Initiating and Anchoring an Academic Course on Societal Collaboration:
A Story About 'Someotherism' and a Need for Reflexivity

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Abstract

Collaboration between academia and society has become a key priority for many higher education institutions (HEIs). In Sweden, this is partly driven by political calls to secure the long-term provision of knowledge, innovation and competitiveness. At the system and institutional level, responses to this are reflected in governance structures and strategic documents. However, those strategic responses often fall short and attempts to organise for collaboration are often met with scepticism, and, in practice, micro-level changes are slow. This paper asks why that is the case by reflecting on the experiences gained from initiating and anchoring a course on societal collaboration at a Swedish HEI. We analyse the experiences from this bottom-up initiative by building on the notion of reflexivity. Our study contributes to research on managing and organising collaboration at HEIs by highlighting and illustrating the need to adopt a scientific approach – to use scientific knowledge – and engage (more) in reflexivity when organising to ensure societal collaboration. Efforts to produce collaboration cannot be expected to be solved by 'someother', but require strategy to be aligned with practice. We conclude our reflexive inquiry with implications for research and practice.

Introduction

We live in a knowledge society, where knowledge is considered necessary for competitiveness and to meet societal challenges or wicked problems (e.g. Head and Alford, 2015; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Academia has long been regarded as the principal knowledge-producer in society (Bell, 1973; Krücken, 2003). However, this perception has partly shifted as knowledge production is now chiefly understood as a 'hybrid form' that engages a range of actors (cf. Gibbons et al., 2010/1994; Miller, Muñoz-Erickson and Redman, 2011; Nowotny et al., 2001), as reflected in concepts such as integrated science, Mode 2, Triple Helix and transdisciplinary science (Klintman et al., 2022). The expectation is that increased collaboration between academia and society will solve these challenges and wicked problems.

As a consequence, we have witnessed a policy and institutional shift in recent decades towards an emphasis on increased integration and knowledge sharing amongst various stakeholders. Interestingly, the narrative is often based on the notion of academia *and* society, emphasising that academia differs from 'the others' and that more knowledge should be shared with 'the others'. There is simultaneously an urge to bring academia and society together – to 'bridge the gap' (cf. Carton and Ungureany, 2018; Rossi, Rosli and Yip, 2017). As Jonsson,

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Grafström and Klintman (2021) stress, there is a need to question the expectations of this institutional shift and who should, or is expected to, contribute knowledge, as well as the meaning of 'knowledge' (epistemological understanding). It calls for a reflexive inquiry concerning the 'otherness' in such expectations (cf. Alvesson, Sandberg and Einola, 2022; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018; Cunliffe, 2003; Cunliffe and Jun, 2005).

Although the shift toward collaboration in knowledge production has initiated new efforts and the build-up of supportive structures at the organisational level in higher education institutions (HEIs), it has also given rise to tensions and inertia within these organisations that complicate the organisation and governance of collaborative efforts (Pinheiro, Benneworth and Jones, 2015; Pinheiro, Geschwind and Aarrevaara, 2014). Responses to the shift at the system and institutional level are seen in formulations in governance structures and strategic documents, but this is not always transferred to the micro level or practice. While academia may take for granted that 'the others' are based on science (or else critical management studies will explore why not), there are reasons to believe that the way academia is organised may not always be based on scientific insights (cf. Alvesson and Jonsson, 2022). As cited in Cunliffe (2003, p 999), Czarniawska (1997, p 21) provides an illustrative quote for this: "Intellectuals may live off scientific knowledge but not by it. Such "ignorance", fed by traditional habits of acquiring knowledge, costs us a great deal." Thus, one concern that motivates this paper is the disconnect between the underlying beliefs and the rationale behind how HEIs are governed and organised, and the scientific knowledge concerning the matter. A second concern is a discrepancy between the strategic and operational levels, or management and the core business of teaching and research. Higher education has been described as a sector that has become increasingly "managerialised" and organised as a "line organisation" (cf. Mintzberg, 1996), while collegiality and professional decisions have become marginalised (cf. Wedlin and Pallas, 2017). Although this is a general issue highlighted by numerous scholars, it has been identified as particularly significant in terms of the organisation of societal collaboration (Broström, Feldmann and Kaulio, 2019; Perez Vico, 2021).

In relation to these concerns, we turn to reflexivity as an inquiry for understanding 'otherness' (Cunliffe, 2003; Cunliffe and Jun, 2005). We understand reflexivity as a means to make sense of why strategic initiatives to produce societal collaboration often fall short and why there is a gap between research and practice regarding such organisational efforts. We build on auto-ethnographic observations from initiating and anchoring an academic course focusing on societal collaboration (cf. Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay and Naicker, 2012; Pabian, 2014). The aim of the course was to encourage more knowledge-based discussions on societal collaboration at a Swedish HEI, i.e. to build on scientific knowledge and develop an understanding of the conditions for the HEI to react comprehensively and rigorously to the institutional shift related to increasing societal collaboration. The initiative can be described as a bottom-up approach to better understand and meet the desire for more collaboration, including the role of academia in society (cf. Kezar, 2012). The fundamental question we ask is *why* societal collaboration seems to be such a difficult task to organise. However, it is essential to emphasise the fact that it is *not* our intention

to pinpoint, or explain, deficiencies in how our initiative was met or how collaboration is organised at the particular HEI, but rather to reflect on the various challenges that we encountered when trying to launch a course. We contribute to previous studies that have detected how the misalignment between theory and practice, and strategy and operations, has left its imprint on the debate and organisation of societal collaboration at HEIs (Laredo 2007, Benner and Sörlin, 2015, Perez Vico et al., 2021). Rather than only accepting these misalignments – which per se undermine the possibilities HEI management has to organise collaboration since there will always be critique from one standpoint – we are curious to learn if a bottom-up initiative may contribute new insights into how to overcome the discrepancies and find fruitful efforts to govern and practice collaboration. Building on recent research on societal collaboration and the widespread (mis)perceptions that researchers are isolated in an ivory tower or 'sell knowledge' at the market stalls (cf. Jonsson, Grafström and Klintman 2021; Klintman, Grafström and Jonsson, 2020), we explore whether a reason for these misalignments is the lack of reflexivity and the inability, in the words of Scholz (2020, p. 1039), to accept "the otherness of the others". The aim of our reflexive inquiry is thus to offer a fine-grained – more nuanced – understanding of how efforts to organise collaboration are met within HEIs. We do so by providing a story to encourage further reflexivity on why efforts to organise societal collaboration fall short (cf. Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Humphreys, 2005).

The paper is structured accordingly. First, we discuss recent literature on the response of HEI to the institutional shift toward more societal collaboration and how reflexivity can be understood and used as an analytical lens for studying how such a shift is met in practice. After that, we discuss the methodological considerations for how we have outlined our story and conducted our analysis. We then share the story of how our bottom-up initiative for collaboration was met, after which we present our findings from our reflexive inquiry. Based on our results, we discuss the need for connecting theory and practice when organising for collaboration, consenting strategic initiatives and operational academic work in bottom-up initiatives, and motivating engagement among various actors and functions within HEIs. Suggestions for future research and implications are outlined for HEI managers and other key actors responsible for structuring and organising collaborative efforts between academia and society.

Background: The Shifting Role of Academia in the Knowledge Society

While the role of academia has shifted over time, it is often referred to as the chief knowledge producer in society, offering knowledge to 'other' actors in society (e.g. Jonsson, Grafström and Klintman 2021; Krücken 2003). A notable shift in the role includes the transition from Mode 1, centring on knowledge production and transferring from within academia to 'other' actors or stakeholders, to Mode 2, which consists of an integrated process where they actively contribute to knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). To use the words by Scholz (2020, p. 1039) on transdisciplinary research for understanding collaborative knowledge production, this underlines the importance of accepting "[…] the otherness of the other. The roles, values, and interests of different

stakeholder groups and disciplines are considered variable contributions for identifying socially robust solutions."

Similarly, in Sweden, which this paper emanates from, the role of academia has expanded from being an actor responsible for teaching and learning to being a knowledge producer in collaboration with society (Bjursell, Dobers and Ramsten 2016; Grafström, Jonsson and Klintman 2020). This change stems from an institutional shift in the higher education system that includes growing pressure from the political, public and private sectors on HEIs to engage in knowledge collaboration with other societal actors (Pinheiro, Geschwind and Aarrevaara 2014; Pinheiro, Benneworth and Jones 2015). This growing pressure has paved the way for numerous concepts, such as integrated science, social accountability, entrepreneurship, and overall economic relevance to society (Fumasoli 2019; Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz 1996; Yang 2018). Furthermore, the shift can largely be explained by increased expectations on academia to contribute to "wicked problems" such as global challenges related to demography, climate change, public health, and welfare (Head and Alford 2015; Weber and Khademian 2008) as well as regional, economic and societal development (Köning et al. 2013; Trippl, Sinozic and Lawton Smith 2015). Although collaboration has always been a central part of academic work – when educating, doing research or communicating with the public – the demands for increased collaboration have increased over the last decades (Benner and Sörlin 2015; Widmalm 2016), as reflected in recent Swedish research bills (Bjare and Perez Vico 2021).

While societal actors prevailingly perceive a need to collaborate, the academic perception is represented by the two opposing views (Brechensbauer et al. 2019; Jonsson et al. 2021); On the one hand, some advocate increased societal collaboration. On the other hand, some advocate greater distance for the sake of academic freedom and integrity. Thus, researchers are often – both by themselves and others – described as actors who either advertise their research on the market stall or choose to be isolated and work in the ivory tower with little interest in society. These opposing views are partly influenced by the fact that collaboration simultaneously presents opportunities and difficulties (Perkmann and Walsh 2009). On the positive side, societal collaboration may enrich the scholarly work of teachers and researchers by generating and giving access to funds, infrastructure and knowledge inputs (Perez Vico and Hallonsten 2019; Perez Vico 2014). Practitioners in society can benefit from scientifically produced knowledge faster (Spaape and Van Drooge 2011; Perkmann et al. 2021). On the negative side, there are concerns about threats from actors seeking commercial advantage that may harm the culture of open science and affect university missions, and that research is posted in a form that will only provide answers to current challenges (Bruneel, D'Este and Salter 2010; Slaughter et al. 2002; Tartari and Breschi 2012).

In recent years, these opposing views have shaped the discussion about societal collaboration and the governance of Swedish universities (Benner and Sörlin 2015; Bjare and Perez Vico 2021). Yet despite these conflicting views, HEIs have increasingly turned their attention to engaging in societal collaboration in response to government policy (Harris 2010; Holley 2009), with increased interest in how to govern and organise for more of these collaborations

(Broström, Feldmann and Kaulio 2019; Lind, Styhre and Aaboen 2014). In Sweden, we have witnessed intensified efforts to structure collaboration at HEIs and "strategise" the arguments for how and why universities should engage in collaboration (Benner and Sörlin 2015). HEIs have produced strategic plans and developed different ways of organising for collaboration, such as collaboration councils, special strategic units and coordinators (Grafström, Jonsson and Klintman 2020). However, recent research indicates that these strategic top-down initiatives often meet faculty resistance, especially from those sceptical of efforts to steer and manage HEIs (Broström, Feldmann and Kaulio 2019; Perez Vico 2021). These developments reflect general challenges facing European HEIs due to centralisation that has redistributed power from the bottom of the organisation towards management and strategic actors that often hold values and aspirations dissimilar to those of academia (Pinheiro, Geschwind and Aarrevaara 2014). Thus, organising for societal collaboration more comprehensively and rigorously requires well-informed decisions built on research-based insights into academia's shifting role in society.

A Reflexive Inquiry on Efforts for Organising Collaboration with 'the Other' in Higher Education

Research on the development of HEI is extensive and covers many different issues related to ways of organising to meet or match various trends and challenges, such as globalisation and neo-liberal political ambitions (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson 2020; Khurana 2010; Shore 2010). The literature is concerned with the influence of various management ideas and, in particular, the consequences of New Public Management (e.g. Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani 2009; Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman 2017; Wedlin and Pallas 2014). Pinheiro, Geschwind and Aarrevaara (2014) describe this influence as a shift in the "social pact" between HEI and society from trust and loyalty to efficiency and accountability. In addition, critical management scholars have focused on power and resistance, including the logic of either adhering to or resisting these changes (e.g. Engwall and Scott 2013; Krücken, Kosmützky and Torka 2007; Pallas 2017). Scholars have also taken an interest in the discrepancy between the strategic and operational levels, or management and "the core business" (i.e. teaching and research). While some researchers address the discrepancy as a pure governance problem, others stress that management takes decisions that are not in line with the logic of the profession but rather a logic heavily influenced by corporate or managerial logic (e.g. Parker 2011; Robertson 2010). The latter is described as an example of decoupling (Ramirez and Christensen 2013) and then motivated as a strategy to protect the core by acting as an "umbrella" and developing strategies that please the institutional, or political, demands (e.g. Bäker and Goodall 2020; Lahikainen et al. 2019).

Within this body of research, the literature has dealt with organising societal collaboration under concepts such as implementing the third mission (Laredo 2007), the knowledge triangle (Perez Vico et al. 2021) or the entrepreneurial university (Clark 1998, Etzkowitz 2004). This vast stream of literature has pointed to signs of decoupling and discrepancy between the strategic and operational levels as challenges for organising societal organisation and even

highlighted that this is the mission that requires the most organisational innovation at HEIs (Laredo 2007; Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020).

Interestingly, in light of efforts to organise for more collaboration, there is less research questioning the underlying assumptions about the relationship between academia and society, i.e. what is meant by 'knowledge', who is expected to contribute with knowledge and how (cf. Van de Ven 2007; Jonsson, Grafström and Klintman 2021). As stressed above, it calls for a reflexive inquiry about the 'otherness' in such expectations (cf. Cunliffe 2003; Cunliffe and Jun 2005).

In organisation research, several researchers argue for the need to engage in reflexivity and adopt a reflexive mindset when conducting qualitative research (cf. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2002), when engaging in management learning (Cunliffe, 2002) or when the ambition is to develop a better understanding of public administration (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005). These arguments open up dual opportunities against our aim, namely, to view reflexivity as an analytical tool but also as a means for bettering the way we organise for societal collaboration. While much has been written about reflexivity and how it differs from reflection, we adhere to Cunliffe and Jun's (2005, p. 227) distinction and understand reflexivity as means for "opening ourselves to other possibilities [and] questioning the basis of our thinking, surfacing the taken-for-granted rules underlying organisational decisions, and critically examining our own practices and ways of relating with others."

With reference to Chia (1996b), Cunliffe (2002, p. 50) argues that "reflexive researchers should recognise otherness, the ongoing, heterogeneous and often contested nature of lived experience, by exploring the tensions and interrelationships of meaning, realities, and theorising". For this paper, we take a starting point in Cunliffe's (2003) call for reflexivity, in particular the need for more reflexivity in public administration (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). Based on our auto-ethnographic observations, we use reflexivity as an analytical lens to develop an understanding – and create meaning – of why strategic initiatives for societal collaboration often fall short and why there is a gap between research and practice when it comes to such organising efforts. Or to use the words by Cunliffe (2003, p 987):

> [...] meaning is created through a constant interplay of presence/absence and what is not said is as important as what is said because each supplements the other. Reflexive researchers recognize oppositional logic as implicit, and actively explore the paradoxical relationship between presence and absence.

Following these lines of thought, we acknowledge both sides of the argument – i.e. for either more or less governance, following the two opposing views on societal collaboration. Thus, we are interested in the interplay between these arguments and in giving meaning to the gap between research and practice related to how HEI organise efforts to engage in societal collaboration. Cunliffe (ibid, p 999) further argues that:

> […] reflexive inquiry can offer valuable insights into organisational studies and practice by stimulating a critical

exploration of how we constitute knowledge and enact our own practices as researchers. In doing so, it raises possibilities for different forms of inquiry and new ways of understanding experience.

In light of reflexivity and the understanding of collaboration between academia and society, the concept of 'otherness' appears particularly interesting. Hibbert et al. (2014, p. 284) describe it as "exploring differences as a means of breaking down boundaries and opening conversations to new voices" that increase the richness of scholarly conversations. Thus, part of the ambition of this reflexive inquiry is – in addition to using reflexivity as an analytical lens – to open up for scholarly conversations on how to organise societal collaboration and pave the way toward a richer understanding of how to (better) align strategy with practice.

Methodological Considerations

Given the aim of this paper, we adhere to the argument about the importance of engaging in reflexivity, i.e. to question our assumptions and theoretical pre-understanding (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013; Davis 1973; Weick 1999) and favour broader interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018; Cornelissen 2017) to offer "good stories" (Dyer and Wilkins 1994; Harley and Cornelissen 2021). This paper is designed as a qualitative case study, which is suitable when developing new insights concerning a situation, concept or phenomenon (e.g. Yin 2003). As stressed by Dyer and Wilkins (1991, p. 615), the goal of a case study is to "provide a rich description of the social scene" and "to describe the context in which events occur" so that "others have little difficulty seeing the same phenomena in their own experience and research" (ibid, p. 617). Thus, part of the ambition is that our story will open up for reflexivity and new questions (cf. Humphreys 2005; Wall 2006), or to use the words by Le Roux (2016, p. 200) in her reference to Ellis (2000):

> *For Ellis (2000), a good autoethnographic narrative should engage one's feeling and thinking capacities while at the same time generate in the reader questions regarding the author's experience and position in relation to the event, how the reader may have experienced the event described and what the reader might have learned from reading the narrative.*

Following Cunliffe's (2003) notion of reflexivity, we have systematically captured and reflected on our experience in line with the principles of auto-ethnographic studies (Ellis 2004). We documented our experiences through continuous notes from events, meetings, phone calls and e-mail communication. This documentation spans over a period starting from the time we got the idea for the course in May 2017 until we finally abandoned the idea of completing the course at our home university in February 2019. All data was compiled from the repository of each individual author/tutor and curated for analysis during the spring of 2020. The systematic gathering and ongoing analysis are essential to emphasise, following the debate on academic rigour, validity and scientific

accountability of qualitative research, and autoethnographic research in particular (cf. Le Roux 2017).

To protect the identity of different individuals while offering rich content for our narrative, we use fictitious names for the individuals who are essential to our history. Based on this material, we have collectively rememorised past events to portray our experiences through an emerging narrative, inviting the reader to follow the course of events (Ellis 2004). To analyse our data and reflections, we have alternated between working in a group and individually and iteratively moved between our documentation, our experiences, and the unfolding narrative. By doing so, we adhere to the tradition of ethnographic studies that aim for responsiveness to distinctive perspectives in our material and authenticity in our narrative (Holt 2003). After outlining the empirical story based on our auto-ethnographic observations, we discussed our findings. To structure our discussion, we lean on Cunliffe's suggestions of how to engage in reflexive inquiry, in what can be described as an abductive approach (cf. Dunne and Dougherty 2016; Peirce 1931). From this reflexive inquiry, three key observations emerged that bring rich insights into why collaboration is such a difficult task to organise and govern. Before outlining these observations and relating them to previous research, we invite the reader to the story on which this reflexive inquiry builds.

A Story of Initiating and Anchoring an Academic Course on Collaboration

The idea to develop a course about societal collaboration emerged after our meeting in May 2017 with our colleague *Charlie*. A stand-alone faculty-affiliated company responsible for executive education, thus not the university, had appointed *Charlie* to develop an executive course on communication, organisational learning and "how to teach practitioners", vaguely defined as "Collaboration with society". The aim was to develop a course to train teachers to be "better equipped" with tools and knowledge about communicating and engaging with society, primarily related to offering executive training. We were all involved in research projects studying various aspects of collaboration between society and academia, so we were surprised to learn that the initiative for this particular course was based on practical insights and best practices rather than scientific knowledge about collaboration. Furthermore, collaboration was mainly translated to communication and executive training, thus reflecting a relatively narrow view of societal collaboration that excluded other prevailing collaboration forms.

Against our scholarly work on collaboration, we perceived a need for a better understanding of collaboration among those given the task to initiate and organise for collaboration, such as developing a course and those commissioning the task, namely top management. Charlie was a well-respected executive program teacher who was seen as a good example of a boundary-spanning researcher. However, his experiences of collaboration were primarily as a practitioner with limited scientific knowledge about collaboration. Nevertheless, Charlie showed great interest in our comments and suggestions on developing the course further and connecting it to existing research. At the same time,

Charlie was bound to the frames of the course and coloured by the understanding of collaboration by faculty top management who had given Charlie the responsibility to develop it.

Our interactions with Charlie prompted us to consider the different understandings of collaboration, as well as how and why specific initiatives to "educate" in collaboration were taken within the faculty at this time. We pondered that if we as researchers shall respond to "more collaboration" without losing our autonomy and craft of being independent researchers, there is a need to educate the profession about different perspectives on and consequences of collaboration rather than educating on how to train practitioners better. This also applies to other roles and positions within HEI, including support staff working to encourage and facilitate collaboration. Hence, we saw a need to equip university staff with scientific knowledge to promote fruitful discussions about societal collaboration – discussions that build on knowledge and less on emotions and opinions about whether collaboration is good or bad.

As a result and first step, we searched for good examples of existing academic courses on collaboration to benchmark what other HEIs offered (and communicated in public). To our surprise, there were not many courses. Those few that did exist mainly focused on developing communication skills and sharing research results with society, and mainly targeted PhD students. Hence, no courses focused on understanding different perspectives of collaboration in relation to one's scholarship – an understanding conceived as vital to engage in collaboration. Based on this point of departure, we began to sketch the initial ideas for a course on collaboration that focused on multifaced views and emphasised experiential learning.

At the same time as we started to write down our initial ideas for how to design the course, we searched for the "right" person to contact at the university. Our ambition was to develop a faculty-spanning course available to all colleagues at the university – not least to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration – and in the long run, to include external stakeholders to facilitate transdisciplinary initiatives. Along this process, we realised that this endeavour would be challenging. We initially contacted another colleague of ours – Cameron – who had recently set up a faculty-spanning course for students. Perhaps naïvely, we assumed that lessons learned from that experience could be easily transferred to a course on collaboration for faculty members. This turned out not to be the case. After our conversation with Cameron, we were advised to contact the division for educational development – a unit that offers courses on higher education pedagogy for all teachers at the university. However, when contacting the division for educational development, we were told that since our course did not target pedagogy specifically, it did not fit the unit's profile. We continue to search for "the right person" through various contacts within the university. Among these, we approached different persons offering courses to university staff in leadership and career development. These contacts taught us that we would need a translucent budget and a clear idea about the course design and implementation. In addition, we were advised to develop "good relations" with some of the vice deans at the university to get the proper attention. As we were figuring out how to set up a budget and estimate costs for our time and

lecture halls, we realised how much of our spare time we spent trying to understand the organisation and identify who had the decisive mandate.

During the autumn of 2017, one of us was invited to give a speech about current research on collaboration at the university's central unit for collaboration support. This unit was a relatively new organisational entity set up under the university's central support section, "Research, collaboration and innovation" and reported to one of the vice-chancellors responsible for collaboration. Just as we were questioning whether we should proceed with our idea, the head of the unit for collaboration – Frances – picked up our idea that was mentioned in a break at this meeting, and thought it was great. As a result, we were encouraged to present our course idea to the newly established council for collaboration initiated under the vice-chancellor. The council had collaboration as a specific responsibility and was represented by all of the university's faculty deans.

Thus, one of us was invited to present our idea and a suggested course outline during a council meeting in November 2017 (see appendix 1 for an early presentation of the course content). The presentation was met with both encouraging comments and sceptical voices. Hence, there was no consensus regarding our idea, although several faculty deans initially expressed interest in a pilot course. Immediately after the presentation, Frances provided encouraging feedback while also emphasising that finding funding and organisational residency for a course like this could be a difficult task, and it was up to us to solve it. However, it was unclear to us how we should proceed since we had previously investigated the issue of organisational residency in many instances within the university without any success. Surprisingly, none of the different support functions – the administrative units responsible for collaboration or the vice-chancellor responsible for collaboration – seemed to have the mandate (or perhaps genuine interest) to support our initiative through means that facilitated the process of furthering our ideas. Frances advised us to contact the faculty deans directly because they have the formal mandate to fund, anchor, and organise a course like this, given the university's distinctly decentralised governance. We were also advised to contact Loui at a unit in charge of faculty-spanning courses and in-house training for university staff to investigate if they could help us concretise and organise our course. The unit offered various courses and training from their educational platform, focusing on general skills such as leadership, writing or applying for external funding. However, after a meeting with us in December 2017, their impression was that our course did not fit their unit as it focused on the individual's competence development related to the scholarship and not on practical organisational skills, which seemed to be what the unit targeted. Also, Loui believed that the unit lacked sufficient practice and routine to organise a pilot course because the unit did not administer complete courses but rather had experience procuring courses. Loui made several suggestions during our talk, referring us back to the division for educational development and another unit for executive education. However, both of these options had previously been ruled out. Hence, from our discussion with Loui, we concluded that the most appropriate residency, given the nature of the course, was our own faculty. However, we needed to anchor the course at other faculties to show our faculty that there was enough interest to fund a pilot course.

Consequently, following Frances' encouragement, we contacted the various faculty deans who had shown interest in our idea at the Collaboration council's meeting. While most deans welcomed our idea, seeing it as a key to professionalising the collaboration task, it became clear that getting a formal decision to initiate and launch the course would be difficult because none of the faculties was willing to bear the costs for developing the course. The deans compared the budget for our course with other courses offered to faculty members that were already established and had significant economies of scale due to high volumes, such as pedagogy courses. We realised that no organisational entity was willing to cover the developing cost since faculty deans considered the price per participant for developing and carrying out a pilot course, like the one we proposed, to be too high. In addition, we were advised to return to "The Collaboration Unit" or "The Collaboration Council", as the faculties considered that this form of initiative should fall under the responsibility of these entities and, thus, they should mobilise funds. We sensed a catch-22 moment – it was always "someother" person or part of the organisation, that we should contact to move forward.

We continuously bounced back and forth between persons we approached in our attempts to organise for collaboration. Therefore, we decided to look for alternative paths for moving forward with our idea. By this time, we also received advice from the vice-dean of our faculty, Cleo, to apply for external funding for developing and carrying out a pilot course and then try to "sell" a readily developed course to the university. Cleo was optimistic about our initiative but seemed unable to convince the dean and pro-dean to fund it, so they recommended we seek external funding. Therefore, in January 2018, we applied for funding from two external foundations mainly focusing on supporting researchers at the university. Unfortunately, we were rejected with the motivation that our application deviated from the conventional format of applications and that this initiative was something a university should finance and support. The "someother" was pointing back to the university. Feeling disappointed but still convinced about our idea, we returned with this feedback to "The Collaboration Unit" and "The Collaboration Council". In addition, we reached out by e-mail to our pro dean Carson, responsible for collaboration at our faculty, for suggestions on how to proceed and learn the tactics of dealing with "the politics". We did not receive any response for several months. We would later learn that our question had "fallen between chairs". This is also the general argument for why collaboration is difficult to organise since it falls between responsibility for either research or education.

Despite all efforts, we did not manage to convince "the right person" at the university nor identify who that person could be. No one wanted (or perceived to have the mandate) to take responsibility for the course. In fact, we still don't know who would be "the right person" to ask when organising for collaboration in the form of a course for faculty members. While continuing to develop a persuasive and selling offer for the course and seek internal acceptance, we realised that we eventually had come up with an almost fully-developed course while refining our ideas on non-financed time. At this point, we had a detailed course plan with a tentative outline, course literature and formulated learning outcomes. Feeling frustrated that all invested time and effort would go to waste

and all ideas would be lost, we decided to have a last go and reached out to Cleo once again, who was now part of "The Collaboration Council". In correspondence with Frances, Cleo promised to speak for our case at the next collaboration board meeting in February 2018. Later in August 2018, Cleo tried to reach out for attention at faculty level.

Cleo's attempt and a reminder to Carson about our e-mail finally led to a response from faculty management a few months later. We were informed that they liked the idea but wanted to modify the course content to fit Agenda 2030 and that the target group needed to be PhD students. In this way, the course could target the strategic plan to adhere to issues about sustainability. We were also informed that a course on collaboration that did not target PhD students would have more difficulty attracting participants. In this respect, PhD students were seen as a safer market due to economies of scale measured as the number of participants. The critical issue seemed once again to bear the costs of developing a faculty-spanning course with the perceived uncertainty of reaching a sufficient number of participants to pay off. Carson also stressed that it was unfortunate that our initiative had been presented at "The Collaboration Council" before it reached the faculty and that funding a course that is supposed to be offered to all faculties would be difficult, which proved to be true. It is interesting to note, and reflect on, that if top management did not consider collaboration important, why would staff – teachers and researchers – do so?

We turned down the offer to develop a PhD course on sustainability, as none of us had any in-depth knowledge about these issues and since our initiative specifically targeted faculty and not PhD students. In our response letter, we reminded the management that other colleagues at the faculty had better knowledge of sustainability research than we did and that we interpreted their answer as "it is unclear who wants to or should take responsibility for a course on collaboration". However, we did not receive any response and were left with the question unanswered.

Feeling disappointed about spending significant time and effort on a course that most people seemed to appreciate and consider a good idea but were uninterested in funding and taking responsibility for, we felt that we probably had to surrender our idea. We realised we could not spend more time trying to anchor our bottom-up initiative with the strategic level. Just when we concluded that we had spent too much of our spare time without any clear results, one of us was contacted by Vinnova, Sweden's innovation agency that supports research and innovation, on another issue. At the time, Vinnova was running a program to strengthen HEI's strategic work on societal collaboration. It turned out that one of the projects in the program was initially intended to focus on developing a course but switched focus for several reasons. Vinnova saw an opportunity to fill this gap in the portfolio through our course idea, and since there was still room in the program budget, they encouraged us to apply for funding. We applied, and in February 2019, Vinnova accepted our application for a research project to develop and test a course concept targeting researchers and teachers at Swedish HEIs.

Findings: Detached, Decoupled and Demotivated reactions

The reflexivity that Cunliffe (2003, 2002) calls for offers opportunities to reflect on the reactions we encountered during our endeavour. Our experience from this

bottom-up initiative has left us with diverse observations of the difficulties of initiating and anchoring a course, even though it was a topic on all lips, not least strategic ones. We categorise our observations into three main findings.

Disconnection between theory and practice

The motivation for initiating the course in the first place was the observation that most initiatives for collaboration at HEIs do not build on research (scientific knowledge) on collaboration but rather on "best practice", personal experiences and "beliefs". This became particularly clear to us as the content of the initial idea for a course introduced by *Charlie,* who had been assigned to develop a course for faculty members, had a weak connection to the research on collaboration. Rather than simply stating that scientific knowledge about societal collaboration was ignored, we took action and decided to try to connect theory and practice by developing, initiating and anchoring a course with a transdisciplinary focus. The disconnection was also partly revealed in our discussions with various persons when trying to anchor the course. It surprised us as scholars that several individuals responsible for organising and supporting societal collaboration at a university held limited knowledge about the research on collaboration and showed lukewarm interest in learning about it. It prompted us to consider whether research on societal collaboration should be communicated in a different; a reflection also made in a related research project (cf. Jonsson and Grafström, 2021; Jonsson, Brechensbauer and Grafström, 2022)

We felt it was critical to delve deeper into the disconnection between theory and practice, as well as why academia does not appear to live by scientific knowledge when organising for societal collaboration. Connecting theory and practice on any issue necessitates active reflexivity on one's practice in light of current scientific knowledge and beyond. We saw a risk that the absence of opportunities for such reflection might lead to misdirected support and initiatives and flawed organising for societal collaboration. Thus, this disconnection especially highlights the need for reflexivity in our scholarship following Cunliffe's argument (2002, 2003).

Discrepancy between strategies and the everyday work

Our experience of trying to anchor the idea for almost two years reveals an apparent discrepancy between pronounced strategies and everyday work at the micro-level concerning collaboration between the university and society. By the time we were trying to anchor our initiative, the present HEI had communicated in their strategic documents and web pages that collaboration is essential and can take many forms, such as education, research projects or specific centre formation for interactions and 'mutual benefits'. Thus, since the strategy indicated that societal collaboration is important and dedicated organisational entities had particular responsibilities for collaboration, we expected such claims to be mirrored in practice – at least somehow. We expected that our bottom-up and practice-oriented initiative would be welcomed as a means to operationalise these strategies. We also expected that "The Collaboration Unit" and "The Collaboration Council" – two organisational entities with a particular focus on the topic – would be interested and the apparent 'owners' that would take responsibility for supporting the operationalisation of the course. We were

puzzled by the inaction but also the lack of connection between these entities since the "Council" was responsible for cross-faculty collaboration issues and had the possibility of funding transdisciplinary initiatives, and the "Unit" was the corresponding support structure.

Our experience shows that faculty-spanning matters, such as our course, were hard to operationalise and decide on. However, when discussing challenges related to collaboration with participants who attended the course that eventually was organised, we could notice that this was evident also at other HEIs (with exceptions from younger and smaller HEIs).

(De)motivation to engage in collaboration

Our course initiative was motivated by a desire to contribute to organisational improvements building on scientific knowledge, and in this case, with a particular focus on societal collaboration. As outlined above, from time to time, we felt that we had to give up our idea. The motivation to spend more of our spare time, i.e. time that could not be linked to neither research or teaching nor "the third task" (i.e. societal collaboration), eventually decreased when we realised it was always 'someother' person we should talk to or "try to convince". Yet, some individuals continuously encouraged us and opened doors, and that maintained our motivation. Drawing on the experiences from our case, we associate this ambiguity between motivation and demotivation with a fear of steering too much, and the risk of jeopardising autonomy. We sense that while it is perceived legitimate to steer towards matters such as excellence in research or internationalisation in education, societal collaboration is considered a different type of organising principle and thus treated differently. It was expressed that trying to control and steer collaboration would not work, and that creating an environment that "unleashes creativity" is better. Creating better conditions for collaboration was understood as nurturing a culture for enabling bottom-up initiatives. However, although this conviction might be the management's view, structuring specific organisation units such as "The Collaboration Unit" and "The Collaboration Council" signals something different. Our story also highlights the difficulty of bottom-up initiatives to gain legitimacy and 'be enabled'. We detect an organising conflict as bottom-up approaches are put forward as the best way to organise societal collaboration simultaneously as various procedures and frameworks are developed and implemented by the functions offering support for collaboration (i.e. top-down). This tension needs to be further explored, not only concerning efforts for structuring and organising collaboration, but also other issues related to efforts for how scientific knowledge shall or could have an impact on society.

Interestingly, when engaging in this reflexive inquiry, it became clear that these findings resonate with arguments for why academia and HEIs need to engage more in societal collaboration. In other words, we see similar challenges when bringing together academia and other actors in collaborative knowledge productions that we do when reflecting on our experiences of organising for collaboration.

Discussion: A Kafkaesque Story About 'Someotherism'

When we outline our story and reflect on the process, we appear to be part of a Kafka play, with "Kafkaesque bureaucracy" (Clegg et al., 2016). We experienced different degrees of interest at various organisational levels and could also sense ambiguity in the responses and reactions we met. On the one hand, we were met with encouraging reactions that motivated us to continue to develop our ideas. Many influential people in various positions within the organisation – "the right persons" – applauded our initiative, and societal collaboration was clearly articulated as significant in the university strategy. On the other hand, no one seemed interested or willing to accept responsibility for the course. No one was able or had the mandate to support the course resource-wise, strategically or administratively. Instead, we were constantly shuffled around between different individuals and parts of the organisation. We detected 'someotherism' – meaning that there was always "some other" (person or organisational unit) within the university to which we were (re)directed. This is further interesting considering the strong signals, such as the penultimate research Swedish policy bill (Prop 2016/17:50), that clearly emphasised the importance of organising for societal collaboration and immediately coloured the strategic plans for many HEIs. However, our story reveals that, in practice it is less evident how and by whom these strategies are operationalised and implemented.

Trying to anchor a course on collaboration, which cannot easily be categorised as neither research nor education and lacks a natural home, was an eye-opener. We were told that this was the backside of the managerial governance structure and that everyone is aware of the problems of "getting things done". This further triggered our interest, and we were surprised to understand that neither the extensive literature on the deficiencies with NPM ideas in HEIs seemed to be "lived by" (cf. Wedlin and Pallas 2017). We were surprised to learn about the ignorance of using scientific knowledge (Czarniawska, 1997) as a basis for organising in academia. Intriguingly, the argument for societal collaboration is to bridge the gap between research and practice (Van de Ven 2007).

While a slow pace may benefit some things due to the structure and routes to decisions, there is also a risk that nothing will happen and that strategies will only exist on paper. Not even collaboration units, collaboration councils, or those principally responsible for collaboration perceived that such an initiative fell under their responsibility. In addition, although collaboration is a priority issue at many HEIs, finding the proper communication channels to reach out to "the right person(s)" within the university to understand how we should proceed with our initiative proved challenging. The information continuously seemed to either get stuck at different levels in the organisation or end up in silos. These observations indicate that the degree of decoupling (Ramirez and Christensen 2013) when organising for collaboration is exceptionally high, which echoes other stories of organising for collaboration (Broström, Feldmann and Kaulio 2019; Perez Vico 2021).

Our finding about the discrepancy between strategic and everyday work resonates well with existing research. For instance, Thoenig and Paradeise

(2018) highlight distinctive features of university strategic work that may contribute this discrepancy: strategies may be more or less formally displayed, are rarely fully endorsed by faculty, and are subject to change during the internal dynamics that follow implementation. However, this discrepancy is not unique to HEIs; it is a pattern we can find in many other organisations. Our experiences also echo descriptions of HEI as loosely coupled collective action systems that struggle to achieve internal cohesion (Thoenig and Paradeise 2016). The success of introducing new structures or initiatives at HEI is consequently significantly dependent on compatibility with existing identities, cultures, and routines. If the compatibility is weak, new initiatives or structures are typically rejected or decoupled from current practice (Maasen et al., 2017). Indeed, several studies have shown that societal collaboration tends to be decoupled from core internal HEI structures and that institutionalising such practices into the everyday HEI routines and norms is hard to reach (Pinheiro, Benneworth and Jones 2015, Benner and Sörlin, 2015). Our story brings fine-grained insights into the unfolding and consequences of this situation.

The findings we put forward are particularly interesting as there is currently a call on universities to act more strategically and socially responsible and engage in efforts to understand and solve "wicked problems". While some researchers advocate vertical integration, Maassen and Stensaker (2019) argue that attempts to strengthen hierarchical governance structures and practices seem to also lead to horizontal decoupling of the managerial and administrative domain from the professional domain, both concerning norms, values and understandings of the role of universities. We could observe a significant disconnection between theory and practice, i.e., a knowing-doing gap. While this is a classic problem in organisations (cf. Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000), there are also numerous suggestions on how to organise to overcome it. For instance, Mintzberg (1980) discusses five different structures that each rely on one of the five coordinating mechanisms to find the right match between internal processes and the environment. When reading about the development of HEI, many of these institutions appear to be run as a corporatisation, moving away from the professional role (e.g. Lynch 2006; Wedlin and Pallas 2017). This has resulted in a situation "where different governance ideals co-act", as discussed by Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterqvist (2016, p. 1); the managerial turn and bureaucracy challenge collegiality and meritocracy. This, in turn, challenges decision-making and should be compared with how Mintzberg (1980, p. 329) describes an adhocracy:

> *Finally, the support staff gains the most influence in the organisation, not when it is autonomous but when its collaboration is called for in decision-making, owing to its expertise. This happens when the organisation is structured into work constellations to which power is decentralised selectively and which are free to coordinate within and between themselves by mutual adjustment. The organisation adopts the Adhocracy configuration to the extent that conditions favor this pull to collaborate.*

Moreover, our findings align with HEI research on the consequences for a sector that has become increasingly "manageralized", with the result that collegiality and professional decisions have become marginalised (cf. Wedlin and Pallas 2017). Research shows, somewhat contra-intuitively, that state reforms to increase HEI autonomy and, assumingly, collegial influence have had opposite effects (Ahlbäck Öberg and Boberg 2022). When HEIs have gained increased autonomy from the state, many HEIs use this freedom to strengthen line management, which has overshadowed collegial influence. This is further interesting since the collective action of the university is ultimately dependent on the commitment of leading academics in the faculty, which strive for a high degree of autonomy against line management (cf. Broström, Feldmann and Kaulio 2019). Our experiences of being shuffled between collegial bodies and management units provide detailed insights into the complexity and lack of action this situation has created.

As a whole, our journey left us with sentiments that genuinely resemble a Kafkaesque experience (Clegg et al., 2016); the ignorance and complication of the responses we met gave us a sense of meaninglessness, the carelessness and "someotherism" of the organisation in relation to our initiative paved the way for inactiveness. The constant back and forth between motivation and demotivation left us with a feeling of helplessness.

Nonetheless, while this story and these experiences come across as a Kafka-like narrative, it is essential to emphasise that our reflexive inquiry should be understood as an attempt to give meaning to the phenomenon under consideration. Reflexivity went beyond functioning as an analytical lens for this story; it also served as a conceptual frame against which we could compare our experiences. The story that unfolded indeed indicates a need for reflexivity, bringing together theory and practice and reflecting on underlying assumptions (Cunliffe 2003; Cunliffe and Jun 2005) when organising societal collaboration at HEIs.

Concluding Discussion: In Search for Reflexivity and 'Togetherness'

Our reflexive inquiry aimed to offer a nuanced and fine-grained understanding of how efforts for organising for societal collaboration are met within HEIs. The underlying question for our inquiry was *why* collaboration is such a difficult task to organise and govern in HEI. Based on our experience from initiating and anchoring an academic course on collaboration, we have recognised three findings that call for collaboration, reflexivity, and trust in scientific knowledge. By engaging in a reflexive inquiry – as an analytical lens – we see a discrepancy between strategies and everyday work, a disconnection between theory and practice, and a demotivation to engage in collaboration. These are indeed three arguments used in the discussion for why academia should or need to engage in collaboration and also described as hinders that must be understood or bridged. Thus, we see similar challenges when organising for collaboration *within* academia when we are looking at collaborative knowledge productions with actors *outside* of academia. This calls for further inquiries about perceptions about the role of academia and its connection with society.

A number of interesting ideas for further study emerge from our reflexive inquiry. By sharing our experiences of taking the initiative for organising societal collaboration, we have highlighted the tensions that might arise, but we also identified a void. An interesting issue for future research is the discrepancy between strategy and everyday work, particularly concerning the ambiguities and absence of willingness to take responsibility for organising collaboration. This dilemma can be characterised by what we refer to as "somoetherism", which resonates with decoupling strategies and ideas and ideals about autonomy, but which could also be understood as a lack of understanding about the organisation and where decisions are made. From our observations, we found ourselves in a space that suffered from unclear mandates and intentions, a significant gap between research and practice, and strategic management and operational academic work. While this space may appear to be a frustrating impediment at first glance, it may also be viewed as necessary; new ideas and knowledge emerge from crossing boundaries, but only if there is space for reflexivity (cf Jonsson, Grafström and Klintman 2022; Langley et al. 2019). Or, to use Hibbert et al.'s (2014, p.292) words, "for encountering otherness and leads to opportunities for reflexive learning, a sense of connectedness, and growth for all."

In terms of practical implications and to cater for societal collaboration, HEIs need to integrate the ingredients of collaboration per see in their efforts to organise for collaboration, including collaboration between the strategic, support, and operational levels. Evidently, if the academic profession's interest is lacking, the ideas for organising collaboration will fall short. A good starting point, not only concerning the discussion about collaboration, is to explore the local conditions and build on existing scientific knowledge on how to organise and govern HEIs. And since research on societal collaboration has grown exceptionally during the last couple of decades (Perkmann et al. 2021), universities have plenty of opportunities to live by scientific knowledge when organising for collaboration. To contribute to a society that builds on the long-term provision of knowledge, we need to acknowledge – not ignore – scientific knowledge.

For HEI management interested in responding to the institutional shift that encompasses a growing pressure to engage in knowledge collaboration with other societal actors, there is a need to consider mandates and cater to bottom-up initiatives. In addition, organising for societal collaboration requires well-informed decisions built on scientific knowledge, both concerning societal collaboration but also academia's shifting role in society at large. When reflecting on the role of academia and its relation to society, Cunliffe's (2003) discussion on the need for reflexivity about epistemological and ontological assumptions becomes relevant. To use her own words (ibid, p. 985), "Reflexivity 'unsettles' representation by suggesting that we are constantly constructing meaning and social realities as we interact with others and talk about our experience."

Given the importance of this, academia must find ways to conduct collaboration more comprehensively and rigorously by aiming for more 'togetherness', or what Hibbert et al. (2014, p. 279) refer to as 'enacting connectedness'. This, in turn, requires allowing for spaces and resources to live

by scientific knowledge and engage in reflexivity. This is a call for collaboration among all actors within HEIs, ranging from top management to support staff and faculty members - a call that calls for collaboration per see.

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Appendix

1. An early outline of the course, as presented at a council meeting in November 2017

A course on collaboration – focus on mutual learning

In this first draft

- Researchers and teachers as course participants (participate in the entire course and receives points)
- External parties and staff in support functions (participating in relevant modules in the course based on their learning needs and/or complementary perspectives)
- Forms of teaching
- Lectures by course managers and guest lecturers from [HEI], and experts from external organisations
- Exchange of experience through workshops where the participants' experiences are at the center
- Interactive discussions with panels of invitees from different collaborative constellations

Suggested Modules:

- Conceptual discussions – what is collaboration?
- Collaboration in teaching - practical perspectives
- Collaboration in research - practical perspectives
- Potential benefits of collaboration – for academia and for society
- Challenges with collaboration – prerequisites and organisation
- Legal and ethical aspects of cooperation
- Collaboration in the higher education policy landscape
- Strategic considerations – what is successful collaboration and how can it be enabled