leading part, not the university, nor the city (. . .)”. (DD P29)

However, this quote also sheds light on the difficulty of the Board to assume a leadership position in respect to ISU, when their perspective is to have it as their “neutral meeting ground” and leave things of common interest to ISU, where no one of the city or the university would take the role of “the leading part”. At the same time, leaving things of common interest to ISU suggests that indeed ISU would be more than a neutral area, but would at the simultaneously be an entity of its own, that could take over and take the lead on the issues of common interest to the heads of departments. However, this attitude of leaving things to be developed by ISU conflicts with the strategic leadership role of the board. For example, the executive director stated concerning the Board’s idea to develop the position of the “boundary agent” within ISU:

> “I was not taking part of bringing forward the boundary agent concept. It was put on my lap and I had to take care of it, but I didn’t like the framework or the lack of framework I should say. But I should just take care of it and I should just fix it. The Board was like: ‘But you are the director, you should do this ’—’Yes, but what did you want?’—And nobody was there either. (. . .) I should just fix it and then the boundary agents, that have been assigned, also come to me and ask: ‘What are we gonna do? ’—’I don’t know what you should do’”. (BM P237)

This problem concerning a strategic decision of the board that subsequently no one took responsibility for, so as to ‘leave it to ISU’ is thus coupled with pressure on the part of the director and the boundary agents to fix it, to make it work, without exactly knowing what the board’s criteria are for determining whether something works or not. On the one hand the vague leadership emanating on the board does create space for the boundary agents to develop their own cross-organizational team. As one boundary agent recalls:

> “I think we, when we started this project, the purpose was kind of vague, what we were supposed to do. So, we developed that purpose ourselves, after trying, discussing, thinking about it a lot in our group. And we have a really interesting collaboration and a good collaboration in this boundary agent group, which I think makes us a very strong entity.”. (IR P36)

Thus, one could say, because of the lack of leadership and organizational coherence within ISU, the boundary agents were free to develop their collaboration and succeeded to establish a close group identity and professional network across the different sectors and organizations. However, as they are also considered ISU employees they are simultaneously confronted with the expectation to deliver on ISU’s envisaged project outcomes as specified in the annual partnership agreement and ISU project plan. The two boundary agents from the city administration were particularly frustrated and admitted that they recently considered stopping to work with ISU:

> “I was considering if I want to continue already. This is mainly where I felt there was no common picture. We—as in [the director] as one unit, the steering board as one unit, the boundary agents as one unit—have no common idea, vision, what do we want to do with

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ISU, how do we get there? (. . .) It has happened that from the steering committee's side suddenly it's like: 'No, this is not at all what you're supposed to do!' And then we do not get an explanation what is it they expect from us". (QY P404)

The organizational dilemma demonstrated in this quotation constructs ISU as a self-organizing network of professionals, which, at the same time, is subjected to implicit expectations to produce concrete project outcomes. This dilemma is further expressed by the executive director, when she describes her role as being required to lead without having the authority to do so:

"I would like to become better in how to lead without being a boss. Because, I have to lead but when you are not somebody's boss, it is extremely difficult to lead and to get the person to do something that you want them to do when you are not their boss and you actually don't have anything to say about them, but it is a part of your work task to lead". (BM P172)

This dilemma of ISU being a somewhat leaderless initiative is closely linked to the contradictory identity of ISU being a neutral meeting and networking place between professionals, a tightly budgeted project expected to produce immediately beneficial results for the partner organizations, and a viable organizational entity with clear mission and coherent boundaries. This dilemma culminates in the position of the director, who was specifically chosen by the board because she is considered a networker, rather than a leader:

"You can also see how ISU was working depending on who has been the director of ISU. For example, the first we had this woman [who] was very much involved in building ISU as a sort of independent institution (. . .) that was more or less independent of these networks inside the university and city administration. It had a life of its own. (. . .) But on the other hand, we had an organization that from an organizational point of view was working quite well. But no one—even I, who was sitting in the board—knew what was going on. And then we changed the director, so now we have a director with more broker competences (. . .). She has a very good competence to work in networks, to connect different people with each other and so on". (ONG P96–98)

However, one of the boundary agents states that for him a fundamental problem with ISU is that the director is neither "strongly anchored in the University, nor in the city. She is to some extend free-floating" (JA P129). Although the boundary agents were supposed to anchor ISU more to its parent organizations, they do not consider themselves part of ISU as an organization. Instead, they have developed their group identity in opposition to the organizational identity of ISU and the position of its director:

"The group [of the boundary agents] is very strong, and [the director] is kind of lonely because she's the only one sitting, working in ISU. And we are connected to ISU but we are not working inside of ISU, and I think that also makes it a bit difficult". (IR P36)

The boundary agent's idea of ISU is very much constructed in opposition of the "lonely" and detached director and the organization she stands for. Their vision is that in the longer-term there would be more boundary agents in both organizations and their contact would be more informal and established within their respective organization (IZ P91; RZ). So, in the long-term there would be no need for something like a formal organization like ISU to organize the links between city administration and university. Instead the issues currently linked with and to some degree outsourced to ISU—collaboration across organizational boundaries in order to make Malmö more sustainable—would be more embedded within the values of the parent organization as such, meaning every employee would be considered as a kind of boundary agent and allowed to spend a substantial amount of their work time outside the boundaries of their home organization, to explore ways on how they can work together in order to push for a more sustainable Malmö (IZ P91, P97; QY P24). As one of the boundary agents from the university states:

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> "I see ISU and all the activities that ISU does as instruments to make people to get together and talk, to establish links and mutual interests and even friendships and that those connections in themselves should work in the future. So, one of the goals of ISU should be, I don't know if that would happen, but to make itself superfluous in a way, that it shouldn't have to be, because connections are already there.". (JA P85)

These remarks in a way show another side of the ISU dilemma between project, organization and network. On the one hand, from the expressed free-floating attitude the ISU process is perceived as horizontal, creative and leaderless. On the other hand, there are strong expectations that ISU should have a clear organizational profile, as well directly deliver concrete project results. This directly contradicts the ideal of ISU to be a place of networking, open conversations and informal communion, where common projects and benefits would emerge effortlessly and naturally, without formal planning and tight performance control. A positive ideal of ISU then is linked to a good, communal, almost familiar climate among the board members (horizontally linking with fellow heads of departments on their professional level), as well as among the boundary agents (horizontally linking with fellow colleagues on their professional level). The negative picture of ISU is that of an organization that is failing as its parts are not vertically integrated. For most interview partners, this image is embodied by the position of the director, who is supposed to lead, while not having the mandate to do so, and should thus lead without being a leader. For others this is embodied in the ISU Board, which does not properly function as a steering body and head of ISU as an organization but is rather a horizontal meeting and networking place for ISUs external partners (the departments of city administration and university).

Both of these perspectives might suggest that ISU in an ironical way is fulfilling its task of creating horizontal links between the mother organizations, because it is failing as an organization and in a way is not able to vertically integrate internally and create boundaries against the organizational outside. Yet, there is a sense of frustration about the lack of forward movement and a clear vision, which is linked to ISU being partly considered and presented as an issue organization and institute pushing forward sustainable urban development in Malmö and expected to work as an independent actor that can be developed by those professionally responsible. At the same time, however, those professionally responsible for ISU (i.e., especially the executive director, but also the boundary agents) do not feel they have the freedom or mandate to do so. They seem to be frustrated by feeling required to lead and develop, while also being expected to adhere and follow the board, which in turn assumes a leadership position without providing the coherent vision or concrete organizational leadership needed, but instead merely exchanges information and loosely defines areas of common interest that then should be developed by ISU (cf. DD P29 above).

5.4. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Fuzzy Profile between Project, Organization and Network

The advantage of such an undetermined structure is perceived by the interviewees to lie in its flexibility and responsiveness, which would allow ISU to adapt its activities to the current and changing needs of the departments, so as to seize on emerging opportunities for collaboration in a timely manner (ISU 2014a; IR P171). However, the disadvantage linked with this structure is described in terms of ISU being governed in an ad-hoc way without clearly formulated organizational boundaries and a committed long-term vision [77]. Instead, as the executive director of ISU states, the quick turn-around of departmental employees being partly financed via ISU and the yearly discussions about what the needs of the departments are leads to a constant, self-referential and inward-looking debate about what to do with ISU and to work on how to work together instead of actually moving forward as an organization (BM P237).

Linked with this perception of pointless debates and the need to constantly explain what ISU is, should or should not do, is a long-standing and widespread sentiment that ISU lacks a clear profile, that it is a "container" or "archipelago" of projects of the heads of departments in the ISU Board. These would use ISU to address their short-term issues and departmental interests, instead of building a

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long-term vision and focus for the organizational profile of the institute (LI P42; LI P110). In 2011, an outside evaluator of ISU concluded in his report:

> "There is also a strong belief that the ISU's profile has been too fuzzy. It has not been sufficiently clear what ISU stands for and what role it should play. Some say that this is linked to ISU having become too inward-looking. The institute has marketed itself badly. Another factor may be that the concept of an institute creates expectations for something bigger than what you can live up to my opinion". ([76]-own translation)

This statement highlights the disadvantages of ISU being run as an internal collaborative project, but simultaneously forming (or posing) as a somewhat independent institute, an independent issue organization with a focus on advancing knowledge on sustainable urban development. The disadvantage of this is, as the evaluator stated, too high or even false expectations about what ISU can or should do, resulting in a fuzzy profile, thematic inconsistencies and an organizational over-stretch [78]. An interviewee expresses this dilemma in a similar way within the context of ISU's work in respect to sustainable urban development:

> "I mean, sustainable urban development, it's a huge area and I think it's important for ISU to have a red thread in what we are doing, because it's easy that you try to work with everything within this area and then nothing will be done of relevance. (. . .) You have to be very strict on what you're doing. So, you have to learn to say: 'No, ISU can't do this. We are focusing on these questions and will be doing so for another year', or something like that". (DD P79–81)

Thus, in developing its profile, a thematic focus on sustainable urban development would be necessary. This would imply strict rules about the type of projects accepted and carried out by ISU. This kind of approach would create a clearer profile as a thematic institute. Put the other way around, if ISU were not a temporary project but could operate as an institute, it would be easier to develop such a focus, to reject some demands and expectations by being able to say more clearly what ISU stands for in terms of sustainable urban development (LZLZ P197–202). However, such an approach is opposed to the idea of ISU working as an open, inclusive and flexible meeting place for potential collaborators and their project ideas and accordingly, when asked how exactly ISU could better manage expectations, one interviewee answers:

> "I don't think you can manage the expectations, actually, because people see us as a kind of a meeting place—'Can't this be something for ISU?', etc.—not realizing that the personal resources are very short. And so, we have a discussion within the board almost every meeting saying: 'Are we doing the right things and how does this new task connect to the others? Is it something ISU should be doing or is it something we could leave to other partners?". (DD P85)

Managing external expectations (and saying 'no' to external audiences or stakeholders) is described by the interview partner as running counter to ISU's image as a meeting place for professional networking. Rather than confronting outside partners and rejecting their ideas, the Board internally argues whether this is something ISU should engage in, and if not, transfer (or divert) it to other partners in its network. In any case, here emphasis is placed in avoiding rejection so as to not threaten ISU's (beneficial) image as an open, inclusive meeting place. However, in the earlier statement by the chairwoman above, being strict and saying no was simultaneously seen as a necessary requirement of ISU being able to navigate the vast thematic field of sustainable urban development coherently and efficiently. The two statements exemplify the ambiguity between ISU as an institute or issue organization and ISU as an open meeting place for projects: The organization should be strict and also reclusive, yet, gain profile and direction, while the meeting place should not manage external expectation, yet rely on its network to transfer project ideas that do not fit to other partners, so as to not lose focus and concentrate on what ISU should actually stand for.

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The problem of inconsistently labeling a collaborative project as an institute and raising expectations can also be positively understood in the sense that you appear (in the eyes of external audiences especially) to have something bigger, more attractive, capable and qualitatively different (the institute) than what you actually paid for (a project). For example, ISU figures as an independent, neutral host or additional guest for workshops, network events and conferences organized by the university or city administration and is included as a separate entity in university or city administration projects or administrative publications (BM P164). When ISU disseminates information about urban development projects in Malmö, these seem to be coming from a more independent source than if it were issued by the city administration itself. Thus, it might not be an accident or necessarily a sign of weak leadership that ISU remains a hybrid between project and organization, as the blurred boundaries also produce benefits. To borrow a term from psychology, these could be called "secondary gains", i.e., short-term, but specific benefits that accrue from not overcoming a conflict, contradiction or problem. As the executive director sums up the enormous list of adjacent university or administrative projects ISU is engaged in:

> "We are valuable because we are neutral. We are not the city and we are not the university, so therefore we are not dangerous or a competitor. (. . .) We are just a neutral platform and we give away so much for free. We are like a consultant firm they don't have to pay". (BM P164–166)

Being engaged in a multitude of tasks and projects links to the value ISU has by being a "container" for all kinds of projects that the university and the city are involved in. Its special value is also connected to the neutral "institute brand" it wears that can be easily applied to other projects and add the value of sustainability like it did to the city's "The Line" (This project is organized by the city to show Malmö as an innovative business environment and various initiatives, start-up and internet companies connected to sharing-based economic models located along a pedestrian and cycle path linking Malmö center and Western Harbor) with its business focus. The many projects and tasks ISU is involved in and the way its funds and resources are re-directed back to the departments at university and city or adjacent projects of the city and university departments, also serve to "neutralize" ISU as a danger or competitor. Since ISU cannot use funds to build up an independent organization, it remains readily available for utilization as a free consultancy, available brand and service provider to the various endeavors of the parent organizations. As an interviewee from the city administration (and ISU Board) states:

> "You could say the main organization or mother organizations they want, they need this organization between, and they want it to be effective and have a high profile, but not too effective and not too high profile. Because suddenly it might be competing with the mother organizations, so it's a balance, always a balance for these types of cross board organizations. And they will always be questioned in the aims and goals and results. That is, I think, built in to the logic in itself". (ID P65)

By keeping ISU, a project, the partners ensure control to question, recalibrate and adjust aims and goals through temporary agreements and part-time employment contracts of departmental employees (rather than having an institute with its own employees). They thereby can still enjoy the benefits of a (seemingly) effective organization that can be used to enhance the profile of the mother organizations endeavors, activities, events. However, the interviewee is also aware that such an approach does inhibit the long-term development of the initiative and curbs the motivation of those working with it:

> "When you are a group of people you have to work with your own identity, that's natural. But it very fast becomes a risk to become an irritation for the mother organizations. (. . .) This is a very important question, I think: How do you secure the commitment of the mother organizations and support from the mother organizations and at the same time, develop the inner life of this organization that it can keep the people that are working here and it gets a known profile and momentum?". (ID P77)

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What in the first quote by this interviewee was expressed in terms of balancing, might as well be understood in terms of a contradictory expectation: To fulfill the leadership's needs for control and flexible utilization of ISU as a project, while also developing a corporate identity, a long-term strategy, so as to generate the direction and momentum necessary for the development of an independent organizational life of ISU. However, instead of dissolving this contradiction it could also be managed by separating outside appearance from inside substance: having the outside appearance as an (independent, high profile) institute on sustainable urban development, while being internally organized (controlled and bound) as a project for facilitating commitment and collaboration between two parent organizations. Such a concept could be visualized as in Figure 1:

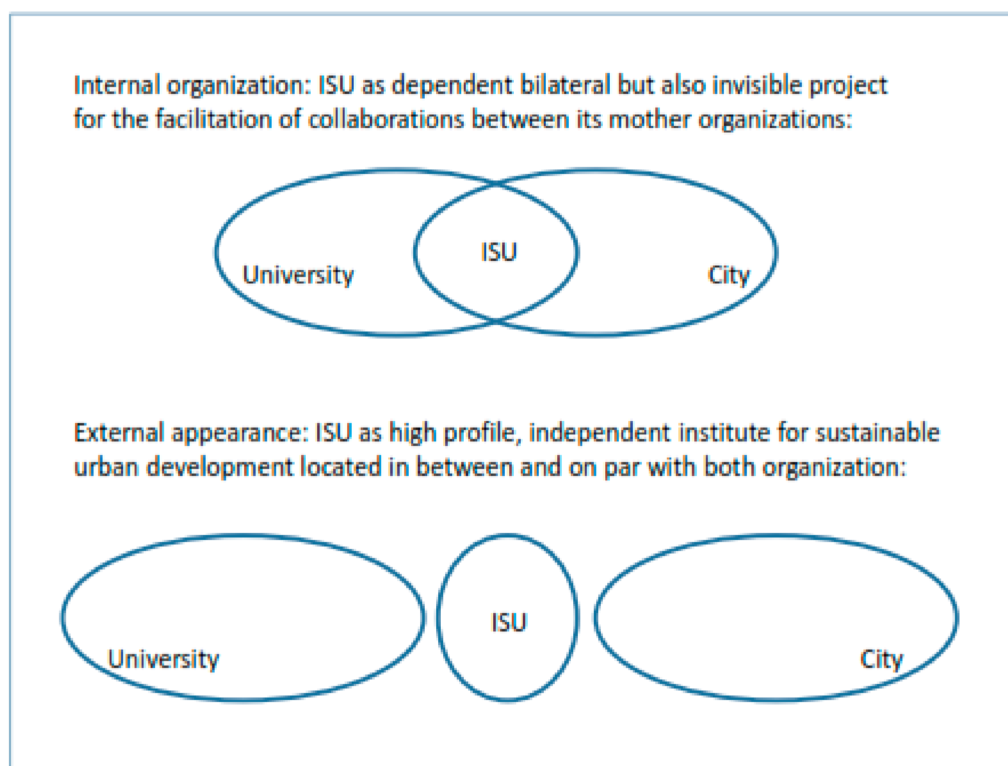

Figure 1. Differing Internal and External Understandings of ISU Structure (Source: own illustration based on interviews and [76]).

Many interviewees point out that the first model is the way ISU should work and the latter would show what should not happen, namely the emergence of an organization detached from its mother organizations and located in between both, blocking their direct interaction or competing with them (ID, ONG, OZM, LI). However, at the same time these two models represent the simultaneousness of ISU's internal project and networking dimension and the external institute dimension of ISU.

5.5. Employing the Fuzzy Profile by Focusing on Learning and Critical Thinking—The Urban Research Day and the Thesis Program/Urban Strategic Forum

Now we want to highlight the ISU's activities or interventions that seem fruitful for developing the different organizational identities of the initiative separately but in concert. First, an annual research conference, Urban Research Day. Here ISU acts as an independent host organization for an event where university academics, students and city administrators meet and discuss sustainable urban development with external experts and interested publics. The other intervention is a combination of a project-oriented cross-organizational workshop format (the so-called Urban Strategic Forum) and a networking format developed by the boundary agents (a thesis match-making program). The first kind of activity develops ISU's external identity as an independent institute, organization or brand, pushing

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forward the critical debate on sustainable urban development, while also linking the cross-sector partnership to the greater transformation story of Malmö. The other two activities aim at developing ISU's internal dimension by producing tailor-made knowledge and collaborative projects through establishing a learning and training network spanning across university and administration.

First, an important aspect of the open, more public meeting format of the conference is that it enables ISU to get known among relevant audiences outside the confines of its mother organizations by connecting with Malmö's prestigious transformation. This "brand development" is relevant when it comes to the so-called Urban Research Day, which is organized partly by the university and partly by the city (with help by the ISU director), but with ISU figuring as the principal organizer and host. It is an annual, international conference, organized at the end of each year, the last time (before the field research phase) in December 2013, where the topic was "Culture and Sustainable Urban Development" [78].

Another important aspect of this conference was, that it opened up the issue of sustainable urban development for critical discussion (LL 19). LGQ explains that this Urban Research Day brought about some "really interesting conflicts with the planning department" (LGQ P91) in the city. According to the interview partners this resulted from ISU organizing this event in an open way, inviting critical voices to confront the city administrators and their economic growth-focused "planning culture". They thereby made visible that people involved in the collaborative process of planning a certain industrial area in Malmö had "totally different agendas and objectives" (LGQ P98). She concludes that the incident at the Urban Research Day indicates that one of ISU's important tasks is to be "very open-minded when it comes to allowing for different interpretations and inviting different kinds of people into the debate and into this space that ISU is" (LGQ P100). This would allow conflicts to become visible, which in turn is a necessary prerequisite: "(...) for us to develop a creative collaboration. Since we need to accept that we have different agendas, if not, sustainability will remain an empty signifier that we can fill with whatever." (LGQ P104).

The tense panel on the Urban Research Day was underscored by many critical questions about gentrification (especially from students, LL P19). It not only triggered subsequent inclusion of the cultural department of the city in the collaborative project of the planning department in that Malmö area to be redeveloped (P19), but also led many in the audience to consider this debate as highly relevant and important. Since ISU was organizing it, it sparked interest in its work and in sustainable urban development as a whole. LGQ concludes:

> "Targeting these actors that are not normally included in this process, in that way, ISU has kind of provided a parallel, to a certain extent, to the administrative space provided by the municipality. Or, to the academic spaces provided by the university. So, a kind of middle ground. And inviting non-expected agents into this dialogue, it's become political". (LGQ P120)

She highlights the importance of ISU acting as an independent host. This conception is linked with the purpose, identified above, of ISU as an actual, issue-focused institute. Later on, she links this with the issue of whether ISU should be understood as working more informally on building up networks or provide a formal framework and concrete inputs for the creation of joint projects:

> "It is extremely key I think, to have these kinds of open platforms, which are not instrumentally targeted towards funding, towards specific goals, or specific impact criteria, whatever. ISU should be much more open. And it's important because we don't know what will be the issues in two years' time. And we need these platforms where we can come together and not react to other people's preformulated questions and so on, but actually formulate our own questions.". (LGQ P138)

"Open" here also means public as opposed to the spaces behind closed doors as an important countermeasure against insider networks, instrumental logics and short-sighted perspectives. However,

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for her coming together in an open way also means conflict and accordingly ISU should continue these kind of open public spaces "for encounters where consensus is not already the natural goal, but where there is also room for controversy and debate" (LGQ P46). By inviting unexpected voices and the public, conflicts bring out surprising insights and open up new perspectives on the overall ambition of Malmö's transformation and its story of being a pioneer in sustainable urban development. This in turn strengthens ISU's public profile as a credible, internationally recognized institute and capable force within the field. In the end, though, as LL argued, it was the tangible political scandal of having the growth-focused planning culture of the city's planning department 'exposed' on the ISU stage, which expanded the collaboration effort in the redevelopment area, to include from then on, also the cultural department of the city, as a more competent partner for those issues related to culture as a driving force for sustainable urban development. However, it also raised the interest of administrative and academic staff formerly disinterested in the work of ISU and contributed to ISU's organizational development, because only afterwards the cultural departments of the city and university were systematically included in the ISU board and boundary agent program.

Second, complementing the public conference format raising ISU's profile as an institute are those more internal and cross-organizational intervention formats organized by the boundary agents, i.e., the partner thesis matchmaking and the Urban Strategic Forum. They are organized together with the city departments around key sustainable urban development issues for the city departments. The boundary agents assembled a list of 50 different topics from which students could choose their bachelor or master thesis topic, e.g., how to make Malmö's neighborhoods denser and more mixed-use (BM P61; IZ P29, P31). Subsequently, the boundary agents facilitated contacts and supported the process of the thesis program, meaning they linked students, their supervisors at the university and the city administrators whose questions or issues they explore. In the first year this process led to 20 theses produced by student teams consisting of 50 students ([68]; BM P61). By "matching" the institutions, tutors and students with administrators who have issues in need of research one idea is to produce direct results for the city's planning projects (IZ P37). However, an important objective of this program is to more substantially bring in the academic supervisors of the students into the network between students and administrators. Here the idea is to use the students as a low-threshold and personal way to connect university and city professionals and inspire larger collaborative research projects that could possibly lead to joint applications for research funds and better educational formats for the graduates of Malmö University ((DD P74; IZ P21; LI P18; BM P71). In a way, the student work is seen as a subtle, indirect way to better engage academics with the practical problems of the city administration via education and training (rather than trying to instigate senior research projects directly).

The thesis program was then linked to an Urban Strategic Forum, which is a bi-annual, formal meeting format between university researchers and city administrators introduced in 2012 with the aim to facilitate the identification of common research/planning issues so as contribute to the joint development of projects and funding proposals [79]. The particular Forum in which a selection of student theses was presented was generally lauded (LGQ P76), even called "the best Forum we had" (ONG P66, cf. IR P88).

Seven working groups formed on topics such as "fairer access to the city" or "the dense, green and healthy city" [80]. There is a general hope that these working groups will grow gradually and either directly produce collaborative projects or at least more binding and continuous relationships among researchers and city administrators. Several of those involved describe the key for process as linking the practice and research through setting up encounters between the institutions on a "more grassroots level, between students and civil servants" (LGQ P73), to "use the students as a way to connect" (LI P104), to create personal connections, "to simply meet face-to-face" (BO P125) so as to show that "behind every subject there is a person on either side" (IZ P29).

However, there is a feeling that these working groups would need to be continuously facilitated and supported by ISU so as to ensure that they remain "alive" (BO P108; cf. IR P81). With ISU's limited resources, this is seen as a big challenge. A more realistic assumption might be that ISU will not be

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able to "follow up on the working group, it has to live by itself" (BM P79). In this respect several interviewees also mention that even though the working groups might not result in formal projects and applications, they would still consider them a success, in that they contributed to establish informal, personal connections between researchers and administrators. Furthermore, they got to know that there is someone on the other side who is also working on the same issues (BO P108). Here one could argue, that ISU's focus on creating informal connections is due to its limited organizational capacity to more substantially control and lead the process that is supposed to result in concrete collaboration results and projects. It, however, also links to ISU's problem to clearly show its organizational impact as the relationships they instigate must live (or die) by themselves, and if they indeed at some later point in time would yield any concrete project results, these would not easily be traced back through the network of collaborators to ISU's activities.

The expectation that ISU should facilitate project organization in a more hands-on way (cf. RI P92–94) links back to the problem of ISU being a project, which is lacking in own, freely usable resources. It also specifies the issue of creating a free space for discussion, where people more fundamentally reflect and ask themselves what they should do together, rather than immediately jumping into the work. As LI argues:

> "If the intention with ISU is to develop new project and then to be some kind of breeding ground/place that breeds new projects, then ISU should have a kind of venture fund or time fund (. . .). Because there's a problem in finding time for sitting down and developing ideas. And (. . .) it's also some kind of risk, because maybe you're sitting together and you're doing a couple of workshops and then everything ends up in nothing, because lots of ideas won't come together, because they're too complicated and when (. . .) analyze it you discover: 'it will not work'". (LI 33)

The Urban Strategic Forum and its link to the student thesis program is perhaps a good practice in this respect, as it was generally lauded by those participating. More specifically though, it seems to successfully link more formal, project-focused and also time-efficient aspects of collaboration between professionals and their organizations (the Urban Strategic Forum format), to the longer-term, informal and relationship-focused aspects of the student thesis program. The aspect of informality of the students can here be considered to provide a more personal bridge between the organizations, allowing their professionals to connect for the longer period of time it takes to produce a thesis and enabling both to assume a similar, more personal mentor role (instead of retreating to their different organizational or professional roles). At the same time, the 20 student theses produced within an applied science context facilitated by ISU allows those organizing it to point to outcomes that would not have emerged without its activities. This helps ISU to demonstrate that it can deliver on the expectations that the resources put into ISU should yield a timely return on investment. However, at the same time, it seems important to acknowledge that ISU in its limited scope and with its limited resources can only lay the "breeding-ground" or produce a germ cell for more substantial and higher-quality projects to develop and "live or die" by themselves, i.e., to self-organize gradually and involve administrators and academics in a self-determined, horizontally networked and project-focused way. In the same way, it seems important to acknowledge the open-ended, autonomous character of these network projects or project networks: this means to allow them to fail and grant those engaging in them leeway in terms of time, labor and resources they can spend free from (conventional) organizational performance controlling.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In accordance with D'Andrea and Gosling's suggestion for a whole institutions approach [23], we explored a central dilemma between identifying as project, organization or network within the change process towards more sustainable HEIs. We did so by researching how individuals engaged in an illustrative cross-sector partnership narratively make sense of the organizational dilemmas and

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ambiguities that stem from the complexity of working together across sectors in pursuit of an integrative approach to knowledge production. The meaning of our findings for the whole institution approach in HEIs is manifold. Instead of organically complementing each other in a kind of teleological movement from project via organization to self-organizing and inclusive network, we found in our analysis, that often the different organizational identities as project, organization or network competed with each other and canceled each other out. In the end, the organizers did not end up with a teleological, virtuous development from project, via organization to self-organizing network across sectors, but with an undetermined and aimless movement back-and forth only resulting in a general sense of stagnation and frustration among especially its regular members. This might also be interpreted against the background of the vagueness of the concepts of sustainable development and Education for Sustainable Development (Authors 2011). However, our findings also suggest that the fuzziness of the cross-sector partnership and its indetermination is seen as something that should not necessarily be overcome, but that the state of indeterminacy in various ways contributes to the different goals of project development, organizational development and network development, which—by their nature—involve conflicts, trade-offs and unsolvable organizational dilemmas. Thus, a fuzzy profile, while being often criticized as a hindrance to the further development of the cross sector partnership and as something that is diminishing its potential impact, can also be seen as a (relative) success story as it supplies many "secondary gains" to those involved by not overcoming their differences and organizational dilemmas. These findings extend the dimensions, dilemmas and tensions identified by D'Andrea and Gosling's conception for a whole institutions approach [23].

In this context, three activities of ISU were analyzed more closely, because they suggest a portfolio, which would allow to develop the three different identities of ISU as project, organization and network separately but in concert. First, the annual public conference "Urban Research Day" hosted by ISU, which boosted its public profile, successfully linked the institute to the prestigious Malmö transformation story and also delivered on ISU's organizational expectations to be a viable, publicly relevant and critical institute. Second, the thesis match-making program organized by the ISU boundary agents, which helped to deliver on the project expectation to produce specific outcomes (theses), that have at least the potential to directly benefit the work of the administration, as well as it directly contributes to the universities educational mission. At the same time, it realized the cross-sector partnership's ambition to nurture personal and professional network relationships, because it focusses the professionals on a learning-process via the students. Third, the "Urban Strategic Forum" which brings together academics, students and administrators in a workshop format to further develop their learning network established through the thesis match-making program by providing the breeding ground for project groups to self-organize across organizations.

However, when using this specific research focus and the accompanying set methods there are important limitations.

First, because this study relies on mainly narrative accounts in interviews, focus groups and program documents, it cannot make claims concerning the objective performance of cross-sector partnership. Our results are limited to what the interviewees give for accounts and judgements and how these accounts and judgements allow them to construct their cross-sector partnership as meaningful. Second, because this study relies on investigating only one case of meaning making in and through cross-sector partnerships, the generalizability of the interpretations and claims deduced from the analysis are very limited.

Accordingly, the results presented should not be read as providing general knowledge about the phenomenon of cross-sector partnerships as such, but as providing, theoretically informed patterns identified through conducting interviews and analyzing documents in respect to a unique cross-sector partnership. However, the results presented are grounded in rigorous analysis and systematic and transparent reference to evidence in form of interview and document extracts. In this way they produce context-sensitive knowledge about the specific process of meaning making in a cross-sector partnership,

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which provides tentative theoretical concepts that can be used to inform further research and theorizing about other cases of cross-sector partnerships.

However, it seems imperative to not measure the cross-sector partnership as a rational process of efficiently pooling resources and effectively integrating project, organizational and network logics as parts of a smoothly growing, naturally synergetic and expanding organism, yielding evermore benefits for everyone involved. Instead, project, organizational and network logics in a cross-sector partnership need to be acknowledged as constituting substantially different, narrative ways of making sense of the same initiative. They each emphasize different objects of value (tailor-made project results, organizational autonomy and viability, network development), different modes of exchange (professional workshop, public conference, learning program), different roles (professional experts, organizational employer/employee, mentor/student) and organizational relationships (project teams, formal/hierarchical organization, personal/horizontal networks).

This is why we suggest that research in sustainable development in HEIs should more substantially investigate the different professional and organizational identities of the cross-sector partnerships undertaken in the context of a whole institutions approach and more specifically explore the process of narrative boundary-making in between them as that which separates and links the actors in their continuous struggle to make sense of respective professional and organizational identities. We are confident that such research could contribute substantially to better define and implement whole institution approaches in the context of promoting sustainable development in and through HEIs.

However, its explorative investigation into one cross-sector partnership for the promotion of sustainable development in and through a HEI showed that more work is required to understand boundary-making as a narrative process of making sense of whole, i.e., complex institutions such as HEIs. We demonstrated that it is especially worthwhile to focus the whole institution approach more systematically on navigating organizational dilemmas and tensions (as D'Andrea and Gosling suggest [23]) by taking into account how these dilemmas and tensions allow individuals to establish their agency through continuously conversing about dealing with them, and where to draw the line through them, so as to define 'what the story is' and 'what to do about it' [81]. In this way this study suggests to integrate insights from narrative and psychological research in organizational studies into the practice of promoting sustainable development in HEIs through a whole institutions approach. A worthwhile next step in better employing a whole institutions approach in sustainable development of HEIs would be, for example, to integrate Michael White's approach in his work on narrative therapy, in which he worked out a detailed analytical framework and investigative method to explore how people develop ceremonies and cognitive maps to orient themselves and connect to others [82]. Another example is Gavazzi and Fox [83], who use their background in family and marriage therapy to approach partnerships between university and the regional community surrounding it. A further important avenue for future research on the issue of sustainable development in HEIs in general and cross-sector partnerships in context of a whole institutions approach in particular, is the integration of theoretical concepts and methods of cultural psychology and specifically the sub-field of narrative liminality, i.e., the study of boundary-making, border and liminality construction in and through transdisciplinary cross-sector partnerships between universities and non-academic partners. For example, Picione and Valsiner [84] highlight the psychological significance of semiotic borders, demarking separation, differentiation, distinction-making, connection, articulation and relation-enabling. They argue that the border is a narrative tool, which enables actors in organizations to maintain stability and induce transformation at the same time by way of creating an ambiguous and instable "liminal space", and in this way induces creativity, leads to novelty and the creation of new narrative forms of organizing (Ibid.). In a related work Picione and Freda approach the border as a semiotic concept that allows individuals to positions themselves to others and the world by creating a dynamic boundary in terms of necessity, obligation, willingness, possibility, permission, and ability [85]. This study has laid a first path, but future studies on sustainable development in HEIs and the whole institutions approach involving cross-sector partnerships would certainly benefit a lot from more systematically integrating

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concepts and approaches from organizational (or group) psychology. More systematically focusing on the narrative construction of professional and organizational identities in a complex, interconnected world, would also allow for cross-sector partnerships to become recognized as critical case for studying how individuals organize their professional selves and organizational relationships in late-modern, increasingly digitalized and globalized knowledge societies in which a radically more sustainable form of development has become essential for survival of human civilization on this planet.

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