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Organising for collaboration with schools: experiences from six Swedish universities

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration between universities and schools has been emphasised by both governments and within educational development research in the Nordic countries. However, educational research has tended to focus on the practitioners' perspectives and experiences, i.e., researchers and teachers. Our intention is to contribute to the field with research from another perspective; that of organising for collaboration. This is done by focusing on the experiences of university representatives responsible for the organisation of collaboration within a Swedish nation-wide initiative, the ULF project. Our theoretical framework draws on the literature of partial organisation. The results indicate that the different approaches and solutions used by universities could not only potentially strengthen schools' opportunities to participate in educational collaboration with universities but also lead to different opportunities, reinforcing previously existing differences between school organisers. The results are discussed in relation to governmental intentions and guidelines.

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Introduction

Knowledge production through collaboration between academia and society has become increasingly important in governmental policy on research (Fenwick & Farrell, 2012; Jonsson et al., 2022) and has been emphasised over the last two decades in the field of educational development research (Skoglund, 2022). It has even been argued that there is a tendency on the part of governments "to pose practitioner inquiry as a solution to some of the emerging questions and problems" (Groundwater-Smith, 2012, p. 59). This trend does not seem to be specific to certain national educational contexts, rather the opposite, and Sweden is no exception as collaborative research has been initiated by the Swedish government as a solution to complex problems (Prøitz et al., 2022). However, research on issues concerning collaboration in education has tended to focus on the practitioner level, which in most cases refers to researchers and teachers (Forssten Seiser & Portfelt, 2022; Olin & Pörn, 2021). In this article, we intend to contribute to the field by introducing another perspective focusing instead on the organisational level. This is in line with the work of Levin and Cooper (2012, p. 24), who argue that studies should focus on "organisational processes, structures and contexts rather than individual attitudes or actions" in order to enhance our knowledge. Furthermore, we do so by studying processes and how organisation is carried out by universities as one element of collaboration, an area that has thus far lacked educational research. As stated by Baumfield and Butterworth (2007, p. 411), "whilst there is a growing body of literature on

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practitioner research and the role of collaborations and partnerships that include universities in that process, there are relatively few studies examining the role of the university in any depth". By adopting an organisational perspective, we shed light on the structures created and used by universities in relation to participating schools, which are aspects that have received little attention in the growing literature on collaboration and partnership in educational research. Thus, the purpose of the article is to explore collaboration between universities and schools from an organisational perspective – two educational organisations with very different missions and ways of functioning. We do so by focusing on experiences described by university representatives in relation to the work of organising for collaboration with schools. The universities in the study are all part of a nationwide initiative, the ULF (Utbildning, Lärande, Forskning [Education, Learning, Research]) project.

The ULF project was initiated in connection with the Teacher Training Convention in 2015, by the universities of Uppsala, Karlstad and Gothenburg (Prøitz et al., 2022), which argued for the need of a national initiative to strengthen practice-relevant research through closer collaboration between universities and school organisers[1] (henceforth we use the simplified term schools even though the collaboration is aimed at school organisers). The Swedish government responded to the call by assigning three initial universities, plus the addition of Umeå University, to taking responsibility for planning and carrying out the ULF initiative 2017–2021 (hereafter, the ULF project[2]) in collaboration with other universities (Ministry of Education, 2017). The four universities were each responsible for one node and worked together with other universities in relation to the node, making a total of 25 universities participating in the project. ULF is, as such, a prominent project in the current Swedish educational context (Skoglund, 2022). The aim of the project was described as "developing and testing different models for long-term cooperation" between universities and schools. The experimental, collaborative activities shall "contribute to a strengthened scientific basis in teacher and preschool teacher training education[3] and in the school system" (Ministry of Education, 2017). The governmental commission also included several other expectations, expressed as "shall" or "should". To mention a few examples: the universities involved were expected to collaborate with other universities; each university should collaborate with multiple schools and there should be variation among them regarding size, geographical location and age of pupils; different models for long-term collaboration should be tested; and teachers and preschool teachers must be given the opportunity to participate in both planning and conducting research. Many of the expectations and guiding principles expressed in the governmental commission have a bearing on organisational aspects. Furthermore, they relate to different levels of organisation: the four universities responsible need to have a functioning meeting forum to plan and organise the work and they in turn need to collaborate with other universities within their respective node. In addition, all universities need to create collaborative arrangements in relation to schools.

The article draws on an evaluative assignment carried out by one of the universities responsible[4] for the node that was conducted during the latter part of the initial phase of the project (2020–2021; see also Benerdal et al., 2022). For the purpose of this article, the material gathered has been re-analysed. In the next section we discuss previous research regarding collaboration between universities and schools. After this the theoretical and methodological framework is presented. The results are then presented whereby the theoretically informed organisational elements serve as guiding principles. These sections are followed by a discussion section.

[1]In Sweden, the 290 municipalities act as school organisers. In addition, there are independent, publicly financed actors which also operate schools. In the rest of the article, we use the term "school" also when referring to the school organiser.

[2]The first part of ULF was carried out between 2017 and 2021 as a pilot. It has subsequently been extended for the years 2022–2024 and will then become a permanent operation in 2025 (Bet. 2020/21: UbU16). In the article, we term the first phase of ULF, a "project".

[3]Teacher training education includes education regardless of school level.

[4]The material for the article draws on an evaluation commissioned by Umeå School of Education; Umeå university thereby financed the data collection.

Organisation for collaboration between universities and schools

As argued in the introduction, there is a political will to increase collaboration between universities and schools in order to carry out activities that promote research and development. Collaboration as a phenomenon is in tune with current thinking, has positive connotations and can, like other concepts such as development, be taken for granted or used without being problematised. In the literature, research on collaboration is fragmentary and to a large extent includes intervention studies and studies on the effects of development projects (Prøitz et al., 2022). The ambition of the ULF project was to increase collaboration between universities and schools and improve knowledge regarding how such activities can/should be organised. Previous research has put forward some factors considered to be important and in the following we focus on aspects concerning organising for collaboration.

First, enough time must be set aside to enable long-term collaboration that benefits the participating organisations. Results that point to this need for time have emerged from studies of so-called "research–practice partnerships" (RPP) (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2020; Henrick et al., 2017), which have been defined as "long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners that leverage research to address persistent problems of practice" (Henrick et al., 2017, p. 1). Organising collaboration through partnership is characterised by a common goal that must be given time to develop. The time perspective in PPP enables partners to tackle more comprehensive issues and solve challenges that are rooted in deeper institutional and organisational structures. The focus on problems in professional practice means that the partnerships aim to be relevant for the schools and to solve current issues that have been experienced in practice (Prøitz et al., 2022). It takes time to identify exactly which issues are important for the participants. Mörndal (2018) argues that, despite the existence of many definitions of collaboration, there is commonality in the fact that there are many differences in organisations that work across borders to achieve common goals. The time aspect is crucial in understanding the concept of collaboration, according to Mörndal (2018), in addition to the fact that the benefits resulting from parties working together must be seen from a long-term perspective (Mörndal, 2018). Thus, while different organisations have different aims and missions, they might find commonality in the benefits resulting from collaboration. As argued by Jonsson et al. (2022), in order for collaboration to reap the expected benefits, it is important to discuss and focus on the participating actors' different understandings of and perspectives on knowledge and what constitutes relevant knowledge. Time is an important factor in terms of enabling collaborating participants to get to know each other and identify common interests.

Second, a well-thought-out selection of actors with respect to their roles within their organisations is crucial in collaboration. Participants and their roles in schools or universities have an important impact on the outcomes of research and research and development (R&D) projects. Educators have often been treated as a homogeneous group in previous research but, in terms of determining what is relevant, the choice will differ depending on whether the users are teachers, school leaders, district policymakers, or central office staff (Honig, 2013; Spillane, 1998). Each professional group knows its own area of work best and feels most comfortable with its own level of expertise in this area (Spillane, 1998). In order to carry out projects that can benefit the organisation of schools, it is also important to identify the internal challenges facing them – from the central office to teachers in the classroom (Honig, 2013). The individuals included in collaborations play a decisive role in choosing a research and development area and which issues to focus on. It therefore becomes important to pay attention to who negotiates the knowledge defined and constructed through the research enterprise (Ming & Goldenberg, 2021). The selection of actors plays a decisive role in the results that can be achieved.

Third, the internal organisation of universities is also an important factor in terms of collaboration outcomes from the perspective of university representatives. In addition to teaching and research, the universities have a statutory mission to collaborate with the surrounding community

(SFS, 1992:1434; see also Öhman Sandberg, 2022). To encourage and facilitate such collaboration, e.g., between universities and schools, incentives for researchers are needed; however, today's system can counteract the desire for collaboration. The present reward system puts a premium on scholarly papers published in prestigious journals rather than texts written to be useful for educators (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003). In order to produce such papers, scholars may be hesitant to participate in collaborations with school representatives who have other aims for collaboration. Therefore, the provision of structures that meet the needs of researchers at universities can be important for facilitating this kind of collaborative work.

To sum up, we see that in many ways how work is organised has an impact on the possibility of carrying out successful collaborations in relation to schools. A solid organisation offers possibilities for long-term collaboration to achieve common goals. Once a goal is set, participants involved in a collaboration need to be those with expertise in the selected area of work. There must also be internal incentives for collaboration within participating organisations. Other aspects of organisations, such as the type of research to be conducted or whether an organisation works to disseminate research results on a wider scale (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Levinsson, 2011), may also impact the kind of activities being undertaken and so on. These aspects are, however, outside of the scope of this article, where the focus is on organisation for collaboration.

Theoretical and methodological framework

In this section we outline our theoretical points of departure and present the material and methods of analysis.

Theoretical points of departure

As a starting point, we put forward our understanding of the efforts and intentions of the ULF project to be adopted by the respective organisations, i.e., schools and universities. The ambition of the government in the commission of the project, as well as the intentions laid out by the responsible actors in the nodes, can be interpreted as an effort to institutionalise structures for collaboration. ULF is basically about creating structures or (in)formal organisations with a long-term perspective regarding their aims and goals. These ambitions can thus be interpreted as a desire for institutionalisation, in the sense of taking ideas for granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). There should also be mutual exchanges between research, teacher training education, and school operations on an ongoing basis. This is the fundamental intention of ULF (see Prøitz et al., 2022). However, as highlighted by the literature on institutional change, institutions are fundamentally stable and enduring and change is expected to be incremental and possibly partial rather than swift and comprehensive (Fioretos et al., 2016; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004). As Ahrne and Brunsson (2011, p. 96) argue, "organisation can be expected to be a quicker method than are attempts at changing institutions directly".

As a framework for analysis we draw on the literature of partial organisation (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011); that is, we focus on analysing organisation for collaboration via the lense of evidenced elements of organisation. The analytical approach is further developed below, but first we introduce the material and how it was collected.

Material and methods

The article draws on an evaluation commissioned by one of the nodes with the purpose of analysing how each of the universities creates prerequisites for collaboration with school organisers and identifying obstacles and opportunities that exist during collaboration between universities and school organisers. Several different kinds of material were collected and created for the purpose of the study (documents, semi-structured interviews with university representatives, surveys, and focus

group interviews with school organisation representatives). Here, we describe how we collected the material used in this article. In the initial phase we gathered documents and information about ULF from the universities' webpages as well as formal agreements on collaboration set up between universities and school organisers. We also conducted initial interviews with one representative from each university assigned to work with ULF to gain a better understanding of how the project is set up at their university. Based on these data (documents and initial interviews) we constructed "organisational maps" wherein ULF is visualised in relation to the formal organisations and decision forums of each university, together with how and through which type of forum school organisers are included. These maps were later discussed and revised, or validated, in semi-structured group interviews with university representatives (6 interviews, 22 respondents). The representatives from the universities have different titles and perform different functions in their organisations. For example, we interviewed heads of departments, project managers, organisational managers, organisational developers, coordinators, collaborative lecturers, and senior lecturers, to provide just a few examples. The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide with the following themes: the organisation of ULF, the participants' experience of collaboration, activities, equal participation in activities (how and in what way the perspectives of teachers and principals are considered), and expectations of or views regarding the future of the project. All participants were informed of the aim of data collection and told that it would also be used for research. They were asked to provide consent and informed that they could withdraw it at any time. The interviews were carried out by the authors, together with two other researchers. Two of the four researchers participated in each interview. All focus group interviews were recorded and partly transcribed. For the purposes of this article, all documents, such as information from websites, formal agreements, organisational maps, and transcripts from semi-structured group interviews, were re-analysed by the authors. The analytical process is further elaborated on below.

Analytical framework and analysis

Drawing on the literature on partial organisation, we explore how university representatives experience and describe the organisation of collaboration during the ULF project. The analytical framework is based on five organisational elements: membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions. As Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) argue, formal organisations have access to all of the elements but they can also be used separately, i.e., partial organisation. *Membership* concerns access – who will be allowed to join the organisation (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). In the ULF context and from the perspective of this article, membership can relate to the question of membership both within the university – which actors are included in the project and how – and in schools – which schools are included in the project and how participation is enabled. Organisations also involve *hierarchy*, which concerns the right to "oblige others to comply with central decisions" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011, p. 86). This right can belong to certain people or be maintained through some kind of voting procedure. Since hierarchy entails power, the hierarchical dimension has consequences in terms of the boundaries; that is, what can be said and done and what perspectives can be put forward. This means that certain participants' questions will be focused on during the collaborative project or activity. *Rules* concern decisions about how certain others shall act in certain situations. They are primarily in written form and always pronounced in contrast to norms (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). The last elements are *monitoring*, concerning routines that control what members do and ensuring that they act in accordance with the rules and, finally, *sanctions*, which include both positive and negative measures that can be resorted to when members do not act in accordance with the rules (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Andersson et al., 2017).

As stated earlier, the material was re-analysed for the purposes of this article. The analytical process can be described as a directed content analysis as defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), whereby codes are derived from theory and defined before (and during) data analysis. This means that the pre-determined categories (the elements) were used to code the interview transcripts

and documents. We searched the material for expressions regarding the different elements of organisation. For example, from the definition of "membership" we coded the material relating to expressions or descriptions of participation in terms of actors and decision forums at the university and schools, and practices enabling school actors to participate. This meant analysing the organisational maps and coding formal agreements, interviews, and how the university representatives talked about the internal organisation of the university and participation of schools and school organisers. The analysis can be described as having a dual purpose. First, we wanted to identify which organisational elements were present and visible. Second, we focused on coding expressions and statements tied to the different elements. Departing from the theoretically informed definitions, we coded how university representatives described how they worked in the ULF project in relation to the different elements, focusing on selected solutions and challenges to give voice to their experiences (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Doing organisation: solutions and challenges

In this section, we present our results and analysis based on the organisational elements. We found examples and expressions of the first three organisational elements (membership, hierarchy, and rules). They are used as a principle for structuring the section. We use quotations from the participating university respondents, each one given an individual number (RI1–22).

Membership – who is included?

As this article focuses on organising collaboration from the perspective of the university representatives, this is also visible in our interpretation of the membership element. We looked at how ULF membership was constructed in relation to (a) the universities' collaborative activities with schools – how and in what ways participation was enabled and decided – and (b) the collaborative organisation and internal structures within the universities. We found a distinction between universities that used an already established organisation for collaboration and thereby let this constitute the foundation for the ULF project and those that created new collaborative forums.

Regarding membership in relation to schools, we found that, in the ULF project, four of the six universities used, to different extents, existing structures. Three of these collaborative structures originated in Regional Development Centres (Regionalt utvecklingscentrum, RUC), which were specified in the instructions for Swedish universities training teachers between 1997 and 2010 (Öijen, 2014). With RUC, the Swedish state aimed to enhance collaboration between teacher education and training, research, and school development. Some universities also continued to have an RUC after 2010, despite a lack of funding. The fourth university that used an existing structure had a more recent organisation, which, in addition to RUC, was in place when the ULF project started. All four of the universities had a general, basic agreement in place for collaborations and much experience from previous research and development collaborative work. Several participants at the universities that chose this path expressed satisfaction with the selected way of working, for example because collaboration is already something many people are familiar with:

> Many [working] in teacher training, research, collaboration – recognise and can relate to the aims of ULF, so in that way work in the ULF steering group has been natural. Another way of seeing it is that it is positive that ULF has not involved a new way of thinking, or something that we need to adjust to; rather, it has filtered into something that we recognise well and that we partly have had a well-functioning infrastructure for. (RI2)

At universities working with established structures, statements from the respondents were also characterised by their recognition of the advantages resulting from the inclusion of many schools, something that is easier when a collaborative process has been developed over a long period of time. The respondents also stated that trying a new activity is easier with already established contacts and networks. The possibility of using existing structures is a strength of ULF projects; however, risks

are also evident. For example, existing structures contribute to providing conditions that allow for collaboration to develop in a favourable way; however, the potential risks inherent in using existing structures may be that new ways of collaborating are not created and activities largely follow already trodden paths.

If new ways of organising collaboration have been developed, they are often initiated high up in the organisation. Two of the six universities did not have a formal structure for collaboration when the ULF project began and had to establish general agreements on research and development with individual schools. These agreements constituted new prerequisites for collaboration on a larger scale, although collaboration between individuals had existed even before these agreements were established. Respondents stated that establishing such agreements was sometimes time-consuming:

> Some were quite fast [School organisers 1 and 2] and I, who have worked [for] the last two years, have been working with the agreements for example … and [School organiser 3] was quite late so they have started their project significantly much later, so it's kind of been built on all the time, even on the university side; it has been a slow process until everyone is done with agreements and in work, so there's a … a quick start, you can say quite late anyway in the process. (RI15)

Here, the work with general agreements has meant that the start of individual R&D projects has had to wait. Organising those projects on the basis of a general, long-term agreement increases the possibility of them addressing issues of concern for practice, in alignment with RPP (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2020; Henrick et al., 2017). Respondents also expressed that the writing of agreements during the project was preceded by discussions between representatives of the organisations: "We had a long period with many dialogues with the school representatives before the agreements were formulated so that most, most of it has taken place in dialogues" (RI17). According to the respondents, the preparatory work conducted through discussions contributed to the agreements being able to meet the needs of both organisations.

The internal organisations of universities can impact the will as well as the opportunity to participate in collaborations. One aspect that can be an obstacle for ULF projects concerns the universities' career and qualification systems; collaborative research may be perceived as taking a long time and thus extending the time horizon for researchers to gain qualifications:

> [I]f you think about career paths for researchers, collaboration is not the fastest way. It takes longer to take these steps, if you have that ambition, in case you enter into collaboration. Because collaborative research takes more time, it is about adapting, moving in step together with the school principal and conducting a dialogue about this development, and development and research have different tempos. (RI15)

This suggests, in line with previous research (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003), that to promote collaboration universities need to develop their incentives to encourage such work.

Another issue that can be an obstacle concerns schools' organisation. A representative of all schools in the region is usually lacking and therefore discussions need to be conducted separately with each school: "When the university is going to discuss with the [schools in the] region, we do not really have a [representative from the] region to discuss with, but we have a number of individual, separate school organisers" (RI21). Each school organiser needs to have the resources to commission someone in the organisation be a partner in those discussions, which is a challenge for smaller organisations. From the material analysed, we identified that smaller schools less often participate in collaborations, and schools organised by municipalities participate to a greater extent than schools run by other, independent organisations.[5] We were also presented with examples of smaller organisations joining forces and collaborating with universities in one common organisation.

To sum up, the membership element in our data shows that respondents from universities with an existing structure for collaboration find it easier to get started with activities. Those universities

[5]In Sweden, in 2021/22, 18% of school units in compulsory school, 30% of preschool units, and 36% of upper secondary schools were run by independent actors (Skolverket, 2022).

also collaborate with a larger number of schools than universities with no former organisation. In universities with no previous structure for collaboration, the ULF project resulted in the establishment of forums; discussions prior to the setting up of a forum have thus been perceived as important. Participation in ULF projects also involves an aspect of internal organisation at the universities and schools. The reward system at the universities emerged as an aspect that can become an obstacle. Independent school organisations and the absence of a collective organisation among schools are also factors that can affect collaboration negatively.

Hierarchy – decisive for questions in focus?

Hierarchy concerns who exercises the right to make binding decisions that others are obliged to comply with (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). In relation to the ULF project, it was decided by the government that universities should collaborate with school organisers (and not teachers or principals, for example). Each collaboration and its focus were thus to be decided upon by actors high up in the school hierarchy. Several respondents stated that this was a highly relevant issue because actors on the level of the school organiser have organisational and financial decision-making power. As such, the involvement of school organisers can be seen as a way to create stable conditions for both project and collaborating parties, a view expressed by respondents:

> If it is to be sustainable in the long term, it is actually the head of the school and most likely the principal who is the guarantor of freeing up time, or allocating time for the teachers. It's a matter of resources, so to speak. I can fully understand that the superintendent, head, or school principal would react if I contact teachers directly. Of course, if they have three different development areas in progress, and then I invite them to a fourth or fifth … It can make a difference … so I can understand that it is sensitive. It is about coordination, so to speak. (RI19)

Making agreements with principals, heads of schools or superintendents was seen as important, mainly out of respect for their priorities in the developmental work of the school but also to enable the sustainability or robustness of the collaboration. At the same time, university representatives state that different questions are asked and viewed as important depending on the actor's role and function in the school organisation. A preschool teacher does not ask the same kind of questions as a principal or operational manager, according to one of the respondents. Furthermore, teachers' voices and questions are regarded by many representatives as the most important to listen to, with reference to the intentions of ULF. As one respondent explained, in relation to trying develop different models for initiating collaborative R&D projects:

> [W]e have tried both the call for tenders model and [going] through developmental areas identified by superintendents, and there it is strict, and I think it is partly the same problem as in the systematic quality work. Two areas are identified that we must work on … , and then the teachers' own examination of their own activities automatically falls away, because now everyone must focus [on the identified issues] from the top down, areas that are already given, so to speak. So there is a contradiction there … . Teachers today are probably quite unaccustomed to coming up with initiatives themselves, in that almost all professional development comes from the national agencies … where there are scientific articles and there is a given starting point. Policy-driven areas or issues get a lot of weight and are rewarded, which means there is a risk that the teachers themselves do not look at their own activities and practices. (RI18)

The respondent expresses concern about teachers not being active in identifying developmental issues in their own practices and activities and thus argues that ULF is a way to strengthen the profession by providing room for issues teachers find important. This line of thinking is also evident in the statements of many other respondents. However, for some it is not considered a problem that agreements are constructed at the top-level of the school organisation:

> The R&D projects have not been initiated at the top level, but we have concluded agreements with them [superintendents]. And they themselves [the school organisers] have also identified this challenge. We have an agreement, but what do we do to involve more people further down in the organisation, where the issues have been identified … ? I agree that it must be funnelled down, otherwise it becomes something of an overarching perspective where it is not relevant. (RI4)

As this quote exemplifies, the agreement is one thing, but the identification of relevant issues takes place further down in the organisation. The matter of hierarchy thus seems to have an impact on issues or questions that are the focus of collaboration, and certainly so in regard to how school organisers decide on relevant foci for collaboration. Thus, hierarchy can be seen as both a strength and a hindrance. The identification of developmental needs and questions that will be addressed during collaborations between universities and schools is not self-evident. Previous research has also reported that one should take into account that educators are a heterogeneous group with different perspectives regarding what counts as relevant knowledge and research (see Honig, 2013; Jonsson et al., 2022; Spillane, 1998).

Establishing rules – writing agreements

In our interpretation of rules, we found agreements to be central to the approach to collaboration of the node in relation to the universities included in this article. Their approach was decentralised and dialogue-based, with an ULF plan as a bridging element. Two types of agreement were created: between the participating universities and the university responsible for the node, and between universities and the schools they collaborated with. The latter are focused upon here. In this respect, the agreements function as rules (see Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) since they express what each organisation undertakes in terms of activities, financing, and time, respectively. The agreements express commitments, and both positive and negative experiences are described by representatives in relation to the establishment of agreements.

All universities established agreements with schools at the level of the school organiser (i.e., usually the superintendent), and we can discern two different approaches to how this was done. Some universities decided to rely on existing collaborative arrangements (see "membership" above) and thus used previously established "general agreements". They did not create specific agreements with every school included in the collaborative ULF project. The general agreements were considered to be time-saving, but potentially not leading to strengthened collaboration. One respondent compared their strategy of using a general agreement with that of other universities' use of individual agreements:

> Then of course it can be a disadvantage in some way … . In other universities they had to work quite a lot in the dialogues to create the agreements with the municipalities. [This opportunity] may have been lost a little with us [as a result of] not sitting down with the municipalities. (RI12)

The respondents stated that individual agreements with schools were perceived as being rewarding; they mentioned aspects such as basic stances, efforts, activities, and expectations. Such discussions were understood to increase the possibility of creating a common understanding with regard to the content, scope, and aims of a collaboration. Nonetheless, the process was also considered time-consuming and "complicated":

> When it comes to writing an agreement, then all school principals are individuals and then we have to have individual conversations with them and dialogues … , then each municipality, each school principal is its own party, and then it becomes, well, it gets a bit complicated. (RI21)

The universities may also have many potential schools to collaborate with, which means that, for some, there will be a large number of agreements to write depending on the extent to which they adhere to the government's remit. A general agreement is time-saving but the responsibilities of each participant are less clear, possibly affecting the depth or robustness of the collaboration. With individual agreements, the responsibilities of and expectations for each participating party are more explicit. A positive aspect of general agreements is that they can be the basis for long-term collaboration and do not need constant renewal. However, dialogue in terms of discerning differences in perspectives and expectations may only take place when individual agreements are created (see, e.g., Jonsson et al., 2022).

Discussion

In this article we have explored how six universities organise for collaboration within the national ULF project from the perspective of the university representatives. The focus of the analysis was their work and experiences in relation to the organisational elements encountered whilst realising the ULF project's aim: robust or sustained collaborative arrangements between universities and schools. The analysis has shown how three elements were used, and the organisation of ULF can thus be considered partial organisation (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) whereby one or more elements are used. As Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) stated, having elements in place makes managing organisation easier. Partial organisation can be conceived as "failure" because it is the result of organisers' inability to use more than one or a few organisational elements due to lack of energy or resources, for example. But partial organisation can also be considered a "smart solution" when no more organisation is needed or certain elements are enough (cf. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011, pp. 92–94). In the case of ULF and collaboration between universities and school organisers, more research is needed to determine whether appropriate organisational elements are used to enable collaboration, how other parties experience collaboration, and whether more (or less) organisation is required.

A partial organisation is influenced and shaped by the formal organisations it is surrounded by. One salient feature that runs through the organisational elements is universities' use of established collaboration forums versus the creation of new forums. This was evident with regard to membership and rules and, to some extent, hierarchy also. In some instances, the established paths were not challenged even though, for the initial phase, it was considered beneficial to place the ULF project within an already functioning organisation incorporating both university and school representatives. In relation to this, one could ask what the consequences may be for the new ULF project and its realisation, if the established forums prevail and become the norm? If, for example, members are included based on historic merit or ease and no new agreements are constructed, there is a potential risk that collaborative actors will miss out on important conversations regarding the fundamental values of a collaboration (see, e.g., Jonsson et al., 2022).

If we consider the implications of our results, we identified that different strategies and approaches were used and maintained at different universities in relation to the organisation of collaborative arrangements. This indicates that the different approaches and solutions used by the universities could potentially strengthen schools' opportunities to participate in educational collaboration with them, particularly since the approaches chosen strive to be sensitive to the context. However, at the same time these different approaches and solutions can also lead to very different opportunities for schools, depending on the approach of individual universities. This can, in the long run, contribute to reinforcing already existing differences between different school organisers when some schools and school organisers are considered to be "already on board", meaning presently collaborating with a university or having an organisational culture that is prepared for collective change and development. The opportunity to participate in the ULF project might also be reduced if a school's organisation is small or a non-municipal organisation, as established collaborative forums mostly cover municipal school organisers. Even when not considering schools' different chances of participating in a ULF project on the basis of size, finance, and competence, it is possible to discern inequality in opportunities for schools to collaborate depending on their geographical location due to the different approaches adhered to by the universities.

Our results also indicate the presence of dilemmas or counterproductive factors built into the initial ULF project, which both universities and schools need to deal with. These originate from how the government decided to launch and realise the initiative. Respondents referred to these factors as aggravating and/or challenging dilemmas.

The first concern relates to organisers identifying an interesting dilemma regarding whose questions will be heard and raised. As stated in the ULF project's mission, the starting point should be at the teacher level since they are the ones closest to students; they also have an important mission,

according to the Education Act, to educate on the basis of scientific knowledge and proven experience. A further aim expressed in the ULF project is to increase the number of students achieving their goals. This dilemma is evident when universities are supposed to collaborate and write collaborative agreements with school organisers and not teachers or principals, for example. Doing so means that collaboration occurs at a higher level in the school hierarchy, which means, depending on the school's size, that it may be at quite a disrance from school operations. These are issues connected to hierarchy but, of course, are relevant in all ULF initiatives regardless of the theoretical framework adopted.

The second concern regards the aspiration to build or create models for durable collaboration; that is, the government mission to create sustained collaborative structures between universities and schools on equal terms (Ministry of Education, 2017; Prøitz et al., 2022). This ambition of sustained collaboration can be questioned when the entire ULF project/initiative was constructed as a time-limited project over five years. As Mörndal (2018) and others point out, collaboration takes, and needs to take, time, thus the government's approach with a time-limited project is in stark contrast to this. However, the government has announced its intention to prolong the project by two years (Bet. 2020/21:UbU16) and expressed intentions to make it permanent. The fact that the initiative was launched as a time-limited experiment might have had an impact on the approaches chosen to enable collaboration. Consequently, collaborative forums already in place and operational (such as the RUC) might have been seen as a relevant place to start since other forms were deemed more time-consuming.

The third concern relates to the power dynamics at play. As stated by the government, the intention of the ULF project is to create collaboration on "equal terms" (Ministry of Education, 2017). This can be problematised in several ways. The respondents expressed concerns regarding financing differences. Even if school organisers consider being involved in ULF a relevant and important issue, unlike universities collaboration is not part of their mission (see Öhman Sandberg, 2022) and they need to fund such participation. In contrast, the universities received government funding together with the responsibility for "creating" and organising ULF, which could indicate built-in contradictions from the start. "Collaboration on equal terms" is not possible if the balance of power is already skewed in favour of universities. How participating (and non-participating) school organisers and actors within them experience participation and the power dynamics in play is thus a highly relevant question to be considered for further research.

A final note on the importance of analysing organisational factors: such analysis is relevant even if participants mostly raise concerns at the level of the individual because the individual level is affected by the level above. Examining the organisational factors at play in collaborative projects is crucial because not only do they influence the internal possibilities of and hindrances faced by such arrangements but they also impact the opportunities of school organisers to embark on collaborative journeys with universities. The outcomes of different forms of collaboration are yet to be investigated. This article reports on the organisation of collaboration rather than its outcomes. Results related to common activities carried out by schools and universities need to be explored as well. In addition, it is important to gain as complete a picture as possible. This article reports on the experiences of representatives from the universities while the experiences of school representatives remain to be investigated. However, maybe focusing on the process of organising rather than the organisation itself will produce more relevant insights, considering the intentions of the ULF project and the eagerness to create sustained collaborations. By investigating the different factors involved in organising collaboration, important matters take centre stage. The different actors' perspectives and their relative room for manoeuvre and experiences in relation to different power dynamics need to be explored further, particularly as collaboration between universities and schools is of interest to many (Fenwick & Farrell, 2012; Jonsson et al., 2022). This article contributes to knowledge about the merits of collaboration and the challenges faced by those involved in organising such projects. However, there is a need for more knowledge concerning the organising of such

collaborative arrangements between universities and schools, not least from the perspective of schools.

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