A Process Model for Building an International Partner Network

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Abstract

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The objective of this thesis is to create a process model for building an international partner network. The process model was developed by utilizing a theoretical framework as well as action research and constructive research as research approaches. The process model was tested in real-life situations and through participatory observation and survey, a version 2.0 of the process model was created as an end result of this thesis.

The case company of this thesis, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences Service Experience Laboratory LAB8, is highly experienced in international (mostly European) project collaborations. However, even though LAB8 has vast experience in many types of international research and development projects, it has yet to receive funding from the most prominent funding institutions in Europe. As this funding institution, called Horizon 2020 and managed by the European commission, stated in their rules that in order for an organization to receive funding from the instrument, it requires the organization to have received previous funding from the same instrument. Since this meant having to find new partners with such experience to collaborate with, LAB8 set out to create a process model for building an international partner network.

The theoretical framework of this thesis is a combination of internationalization and networking theories. As presented in the chapters concerning the theoretical framework, all the theories presented are linked with each other in one form or another. The linkages between the theories are also presented in a figure at the end of the chapter.

This thesis was conducted with action research and constructive research as research approaches. The more specific research methods included participatory observation and survey. The end-result of this thesis, a process model for building an international partner network, was developed through these research methods.

Keywords
International partner network, Network building, Partnership, Internationalization, Business model, Process model

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1 Introduction and objectives

Networking has become the "word du jour", whether the case is of personal relationships, corporate management or international business. This is not without reason: collaboration and different types of networks have proven to be valuable assets in creating and developing new operations and business possibilities. (Griffin & Pustay 2015, 389) Especially in the world of research- and knowledge intensive organizations, working together with different areas of expertise can significantly improve their ability to create something grand and invaluable.

The case company of this thesis, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences Service Experience Laboratory LAB8, is highly experienced in international (mostly European) project collaborations. The need to invest in international partnerships is constant, as different projects often require different types of multinational teams called consortiums. As experienced as Haaga-Helia has been over the years in conducting international projects, there is still room for organizational growth, too.

European research and development funding, distributed by the European Commission, comes in many forms. There are different types of regional funding (e.g. Interreg), which is limited for specific geographical areas in Europe. Another funding instrument, one of the largest and most wide-ranging in content, is the Erasmus+ funding. Erasmus+ includes student, teacher and personnel exchange programmes in addition to many different forms of research and development funding. Haaga-Helia is highly experienced in Erasmus+ funding and has conducted many successful multinational projects under this funding instrument, both as a lead and as a partner organization. However, as successful as Haaga-Helia has been in Erasmus+ funding over the years, there still is the highest level of European funding from which Haaga-Helia has not yet received any funding. This funding instrument is called Horizon 2020, which distributes billions of euros of funding to top-level development and research projects. In addition to being the one of the largest funding instruments in the world, Horizon 2020 is also one the most difficult ones to apply for. In order for an organization to be able to apply for funding, it is required for it to have received prior funding from the same instrument. In essence, this means that in order for an organization to be able to apply for Horizon 2020 funding, it needs to have experience in operating as a partner in a previously funded project. (European commission 2020) At present, LAB8 has not been a partner in Horizon 2020 funding applications, nor did it have a previously known potential partners of such in its existing partner network.

The conclusion of this is that even though Haaga-Helia is highly experienced in the Erasmus+ level of funding, the previous collaboration it has conducted has been performed with partners who do not operate on the level of funding that Haaga-Helia would like to penetrate. In order to do so,

Haaga-Helia needs to form new partnerships with organizations that have previously not been our partners, but are experienced in Horizon 2020 funding.

But how do we build these valuable relationships? What are the concrete steps we need to take in order to create a partner network? These are the questions this thesis aims to answer.

1.1 Overview

Networks and strategic alliances provide endless possibilities for value creation. They can be used to create more efficient supply chains, to offer more solutions to customers, and for possibilities to expand on national and international markets. (Griffin & Pustay 2015, 386) These features make networking and creating strategic alliances some of the most important activities a firm can concentrate on.

As networks and partnerships are known to be valuable assets in business, there is a lot of literature about the subjects. The same can also be said about internationalization literature, which can be found in plenty of sources and contexts. However, even though there is a lot of literature about these important subjects, they tend to concentrate on the strategic or managerial side of the operations. The early theories of internationalization date back to the 1960s, when traditional economic theories which had been used in international studies since the 1930s, were replaces with first introductions to internationalization theories (Andersen, Ahmad & Chan 2014, 38). Some of the most influential internationalization theories include for example the Uppsala model, created in 1977, which to this date is one of the most influential modern-day theories of internationalization. As Uppsala model is one of the most relevant internationalization theories to date, we will be taking a closer look at it and a few other relevant theories in chapter 2.

However, even though there are these valuable theories and active scientific discussion continues to date, there still is room for new insights in the world of international networks. As majority of the existing discussion concentrates on the management of existing international partner networks, many of them do not present a view on how to initiate the very first contact with the potential partner organization. Another element that this thesis aims to bring to the discussion, is a step-by-step process model and practical tools related to different phases of the process, to support the implementation of it. As Möller, Rajala and Svahn (2004, 27) state, the basic unit of a partner network is the bilateral relationship between two operators. This being the case, this thesis focuses on describing the initial steps for building an international partner network by contacting individual potential partner organizations separately.

1.2   Research objective and strategy

The objective of this thesis is to create a process model for building an international partner network. The process model concentrates on the first steps initiating a discussion with a completely new potential partner organization. The process model is developed for Haaga-Helia Service Experience Laboratory LAB8, which also functions as the piloting environment for the implementation of the process model. However, even though the process model is created for LAB8, it can also be applied to other organizations looking to form new partnerships with previously unknown partners.

As the objective of this thesis is to create a process model for building an international partner network, constructive research is an appropriate one to use to conduct the research in this thesis. Constructive research aims to create a construct, in this case a process model, as an end-result of the research process. As the researcher, in this case myself, is going to be an active participant in the research and development process, also action research is an approach that is valid and applicable in this situation. Thus, as there were two research approaches that were suitable to conduct this thesis, a decision was made to use a combination of them both. Both of these approaches are presented in more detail in chapter 4.

This thesis was conducted as a development project for Haaga-Helia Service Experience Laboratory LAB8. The project started in the fall of 2019 and it was initially supposed to be conducted by the end of spring 2020. However, as the project concentrated on planning international activities which were supposed to be tested in action right at the same time as the Covid-19 pandemic started, the duration of the project was eventually extended to fall 2020.

The way that this thesis was executed, was first to create an initial draft of the process model, test it in real life, and then revise it in a way that would ultimately create a version 2.0 of the process model. This thesis was conducted as a development project including the researcher and a team of experts participating in the project. In order to fully test the initial draft process model in a comprehensive way, the testing was decided to be done in three different ways, in order to find the best way to implement the process model in real life. After the testing phase of the project, all of the participants were surveyed to receive their feedback before revising the initial process model to version 2.0. This thesis provides the information and concrete, step-by-step instructions on how to build the initial steps towards international partnership in chapter 4.

2   Building international networks

There are bundles of different theories of internationalization, of which Andersen, Ahmad and Chan (2014, 38-39) point out as the most important ones the following nine: Monopolistic Advantage Theory, International Product Life Cycle Theory, Internationalization Theory (Uppsala Model), Networks Theory (Network Approach), Internationalization Theory (II), Eclectic Theory (OLI Model), Transaction Cost Theory (TC), Resource Based View (RBV) and Contingency Theory. Since this thesis is about building international partner networks, the most relevant theories are Internationalization Theory, Networks Theory and Resource Based View. We will take a closer look at all of them in the following chapters. Since this thesis is also about building international strategic partnerships, at the end of this chapter we will also take a look at the theory of International strategic alliances.

2.1   Internationalization theory (Uppsala Model)

Up until the 1930s, international business studies were conducted relying on economic theories (Buckley in Andersen, Ahmad and Chan 2014, 38). One of the earliest theories on the process of internationalization as a whole was the Uppsala model, which was developed by Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul in 1975 and complemented by Johanson and Vahlne in 1977. Prior to that, there were little or no theories that would take a stand on the process as an entity. (Arvidsson & Arvidsson 2019, 2)

The core idea of Uppsala model is to gradually increase the activities in international markets, as companies build their experience in them. The theory states that at first, organizations start their internationalization in familiar markets with close proximity to their own business conditions and culture. Second, they gradually move from there on to more unfamiliar grounds. (Arvidsson & Arvidsson 2019, 2).

Imbedded in the Uppsala model is an iterative approach to internationalization (Lemos, Johanson & Vahlne 2011, 144). As Arvidsson et al (2019) state, Uppsala model presents a theory of gradual development in international markets, progressing from one market to another. However, as a criticism to the theory's lack of fundamental explanation for the contingency in the progression, Lemos et al (2011, 144) note that even though Uppsala model does explain that the company's past experiences would affect their decisions to commit resources to foreign operations, this alone does not explain the conditional nature of the decisions.

Although Uppsala model was originally created to depict the characteristics of the conditions in which companies internationalize, it can also be viewed as an early adaptation of the Resource-Based View (presented in figure 1). This is explained by the Uppsala model having a strategic approach to its content in emphasizing the role of heterogeneous resources, as well as noting that increase in knowledge is also increase in the capabilities of the company. (Vahlne & Johanson 2013, 5)

2.2 Network approach

According to Halinen & Törnroos (2005), business conditions have changed significantly since the first notions of networks in industrial marketing were made in the early 1980s. Globalization and the so-called "new economy" is based on continuous change, the increasing use of information and communication technologies and complex networks of relationships between firms (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). This being the case, we should look more closely at how networks are constituted and how they currently function (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005, 1285).

Andersen et al (2014, 38) present network approach as one of the nine major theories of internationalization. Vissak (2004, 2) points out, that network approach has been a widely used framework in many different disciplines. In addition to internationalization, it has been used in the context of sociology, organization theory, social policy, innovation and entrepreneurship studies, political science, industrial marketing and purchasing, and economic geography (Araujo and Easton 1996 in Vissak 2004). Vissak puts the term in the context of business network, and in relation to a set of relationships between different operators, which affect the process of internationalization. (Vissak 2004, 2)

The difference between network approach in relation to several other internationalization theories, including Uppsala theory, is that the network approach considers managerial as well as problem solving elements in the theory, where the Uppsala theory concentrates on the different phases of the process. These are defining elements in differentiating the two theories, even though network approach has eventually been partially developed from Uppsala theory (figure 1). (Vissak 2004, 3) "While the traditional internationalization literature largely concentrates on the processes of deciding and planning to enter a market and on entry modes, the network approach stresses the actual process of market entry and becoming a player in the network", states Salmi in Vissak 2004 (4).

As Vissak (2004, 4) brings out, network approach highlights the idea of companies being able to operate and distribute their resources more efficiently, if conducting operations in collaboration in contrary to competing.

2.3   The Resource Based View

According to Kraaijenbrink, Spender and Groen (2010, 350) one of the most significant theories of management according to the number of citations, is the Recourse Based View (RBV). The basis of this theory, originally presented by Barney in 1991 and updated in 1994 and 2002, the main proposition of RBV is to consider a company's own internal resources as source for creating a sustainable competitive advantage (SCA). This can be done by taking hold of and managing resources and capabilities, which are considered to be valuable, rare, inimitable and nonsubstitutable (VRIN). (Kraaijenbrink et al 2010, 350) RBV is stated as one of the nine major internationalization theories by Andersen et al (2014, 38-39).

Resources can be anything from a firm's asset, capability, process, attribute or information, which is managed by the firm. (Barney in Kraaijenbrink et al, 2010, 356) In order for resources to be valuable, they need to be able to provide the company with the possibility to enhance its operations' efficiency or effectiveness. For resources to be rare, there needs to be a limited supply of them and not found equally divided amongst all competitive surroundings. The inimitability of resources is defined by how unable other companies are to copy or reproduce them, and non-substitutability is defined by how difficult the resource is to be substituted. (Lockett, Thompson & Morgenstern 2009, chapter 6)

Kraaijenbrink et al (2010, 350) point out that even though RBV has "elegant simplicity", making it relatively easy to use, teach and absorb, it is not without its limitations. Where the RBV does encourage companies to pay attention and develop their VRIN, it fails to tell how it eventually should be done. RBV also gets criticism on what can be interpreted as implication to unlimited regression, meaning that in order for firms to gain competitive advantage, they are in a risk of finding themselves endlessly looking for and creating higher order capabilities at the cost of second order (or other) capabilities, which in reality could in due time be even more valuable than the higher order ones. (Kraaijenbrink et al 2010, 350-352)

One of the criticisms that RBV has also received is its limited applicability to different situations. It is said to be more usable in larger companies, as well as in companies which are seeking to enhance their sustainable competitive advantage (SCA). If a company is small in size or content with its competitive advantage, it is not in the realms of utilizing RBV for the development of their business. In regards to SCA, there is also criticism against RBV on focusing on trying to utilize VRIN to create an SCA that prevents others from creating similar ones. In the premise of ever-changing knowledge, skills and other resources, in reality it is unable to be done. On the other hand, another critique states that in order to achieve SCA there doesn't need to be VRIN applied at all. (Kraaijenbrink et al 2010, 353-354)

Even with these critiques, RBV still remains a strong theory to use, especially if complemented with more specific views on some of the elements that are included in the theory. Considering that a company's SCA might be affected differently by different types of resources, can help the application of this otherwise simple theory. Furthermore, distinguishing a difference between these different types of resources can help utilize the theory in more relevance and applicability. (Kraaijenbrink et al 2010, 362)

2.4   International strategic alliances

According to Griffin and Pustay (2015, 388) and Li, Qian and Qian (2013, 489), international strategic alliances are contracts or agreements based on voluntary commitment. They can be either one or a collection of operations which are based on mutual collaboration and agreement between different parties or organizations. In strategic alliances, the organizational needs are different from the ones in other internationalization situations. For example, in foreign direct investment, licencing and franchising, the company relies on their own resources and create new operations directly by themselves or by acquiring them. In comparison to them, strategic alliances rely on mutual benefit and the willingness to collaborate based on joint interest. However, even though strategic alliances are based on collaboration rather than acquiring assets, it should not be confused with not having a contractual side to it too. For example, in joint ventures the aim is to create a new business entity between the operators, so there is a large amount of legal and contractual aspects to consider. (Griffin and Pustay 2015, 388) The reason behind strategic alliances can also be seen as a link between this theory and the resource based view: in comparison to the resource based view, strategic alliances can be seen as a way of accessing the resources of another company without having to create one's own (Day, Lambe et al., Varadarajan & Cunningham in Lammi 2012).

Li et al bring out that in 1980s and 1990s the motives behind strategic alliances were often explained through Resource Based View (figure 1). They further explain that it was indicated that companies are able to gain competitive advantage by sharing resources with each other through strategic alliances, as well as share the risks and costs that are involved in the operations. (Li et al 2013, 489) Three of the mentioned competitive advantages are improved Research and Development activities (R&D competences, better abilities to market their products and services, and increased learning competences). Nielsen & Nielsen (2009, 1031-1032) highlight that as they have empirically discovered, in connection to knowledge management of international strategic alliances, learning and innovation are related, however distinct, structures.
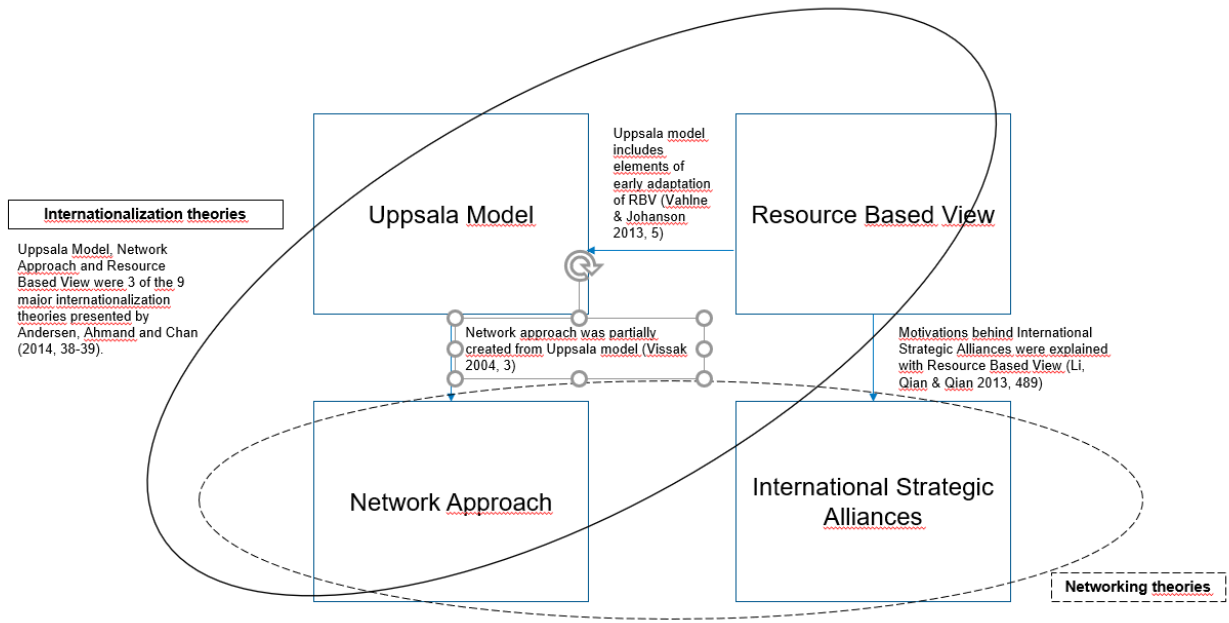
Figure 1. Linkages between the theories of internationalization and networking.

3   Case company: Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences Service Experience Laboratory LAB8

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences is Finland's second largest university of applied sciences with 11 000 students and 731 personnel operating on 5 campuses (Haaga-Helia 2022). In addition to its core activity of offering higher education in Finnish and in English on bachelor and master level, it is also known for its strong connections with business life especially in the Uusimaa region. (Haaga-Helia 2022)

Service Experience Laboratory LAB8 is a unit in Haaga-Helia, which concentrates on creating externally funded projects to develop service business in regional, national and international development projects. LAB8 combines creativity, service business and learning by doing to collaboratively develop the service industry. LAB8 has three major core competences: service experience, service concepts & design and digital multichannel services. Instead of being a physical room in Haaga-Helia, a laboratory per se, LAB8 is more of a platform operating around eight different areas of interest. (LAB8 2022)

The eight areas of interest are:

- Fast Prototyping
- The BOX
- Trends
- PLAY
- Service Design
- Tools
- Events
- Silab

Fast prototyping supports developers and decision makers to create fast prototypes about the subjects of their development, in order for them to be able to make quicker decisions on which path of development to continue with. The main idea of fast prototyping is to speed up development durations from (e.g.) 14 months to preferably 14 weeks or even 14 days. It is a facilitated process which utilizes different types of prototyping models, including but not limited to cardboard mocks, wireframes, etc. (LAB8 2022)

The BOX (LAB8 2022) is an immersive, digital multisensoral entity, which can be used to pilot several different service concepts and situations. The BOX is located at Haaga-Helia's Haaga Hospitality campus, where it is often utilized in different types of multisensory prototypes and testing. It is

also used in collaboration with Haaga campus students, most often culinary, who create multisensory dining experiences in it (for example, a Lapland experience with extremely high-quality food with world-class details like eatable bee pollen or lichen, combined with Lapland projected on the walls and table, accompanied with fresh forest scents). In addition to having the permanent piloting room at Haaga campus, LAB8 also has portable technology to enable prototyping in other locations, too.

Trends are topic-specific reports which contain highly crystallized information on current worldwide trends. They are highly popular and offer valuable insight for business and project leaders on what are the most important current trends, and what can be inspired from them. In addition to bringing insight on global trends, the trends are always also tied to the views of Finnish specialists in hospitality sector. (LAB8 2022)

PLAY offers services to develop business concepts with the help of Lego Serious Play. It also includes methods to add playfulness and storification into business and development. (LAB8 2022)

Service Design is one of the core competences of LAB8. LAB8 has conducted over 150 service design projects, and a majority of its projects overall are conducted as service design projects. LAB8 offers trainings by service designers, who have been accredited by the world leading service design organization, Service Design Network. Service Design Network is a highly regarded association, and out of the 27 Master-level service designers they have accredited worldwide, 3 of them work at LAB8. (LAB8 2022)

Tools includes a set of 42 development tools that are available for free online on LAB8 website. (LAB8 2022)

Events offers knowledge and training in arranging live, online and hybrid events. (LAB8 2022)

Silab is a platform for colliding such companies and operators with each other, who probably wouldn't have collaborated without this facilitation. It is a crossectional element which is included in the majority of development projects LAB8 conducts, with extremely highly regarded experience on the results of this type of activity. (LAB8 2022) For example, in one of the Finnish government key projects, BLUE, LAB8 brought together several companies from very different fields of interest, such as water-based tourism and augmented reality, to create new concepts to develop water-based tourism.

The purpose of LAB8 is to help develop hospitality, service and tourism industries, for the companies to be able to create new competitive concepts and ultimately enhance their revenue and employability.

4 Research approach

There are many different approaches to choose from when conducting a research or development project, and the decision between them is related to the research goal at hand. For example, case study is by its nature designed to bring new information and development suggestions about the case and not to enhance the improvement or development of it. Therefore, it is an approach that leans more on the research side rather than development side of approaches. On the other end of the spectrum is the innovation approach, where the aim is to create new ideas and not only bring them into action, but to create new revenue and commercial opportunities while doing so. This approach is heavily on the development-side of the research spectrum. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2009, 37)

Between these two, there are two approaches that are more applicable to developmental research such as this thesis. These approaches are called action research and constructive research. As this thesis was conducted by utilizing a combination of the two methods, action research and constructive research, we will first take a closer look at action research, then in the next chapter at constructive research, before in chapter 4.3 looking the ways they were both utilized in this specific project.

4.1 Action Research

This chapter will concentrate on presenting action research as a research method. As Ojasalo, Moilanen and Ritalahti state, "Action research is participatory research, where the aim is to solve a practical problem together and simultaneously create change." (2009, 58). In addition to this, action research also helps create better overall understanding of the situation, as it also creates new information about it (Moilanen, Ojasalo & Ritalahti 2021, 76).

Action research is particularly well equipped for development projects, as it is a method that combines research with practical working life activities. In action research, the researcher (and other people from the organization) participate actively in the research and development of their own operations. (Kananen 2009, 9-20; Moilanen et al, 2021, 28-29) It is a form of collaborative and participatory development between the researcher and the subjects of the research, both striving to create change. In action research, the researcher is put in the middle of the activity, participating actively in the development, and not as an outside observer. (Moilanen et al 2021, 76)

While the researcher is an active operator in the development, they also develop their own understanding during the process. In action research, the researcher draws conclusions from the

development and research process, and with further enhancement of the operations, develops their own skills and expertise of the subject matter at the same time. (Heikkinen, Rovio & Syrjälä 2006, 16-22) As Kananen (2009, 9) also states, this supports the professional development of the researcher.

However, even though the researcher does not keep an objective and merely observational role in the process, action research should not by any means be considered as an activity without the element of research. Research is an integral part of action research, as it greatly affects the development being based on scientific basis as opposed to everyday-thinking. (Kananen 2009, 9-20; Moilanen et al, 2021, 28-29). However, even though research does bring a great deal of scientific basis for the development, action research is also strongly pragmatic. It emphasizes the role of ordinary people in their everyday lives (Moilanen et al 2021, 76). For action research, as well as other process-based approaches, it is typical to use both researched and practical information to aid the development activity. In action research, the premise is to concentrate on how things in an organization should be, in comparison to how they are in the beginning of the project. With this said, how things are at present state is not necessary to be described in the most specific way possible, as change is ultimately the goal of the action. (Moilanen et al 2021, 76) True to its process-like nature, in action research the development project is considered to be improved as the actions are made operational. (Moilanen et al 2021, 32-34)
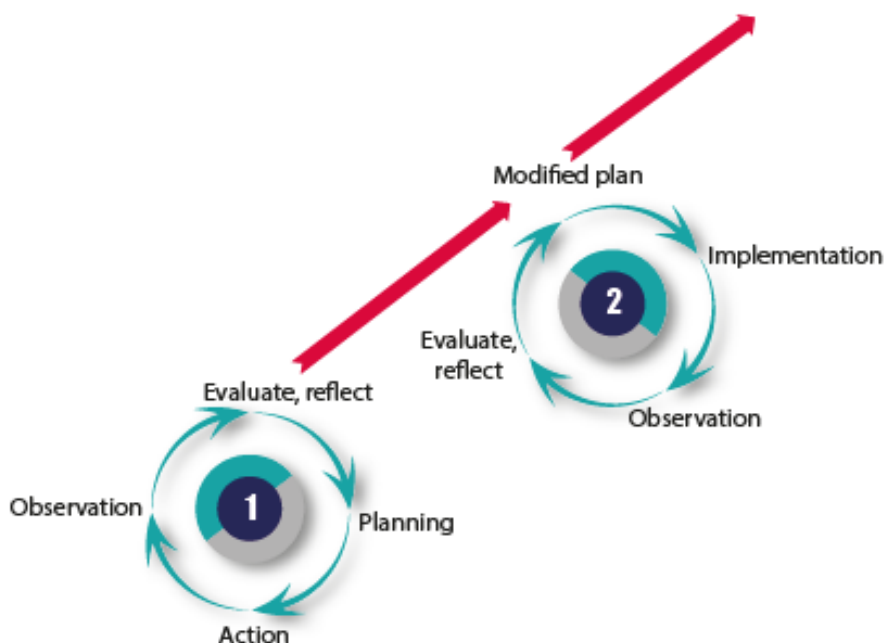

Figure 2. Spiraling proceedings of action research (Moilanen et al, 2021, 79).

Moilanen et al (2021, 79) describe the proceedings of action research happening in spiraling actions (figure 2). In these spirals, the phases of planning, action, observation and evaluation, and reflection, follow each other. As the development moves forward, there will eventually be a modified plan, which is then being implemented, followed by observation and evaluation, and reflection. This cyclicity of actions is also one of the most incremental elements of action research, called iterative development. (Moilanen et al 2021, 78-79) Heikkinen et al (2006, 16-22) state that the structure of action research is a cyclical process, which progresses in interaction between research and trial runs. Kananen (2009, 40) also states that the causal relationship between action and result is incremental in action research.

4.2   Constructive Research

Constructive research is a method that is suitable for situations, where the aim is to create a construction as an end result. The construction can be for example a plan, technique, or a model. The aim is to create the construction based on research, and use it in practice-oriented problem solving. In order to form the construction, there needs to be a combination of knowledge on existing theories and new empirical data. (Moilanen et al 2021, 85)

Lukka (2003, 82) states that constructive research is an approach for producing innovative constructions. It is intended to solve problems that come across in real world and eventually contributes to the theory that is being applied. (Lukka 2003, 82) According to Moilanen et al (2021, 85), contribution to the scientific discussion is one of the goals of constructive research, and by developing solutions to practical problems based on theoretical knowledge, it creates new knowledge for doing business.

Lukka (2003, 84) crystallizes the features of constructive research into six elements. They include focusing on problems arisen from real world, the aim to create an innovative construction to solve the problem, an attempt to test the construction's usability and applicability in real life by implementing it, developing the construction in a collaborative manner between the researcher and other operators or team with the assumption of experiential learning taking place, the development is done on the basis of theoretical knowledge as well as specifically linking the empirical findings to the theoretical framework. (Lukka 2003, 84)

By nature, constructive research is experimental. The construction which has been developed, should be implemented into the activities of the target company and through that, tested in real life. The combination between theory and practice is also shown in the belief, originally presented by James in 1955, that by pragmatic take on science and conducting a profound

analysis of what works and what doesn't work through practice, the activity can produce a significant contribution to theory (James 1955 in Lukka, 2003). Lukka (2003, 85) continues, that in an ideal situation, constructive research is conducted in a situation which leads to solving a real-life problem by implementing a new construction, which has been developed through the combination of theoretical and practical contribution.

The process of constructive research includes planning and modelling the construction before implementing and testing it in action. The operators involved in the activity, usually managers, personnel, and variety of relevant stakeholders, take an active part in developing the construction. Since constructive research also includes an important role of research, the method highlights active interaction between the ones who are conducting the research and those who are the target group of the project. (Moilanen et al 2021, 85-86)

Lukka (2003, 86-89) breaks the phases of constructive research into seven steps:
1) Identifying a problem with practical relevance, which can also propose a possibility for theoretical contribution.
2) Examining the target organization's possibility to collaborate in long-term research.
3) Acquiring understanding of the subject matter in practice and in theory.
4) Creating and innovating a construction to solve the problem.
5) Testing the construction by implementing it in action.
6) Planning and considering the applicability possibilities of the construction.
7) Identifying the theoretical contribution and analysing it.

If the aim of the project is to have a construction as an end result (e.g. a plan, a model or a system), constructive research is a great method to use. The developed construction functions as a meaningful and practical solution to a real-life problem, as well as it improves the process, structure or utilized techniques at the same time. The key factor in creating the construction is the combination of practice and theory to solve a problem which has risen from real life. Similar to action research, constructive research aims to ultimately create change in an organization and its activities. (Moilanen et al 2021, 86)

4.3   Chosen approach: A combination of action research and constructive research

The objective of this thesis is to create a process model for building an international partner network. As this includes forming a construction, a process model, as an end-result, choosing to use constructive research as a method in this thesis was justified. In addition to creating a construction, the other defining element of this thesis is the participatory nature of the researcher and the subject

that is being developed. Since the researcher, in this case myself, is going to be actively participating in the development and testing of the research subject, combining action research to constructive research was a reasonable choice.

The participatory element in action research does not only cover the participatory role of the researcher in the development, but it should also be carried out onto the chosen, more specific research methods (Moilanen et al 2021, 80). When choosing between qualitative and quantitative research approaches, it is usually thought that action research only includes qualitative ones. However, it is also possible to utilize quantitative methods in action research as well. In either case, the participatory nature of the method should be bared in mind. Whether the decision is to utilize qualitative or quantitative research approach, the specific method should in either case be participatory. (Moilanen et al 2021, 80)

Participatory research methods enable to utilize the knowledge, skills and experience of the researcher and other participants. The participatory methods that provide for this type of information include observation, interviews, surveys, group discussions and brainstorming. The research material can also contain written records and documents, including diary entries made by the participants, which can be seen as a useful probe method to describe the events and activities in the target organization. (Moilanen et al 2021, 80)

This thesis utilizes qualitative research in the development project that was conducted during the process. Although qualitative research includes a variety of approaches and methods within it, in a broad sense it can be separated from quantitative research by its nature of getting in-depth and interpreted information about the subject, whereas quantitative research emphasizes statistical and measurable elements of the research subject. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2017)

This thesis utilized the research methods of participatory observation (which according to Moilanen et al 2021, 80, can often be seen as one of the most effective ways of collecting data in action research) as well as survey. We will take a closer look at these methods in the following chapters.

Participatory observation

Observation is particularly well-suited to study human interaction. It is a valuable method for understanding different phenomenas in their natural environments and in collecting data about them. The form of observation is often chosen after the development project and problem are defined, and at best, observation is conducted often and consistently. An important element that validates observation as a research method is that it is more systemized and structured than merely observing random occasions that come across in everyday life. As action research overall, participatory

observation also combines action with theory in a structured manner. (Moilanen et al 2021, 103-105)

Kananen (2009, 68) states that when the researcher is present and taking part in the activities, participatory observation is a natural form of action research. Unlike in many qualitative and quantitative research where the researcher's influence is considered threatening to the objectivity of the research, action research encourages the involvement of the researcher (Kananen 1009, 78).

Survey

Even though it is possible to produce qualitative data with surveys, they are often used in quantitative research as they are perceived as an easy, fast and cost-efficient way of collecting extensive amounts of research material. They usually produce vast amounts of numeric data, which can be processed statistically. On the other hand, superficial nature of the results is often seen as a defect in the research method. (Moilanen et al 2009, 108)

Action research typically uses surveys to map the research process and to measure the impacts of the development at the end of the project. Surveys are less often used during the process, usually due to the limited amount of research actors in the process. (Kananen 2009, 78)

The most typical ways of collecting information in surveys are either to send out a questionnaire to the participants, or to conduct the survey face-to-face or via phone, and have the researcher fill in the question sheet. Which types of questions are able to be asked and what types of elements will affect the answers are greatly related to the chosen technique to conduct the survey. In interviews, there is the benefit of being able to communicate the research questions personally, although it is also considered to pose a potential threat to the reliability of the survey. While questionnaires that have been sent out to be filled by the participants do not hold a risk of personal relation or communication hindering the validity of the survey, the queries depend on the interpretation of the respondents. (Moilanen et al 2009, 108)

When conducting a survey, the objects of measurement are called observation units, such as customers or the personnel of a company. The decision between different observation units to conduct the survey on depends on the objective of the research. In an ideal situation, the survey is conducted to all observation units under study, the population. However, that is often an unrealistic option as the population might be for example the whole Finnish nation, and therefore there usually is a randomly selected sample which is chosen to represent the whole population. (Moilanen et al 2009, 110)

When planning the survey, it should be considered that the questionnaire should include all the questions that are relevant to the results, and nothing more. It should also be bared in mind, that the length of the survey as well as overall clarity of the questionnaire are important elements when designing the content. It is considered aiding to send the questionnaire accompanied by a letter describing the questionnaire, its objectives, necessity and the processing of the responses. (Moilanen et al 2009, 116-118)

4.4   Research context

The objective of this thesis is to create a process model for building an international partner network. The thesis was conducted as a development project and piloted in the context of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences Service Experience Laboratory LAB8.

Close connections with business have been an important part of the development projects Haaga-Helia has conducted, especially on national level. One of the major strengths of Haaga-Helia is to be able to conduct highly effective and necessary projects, where the core ideas have ultimately been risen from the needs of the businesses. Through this type of approach, the projects are able to create true benefits for the regional area, which is exactly what many funders are looking to fund.

In addition to conducting national projects, Haaga-Helia is also highly experienced in international project collaborations. European Commission distributes European research and development funding for many different contexts and target groups. Some of them are concentrated on a specific geographical area (e.g. Interreg Baltic Sea), and others are distributed based on the target groups or participants of the project. One of the most versatile funding instruments is called Erasmus+, which includes everything from student and teacher exchange programmes to complex multinational research and development projects. Above all these, there is a European funding instrument which holds the largest amount of total funding as well as biggest individual projects monetarily speaking, the Horizon 2020 funding (now Horizon Europe).

Horizon 2020 is a funding instrument provided by the European Commission, and it was active during the years of 2014-2020 with a budget of 80 billion euros. Horizon 2020 funding was intended to create multinational research and innovation projects as well as aid individual researchers to bring new knowledge, insights and concrete actions to make Europe the leading continent in business and research. (European Commission, 2022)

Horizon 2020 being the leading funding instrument in Europe, it is important for Haaga-Helia to become one of the organizations utilizing this funding. But even though Haaga-Helia has immense experience in other European funding instruments, so far it has failed to receive Horizon 2020 funding. In order for an institution to apply for Horizon 2020 funding, according to the European Commission's rules, it needs to have previous experience in receiving funding from the same instrument. Since Haaga-Helia had experience in past partnerships with other non-Horizon-level organizations, it became inevitable to be able to form new relationships with organizations, who already were receiving Horizon 2020 funding.

The challenge here was that even though LAB8 was already conducting activities on world-class level, similar to those active in the Horizon 2020 funding, the organizations themselves had never heard from us. Horizon 2020 is a highly competitive funding instrument with a low percentage of projects getting funded. Since this is the case, there are many organizations who have built strong multinational project teams, consortiums, with which they regularly apply for money and create winning funding applications. They have formed a group of strong operators, who know each other, and are used to building strong applications together. In order for Haaga-Helia to become one of them, just like in international strategic alliances, they needed to be convinced that LAB8 truly has a lot of value to offer to them, and they would benefit from Haaga-Helia being a part of their consortiums.

5   Process description

The objective of this thesis is to create a process model for building an international partner network. In the beginning of the project, Haaga-Helia was conducting many multinational collaborations and international projects, although the formation of the collaborations was heavily relying on previous personal relationships. While personal relationships are a wonderful starting point for extremely fruitful collaboration, the problem is that these relationships (and through that, eventually the projects) were not conducted on the highest level of European funding, the Horizon 2020 level.

As Horizon 2020 funding requires for the applicants to have previous experience in Horizon 2020 funding (meaning that organizations must first be participants in project consortiums as partners before they are qualified to apply as beneficiaries themselves), it was important to be able to reach the other organizations on this funding level and convince them to form a partnership with LAB8. The premise is that many of them have strong and close-knit partnerships with previously known organizations, with whom they are experienced in creating successful funding applications. The challenge here was to be able to enter these partnerships and convince these organizations that they would receive value from collaborating with us. Since the basis of partner networks is the bilateral relationship between two organizations (Möller et al 2004, 27), this thesis concentrates on creating the relationship with individual potential partner organizations separately.

In the beginning of the project, a first draft of the process model was drawn, version 1.0. This version included six steps to take in order to create the partner network: 1) Identification 2) Internal organization 3) Contacting 4) Online meeting 5) Partner visit 6) Reporting. The initial draft was seen to be constructed mostly of parts that would be happening one after another, in a chronological order, but still relatively linked with each other. The initial idea was that one action drives the following one forward, thus operating almost like the racks on a clock. This notion was also present in the very first visualization of the model, figure 3.

As the first draft of the model was created, the second step was be to start testing the model in real-life situations. To support the implementation, it was seen highly beneficial to create a selection of tools which could be used when conducting the activities that are included in the process. This would also support the aim of creating a systematic approach to a highly alterable entity. From a managerial point of view, there was a need to create a way to collect and process the information that was received from the visited organizations, in order to make sure that the relationship will be progressively managed in the future. This meant collecting the information in a systemized manner, which would also be user friendly to utilize, in the form of a Partner Visit Report (PVR, presented in more detail in chapter 5.7).

In order to conduct one of the most important parts of the process, the actual partner visits, in the most efficient and effective way, they needed to be planned with precision. The selected partner organizations were paired up with the most suitable experts from LAB8, according to the areas of interest they both shared, and they were then familiarized with the content of the organization as well as the process model, under which the activities were going to be conducted.

During the project, the different roles of the people implementing the process model became evident. There were clear managerial roles that were risen from the action, which also supported the actions of the experts who were seen having different emphasis on their activities in the project. All of the phases in the process model as well as the tools and roles that were created, are explained in more detail in the following chapters.

5.1 Identification

There are 2 725 universities and higher education institutions in Europe (UniRank 2020), which together have enormous amounts of researchers, projects, and areas of interest. In front of this multitude of possibilities, it became clear that in order to identify the right organizations for LAB8 to collaborate with, and the specific people to contact, there needed to be a systematic approach to collecting and filtering information.

To build the systematic approach, the initial idea was not to try and locate potential partner organizations through randomly looking at different universities in Europe, but to utilize databases or other forms of information available, to make the identification more targeted. As the goal was to create partnerships with European institutions which have been successful in Horizon 2020 funding, finding out that European Commission provides significant amounts of information about such organizations in their vast databases was a remarkable step in the project.

As one element of Horizon 2020 funding is that they look to fund projects which have versatile consortiums both in geographical location as well as areas of expertise, there was a need to find balance between identifying an institution that would have shared interested with LAB8, and on the other hand, quite the opposite. An organization which would have a lot of similarities with LAB8 might be easier to approach, but in order to make sure that the areas of expertise don't overlap, completely different types of organizations presented a great opportunity for collaboration also. In order to test both options in real life, the decision was made to try and locate leading organizations from both similar and dissimilar expertise.

First try – Using the European Commission website's search engine

European Commission provides a search engine called Partner Search on their Funding and Tenders Portal website. As the title suggests, this website is intended to provide information about funding opportunities, calls for proposals, and provide help for institutions to find partners to collaborate with in project proposals.

However, even though the website does give out huge amounts of valuable information about open calls and funding instruments, applying their partner search for the needs of LAB8 proved out to be unsuccessful. The way that funding and tenders portal search engine works, is that you can enter keywords to their search bar and select which types of organizations or funding schemes you want to filter the keyword through. As easy as this search engine is to use, the results it provides unfortunately lack so many key elements of the identification purposes, that it was eventually unable to be used.

As the aim of LAB8 was to create partnerships with European institutions which have been successful in Horizon 2020 funding, looking for organizations with more experience with the funding instrument would increase the odds of receiving a funded application, compared to collaborating with organizations with less experience. Therefore, having the list provided by the Funding and tenders portal with all the organizations which have ever participated in a Horizon 2020 project with something related to the keyword, was not enough. Even though there was information about the projects the organizations had participated in, going through each of them individually was going to be too slow approach to be utilized systematically.

Second try – Identifying the most successful institutions

In the second try, the tactic was to identify the most successful institutions in Horizon 2020 funding. This was conducted through a database called CORDIS, provided by the European Commission, which offered less visual and more informational excel sheets about Horizon 2020 participants, compared to the Funding and tenders portal. By downloading an excel sheet with all the participants in the funding scheme, the information could then be filtered in order of monetary amount of funding, and equally importantly, in correlation to the number participation in Horizon 2020 projects. Since the aim was to find organizations that would provide most likely opportunities to receive Horizon 2020 funding, the most attractive ones would not be the ones with only a few participations, no matter how much they would have received funding.

Even though this tactic brought information about the organizations which could be most beneficial to collaborate with in terms of their monetary success in the funding, it unfortunately lacked information about the types of projects they had participated in. This was an integral part of information

that would be needed in order to filter the ones to contact from (yet again) a sea of opportunities with highly successful but ultimately random organizations.

Third try – Identifying the most successful projects

Since the listing of organizations didn't give the necessary results for identifying the most potential organizations to contact, the next tactic was to download another excel from CORDIS database holding the information about all the projects which have been conducted under Horizon 2020, the amount of funding they have received, a short summary of the content of the projects, and the organizations which have participated in them, even separating the lead organization which was one of the most important pieces of information for us. As the aim for us was to become participants in Horizon 2020 projects, according to the funder's rules we would need to find an organization which has at minimum been part of a successful consortium. By identifying the lead organization, we would again increase our odds in being able to collaborate with an institution that would actually be able to carry out a Horizon 2020 application successfully.

One of the most important things this specific listing provided, was information about the content of the projects. By sorting the excel in order of the amount of funding the projects have received, and then searching through with LAB8 related keywords, we were able to identify specific projects which have been conducted in relevant fields to us, and with most amount of funding. The aim here was to locate specific projects where LAB8 could've already been part of (i.e. matching the content with our previous experience), make sure that the amount of funding has been appropriate (preferably closer to 2-3 million euros instead of 50.000), and then see which organization has been the lead in the consortium. In addition to naming the lead organizations in the projects, the material also included information about the specific people who have been participating in the project from that organization. This was highly relevant information for the next phases of the process.

As valuable as this information was in order to identify organizations which are most related to our fields of expertise (instead of only listed participants in the funding, as the situation was in the first try), this method lacked information about the overall experience of the lead organization. Even though it was able to be identified that an organization has clearly received funding from a successful Horizon 2020 project, this information was not sufficient enough to be able to determine if this was a sole example of success or was the institution more experienced than that. In order to have a systematic approach in identifying the most likely option for future success, this method didn't provide enough information.

Fourth try – Combining the information from the previous two databases

Since the previous two approaches weren't able to provide enough information separately, the next step was to combine the information of the databases and cross-reference them against each other. This was conducted by first identifying the projects where LAB8 could have already participated in from the CORDIS projects excel sheet, and then identifying what was the situation of that project's lead organization in the CORDIS participants database. This way, it was possible to identify the most successful organizations with the most relevant areas of expertise in relation to LAB8.

After identifying the most potential European institutions, the next step was to conduct a more thorough investigation about the selected organizations. This required manual work and it took some time to familiarize with the organization in more detail, but since the organization was already selected through a systematic screening process, the time spent on this phase was likely to lead to affirming that the chosen organization was highly potential for LAB8 to collaborate with. Since the previous steps had already provided information about specific people in projects that were relevant to LAB8, it made this phase of the process also more precise to conduct. By searching through the organization's web pages, it was easy to locate the units and activities relevant to LAB8, as well as to take a closer look at the project manager's other experience and expertise.

As this information confirmed that this was a highly potential organization to collaborate with, all the relevant information was then collected and downloaded to a tool called information package. Information package became one of the most relevant elements of conducting the contacting phase of the process successfully, and it is presented in more detail in chapter 5.7.

5.2   Internal organization

After identifying the most relevant and potential organizations in the identification phase, more specific information about all the organizations were gathered in separate information packages, which are presented in more detail in chapter 5.7. The purpose of the information packages is to help the project manager to identify the most suitable experts from LAB8 to contact the identified organization according to their area of expertise, and then to help the expert get familiarized with the target organization. In addition to these, the information packages eventually proved to have even more meaning in supporting the negotiations, which is described in more detail in chapter 7.

According to Kraaijenbrik (2010, 350), the Resource Based View regards the resources of a company as sources for creating sustainable competitive advantage. Resources include amongst others, the assets, capabilities and information of a company, which the company has managerial role over. In the case of this thesis, this is in the core of the actions in many ways. To build the

international partner network, LAB8 is actively utilizing its resources to convince the potential part-
ner organizations of their value, thus creating competitive advantage. In this context, this thesis
also links the Resource Based View to the theories of International strategic alliances. The aim of
gaining competitive advantage is not in comparison to the potential partner organization, but to the
other organizations in the field of research and development, and through that, create an interna-
tional strategic alliance with the potential partner organization. As Griffin & Pustay (2015, 388) and
Li et al (2013, 489) state, international strategic alliances are based on mutual and voluntary com-
mitment. This project was utilizing the resources of LAB8 to create a voluntary commitment of alli-
ance with the potential partner organization.

In order to measure the successfulness of the activities in building the international partner network
for LAB8, there was a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) that were first determined and then
shared with the operating team. According to Hansani Bandara (2016), KPIs can help the employ-
ees of a company to reach their targets, as they are clearly communicated in the form of KPIs. In
addition to that, KPIs can also help reveal knowledge gaps in the organization (Bandara 2016). In
the case of this thesis, both of these elements are highly valuable, as the communication of set
goals can help the team adopt and reach those goals more easily. It is also very important to be
able to identify knowledge gaps, especially when creating a new process model according to which
to operate.

In the LAB8 case, there were 11 potential partner organizations that were recognized in the identifi-
cation phase. All of the identified organizations had different specializations compared to each
other, but all supporting the competence areas of LAB8. Since LAB8 also includes a variety of core
competences with specialized experts, the identified organizations were divided among experts,
matching both of their expertise with each other.

After all the participants of the project had been named with specific potential partner organization,
in order to conduct comprehensive testing of the process model, it was decided to be implemented
with three different approaches, later paths. These paths were designed regarding the two different
roles that had been identified during the development of the process model: a managerial role re-
sponsible of the overall implementation and management of the process model (so called partner
manager) and the expert specialized in the specific competence area (roles ara described in more
detail in chapter 5.8). The first path of action was designed to be carried out in a way that all of the
contacting and negotiation were being conducted by the partner manager, including online meeting
and partner visit. The second path was to have the expert conduct all the contacting, including
online meeting and partner visit. The third path was a combination of the two: partner manager

conducting the initial contacting and then bringing the expert along to online meeting and partner visit.

During internal organization, the participants were also presented with a tool called Partner Visit Report (PVR), later described in more detail in chapter 5.7. PVR is used to report the content of the meetings to come, and in order for all the participants to be able to prepare for the meetings and see what type of information is later expected of them, they were presented with the reporting tool already at this stage of the process. It was seen beneficial for the participants to familiarize themselves in advance to the content of it, also making it easier for them to outline what type of information they are expected to provide after the meeting. This also supports the experts to conduct the visits in a way that produces relevant information for future negotiations. Every meeting is individual and there are many elements that go differently compared to each other, but having a ready-made reporting tool helps the experts share the information needed, without them having to invent the content separately. It also supports collecting all the relevant information in systemized manner, as all reports are similar to each other and no element will be left unreported due to prefixed set of questions.

5.3   Contacting

Initial contacting is such an important phase of the process that it needed to be planned and processed separately. Concocting phase means creating the initial contact with the potential partner organization, and ultimately, making the first impression of LAB8. As the first impression can only be made once, this phase had to be planned carefully and conducted with precision.

The aim of contacting is to make the initial connection to the potential partner organization, and to initiate negotiations with them. Contacting was supported with a tool called contact letter, which was created to help the operator conduct the activity in a systemized and efficient manner. Efficiency comes from not having every operator create their contact letters separately by themselves, and systematicity comes from approaching all the potential partner organizations with relatively same content. Before sending out, all contact letters must be personalized to fit the areas of expertise of the potential partner organization. However, the majority of the content remains the same. The content of the contact letter is described in more detail in chapter 5.7.

In order to continue with the systemized approach of the project, a KPI was set for this phase of the process. The KPI for contacting was as successful agreement from the potential partner organization to conduct an online meeting, which is the next phase of the process.

5.4   Online meeting

The initial draft of the process model, drawn in the fall of 2019, did not include a phase called online meeting. The original idea was to go straight from the contacting phase – perhaps added with a few phone calls – to the partner visit phase, directly travelling to the location of the potential partner organization. This approach was designed on the premise that, as Amey, Eddy and Ozaki (2007, 6) describe, personal relationships are very important in partnership building and can in fact influence directly the reasoning for joining partnerships. However, due to the visits being scheduled for the spring of 2020, Covid-19 pandemic ended up affecting these plans tremendously.

As Covid-19 pandemic started, it made it impossible to travel to the locations of the potential partner organizations. As the act of building these partnerships was seen as one of the core activities of the organization, a phase called online meeting was added to the process model, in order to go forward with the development of the partnership even though travelling was prohibited.

The aim of the online meeting is to take the negotiations forward with the potential partner organization, even though there would be a limitation to travelling. The online meetings were conducted in the same three different paths that were previously defined in chapter 5.2. These included the partner manager conducting the online meeting, the expert conducting the online meeting, and partner manager and expert conducting the online meeting together.

The aim of the online meeting is to present LAB8 to the potential partner organization in a way that will enhance the partner operations straight away, and also to set the premise for conducting the in-person partner visit at some point. To support the operators conducting the meeting, there were tools called LAB8 video and presentation deck that were created during the project. LAB8 video and presentation deck are described in more detail in chapter 5.7. This phase of the process was also supported with the tool called information package, from which the LAB8 operator was able to identify pointers to conduct the negotiations in a way that enabled them to convince the partner organization that we were serious in our endevours and we had invested heavily in the partnership already.

In order for the online meeting to be conducted successfully, the end-result should be agreement on the next meeting with the potential partner organization (preferably live, but if Covid continues, online) and agreement on the partner organization to identify their substance experts who would take part in the next meeting if they already weren't present in the initial online meeting. The successful achievement of this goal was set as the KPI for this phase of the process.

5.5 Partner Visit

Collaboration is ultimately not conducted between organizations, but with people. The aim of partner visit is to create a relationship in a way that operators from both organizations are able to conduct negotiations about the content, but also to form personal bonds with each other. As Amey et al (2007) describe, core relationships of partnerships are a continuum from formal to informal. As beneficial and time-efficient as online meetings are, they are also highly limited in time and heavily concentrated on the subject matter, reducing the possibility for a personal relationship to form.

During the partner visit, LAB8 operations are presented to the potential partner organization with the help of LAB8 video and presentation deck. Even though they would've already been presented in the online meeting, here the idea is to present them in a more in-depth and discussional manner, and most likely to at least a slightly different audience. According to the KPI set for online meeting phase, in the live partner visit the negotiations whould be conducted with one or several different substance experts from the potential partner organization.

In addition to forming a relationship with the representatives of the partner organization, the goal of the partner visit is to enhance the development of actual project collaboration actively. In order to take a systemized approach to this element, the idea was to present the partners with a suggestion of either a specific funding call or specific project idea (or ideally, both), through which the collaboration could be taken into concrete actions straight away. The premise was that without something concrete to start working on together, the likelihood of the actual collaboration never starting is much higher. The goal is not to necessarily aim for the most difficult and complex funding calls in the beginning, even though they are exactly where the collaboration is aiming for eventually, but to start working together in something, giving the experts the opportunity to start familiarizing each other personally, and how each other work. Collaborating even in a smaller portion is still working together and getting familiarized with each others' operations and ways of working, increasing familiarity and thus strengthening the relationship.

The KPI for this phase of the process is a secured meeting to continue the discussion and collaboration.

5.6 Reporting

In order to maintain the systemized approach to partner building and information management, there needed to be a way of ensuring the information received in the partner visit is documented and shared for future references. For this to happen, the process model was included with a phase called reporting.

Through reporting, the organization is able to collect information about the visits in a systemized manner. The reporting is conducted by utilizing a tool created in this project, called Partner Visit Report (PVR), which is presented in more detail in chapter 5.7. The benefit of using a pre-designed report is in being able to collect the information in a way that makes sure the relevant points and contacts are certainly being documented, minimizing the efforts from the people conducting the negotiations to start writing a report from scratch. It also makes sure that all the relevant information is collected from every negotiation. Partner Visit Report is presented to the participants in the internal organization phase, giving them the possibility to familiarize with the content they're expected to report in advance, enhancing their ability to fulfil their KPIs related to this phase.

KPI for this phase is a filled Partner Visit Report.
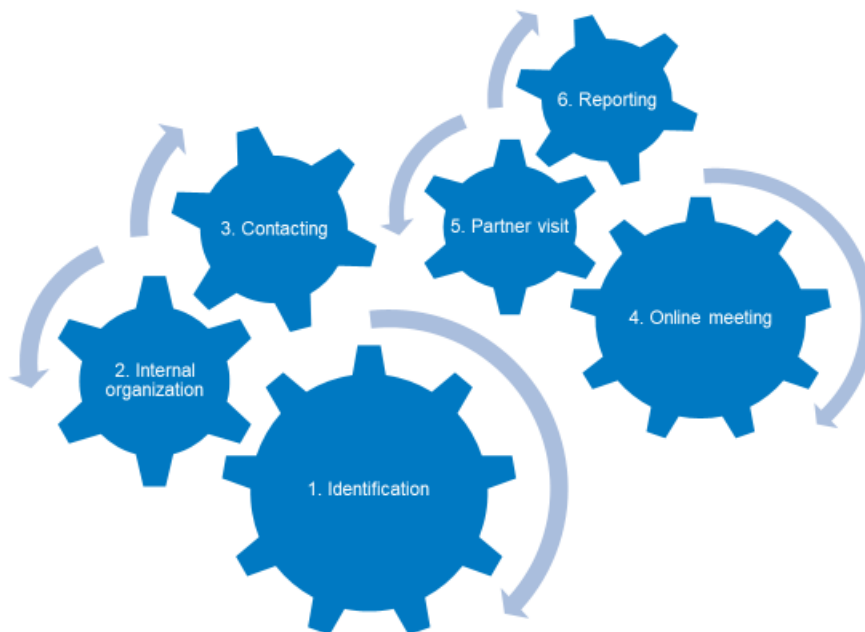
Figure 3. Process model for building international partner network, version 1.0.

5.7 Tools

The aim of this project was to create a process model for building an international partner network. To support the implementation of the process model, there was a set of tools that were created in addition to the phases of the process, which have been presented in the previous chapters. The tools that were created are 1) Information package 2) Contact letter 3) LAB8 video 4) Presentation deck and 5) Partner Visit Report (PVR). Next we will take a closer look at each of the tools separately.

Information package

Information package supports the first two phases of the process model: identification phase and internal organization. The material for information package is collected in the identification phase, and having a structured format for the content, supports the recognition of relevant information from the target organization after it has been identified. The information collected to the information package is shared with the operative team in the internal organization phase of the process.

Information package includes:
1. Basic information about the organization (name, address, amount of personnel, research areas).
2. Amount of Horizon 2020 funding the organization has received (€).
3. Number of participations in Horizon 2020 projects and in which roles the organization has participated in them (as the lead organization or partner).
4. Information about the organization's research activities:
    a. Amount of received overall funding (€).
    b. Number of projects they are conducting.
    c. Number of publications.
5. Information about the unit which had conducted the project that was identified previously in the identification phase:
    a. Name and contact information of the unit.
    b. Head of unit and their contact information.
    c. Core competences and research areas of the unit.
    d. Projects the unit has conducted (all, or if many, selected most relevant ones).
6. Specific information of the relevant personnel:
    a. Name and contact information.
    b. Other personal presentation information available.
    c. List of all or relevant publications.
7. Repeat steps 5 and 6 according to the other relevant units in the organization.

The information collected in the information package is shared with the operative specialist in the internal organization phase. Information package includes all the relevant information of the potential partner organization in crystallized form, which makes it easier for the relevant specialist to absorb. The information package is collected by the manager or other administrative personnel. As all of the identified potential partners were major European organizations with tens of thousands of personnel and numerous amounts of units, it was more efficient to collect the information in a centralized and systemized manner, and then share the ready-made package with the specialist.

Contact letter

Contact letter was created above all for two reasons: to provide support for the people responsible for contacting the potential partner organization, and to support the systemized approach of implement the process model. The support the operators conducting the contacting receive through the contact letter, is that they are not required to design a completely new contact letter every time individually by themselves. This provides support and efficiency in the implementation of the contacting phase of the process. In addition to that, a previously designed contact letter ensures a systemized approach to the process, as all of the contacting is conducted with equally carefully planned and designed material. The contact letter was designed to be the initial approach to start a conversation with the previously identified potential partner organization. The content of the contact letter is carefully planned in order to provide the receiver with relevant information about Haaga-Helia and LAB8 in a crystallized yet enticing form.

The content of the contact letter includes an introduction of the sender, what is the previously identified potential for collaboration between the two institutions, and a preview of the benefits they would receive from collaborating with LAB8. One of the key elements of the contact letter is that it includes a call for action, however not for the recipient, but to the sender. The last paragraph of the contact letter includes a notion that the sender is going to be proposing an online meeting in the near future, and will be calling in the next two days to confirm it. This was seen as a great way of encouraging the recipient for action, without burdening them with any requirements.

Before sending, the content of the contact letter is always individualized according to the areas of expertise of the potential partner organization. However, having a ready-made model as the basis, enables the person updating the material to concentrate on the specifics, and otherwise rely on the carefully planned and designed content.

LAB8 video

LAB8 has vast experience in conducting world-class projects on national and international level. It has truly been a part of multiple pioneering business concepts, often combining service concepts with high-end technologies to create multisensory and engaging experiences. Since it was imperative to be able to communicate LAB8's expertise in a clear and concise way, one of the tools that was created during the project, was LAB8 video.

The video was produced in a way that presents LAB8's core competences as well as examples of the projects LAB8 has previously conducted, in a clear and concise, yet inspirational, form. LAB8 video was made to support the implementation of the process model, especially during online meetings and partner visits. Therefore, it was also produced in a way that supports the content and

visual appearance of the presentation deck, which is described in more detail in the next chapter. LAB8 video is intended to be shown in the partner meetings in beginning of the presentation, as a prelude to the presentation deck.

In addition to being used in partner meetings by the members of the team, LAB8 video also functions as a stand-alone content in many marketing and promoting contexts. LAB8 video is found in YouTube under "Haaga Helia LAB8 Service Experience Laboratory".

Presentation deck

Another tool to support the implementation of the process model in online meeting and partner visit phase, is called the presentation deck. The presentation deck includes basic information about Haaga-Helia and LAB8 (organization, size, educational areas), core competences, and more specific information about all 8 expertise areas of LAB8. The material is designed to be visually appealing and informative to fully communicate the specializations LAB8 has to offer. To make the material to be easier to adopt, these are then followed by specific examples of the projects and that have been conducted in past projects. For every partner meeting, these examples are individualized and selected separately, to correspond to the areas of interest of the potential partner organization.

In addition to presenting LAB8's core competences and prior experience in projects, the presentation deck also includes a suggestion for collaboration in the form of a new project idea where we could see them partnering in with us. The aim of the project idea is to present the partner organization something concrete to grasp, in order to start collaborating in something relatively quickly. The aim is to present them an offer of collaboration in a project that we have initial idea of, but which is still up for discussion and alteration in the content. Ideally, this is then matched with a specific funding instrument suitable for the presented project proposal.

Partner Visit Report

The aim of the project was to create a process model for building an international partner network. The process model was intended to bring a systemized approach to partnership building and creation of international collaborations. In order to manage this systemized approach, an important element for collecting and managing information was having a systemized approach to reporting too. This was conducted through creating a reporting system for the partner negotiations, called the Partner Visit Report (PVR).

In addition to having a systemized way of collecting information about the partner visits, PVR supports the experts in conducting the visist in a way that produces relevant information for future

negotiations. Every meeting is individual and there are many elements that go differently compared to each other, but having a ready-made reporting tool helps the experts share the information needed, without them having to invent the content separately. It also supports collecting all the relevant information, as no element will be left unreported due to prefixed set of questions.

| Information package | Contact letter | LAB8 video | Presentation deck | Partner Visit Report (PVR) |
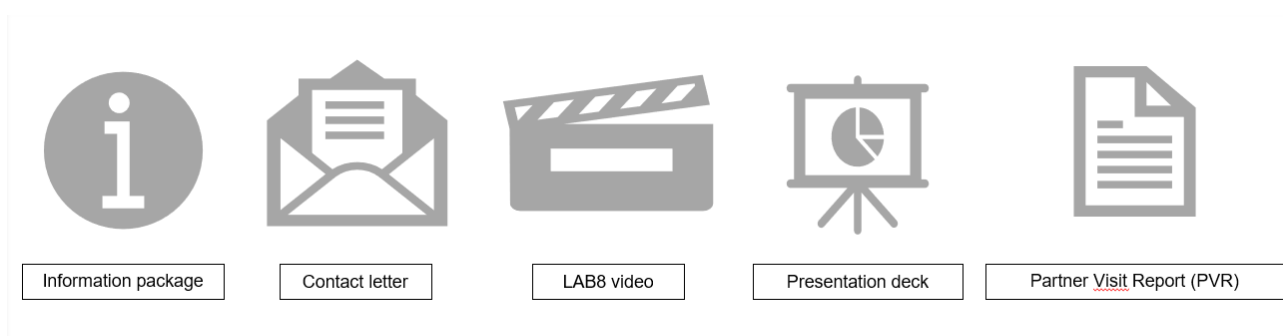
Figure 4. Tools to support the implementation of the process model.

5.8   Roles

When conducting the project, it became clear that there are different roles that are involved in the process. Some roles became evident to be more managerial, such as the person who is collecting the information needed for the identification of the potential partner organizations, making the information package, collecting all the reports from the partner visits, and managing the overall implementation of the process model. This role was defined as partner manager, being responsible for the entity as a whole and having a cross-sectional view on the process.

Another role that was defined was the LAB8 expert role. They were identified as the professionals working in LAB8, all highly experienced experts in their respective fields. In order for them to be able to prioritize their time and efforts into the most relevant phases of the process in relation to their expertise, it was beneficial for them to have the managerial and information-related operations conducted by a partner manager. This way they were also able to receive concentrated information for their benefit.

The process model was tested in real life situations by conducting all the steps in the process on three different paths (figure 5). This was done in order to find the optimal path of progression during the implementation of the process model.
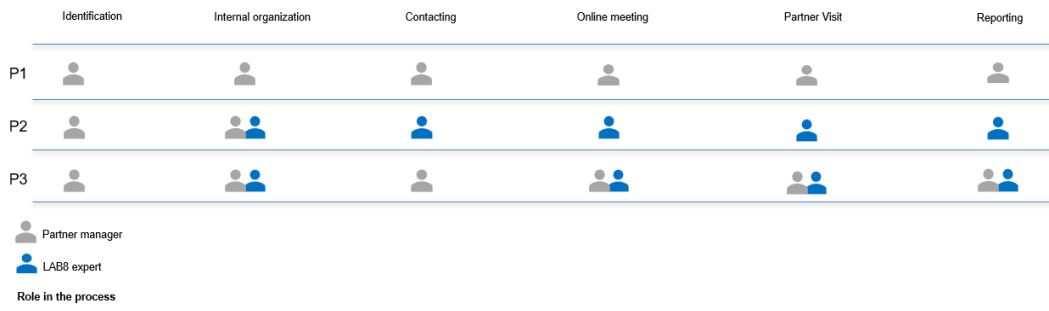
Figure 5. The roles of the implementing the process model in three paths.

6   Results

This chapter presents the results of this thesis. The aim of this thesis was to create a process model for building an international partner network. The process model is a description of the process of building international partnerships as a whole, in addition to which the work included the development of tools and identification of roles to support the implementation of the process model. These were developed using the methods of action research and constructive research. This chapter presents the results of this thesis, and testing the process model adn tools in real-life situations, and how action research and constructive research functioned as the selected research methods. The experience and insights received from implementing the process model are described in chapter 7.

In the beginning of the project, the premise was that LAB8 was already a pioneer in many of its core competences on European and global level, and the projects it was involved in were conducted in multinational project teams called consortiums. However, even though they were highly interesting and important collaborations, they were not being conducted on the highest level of European research and development funding called the Horizon 2020. Even though LAB8 was a leading organization in many of its operations, it had not yet received any funding from this greatest funding instrument in Europe.

As Horizon 2020 has set in its rules that in order for an organization to act as a lead in Horizon 2020 project application, it must have received previous funding from the Horizon 2020. (European Commission 2022) This meant that since Haaga-Helia or LAB8 had not previously been awarded with Horizon 2020 funding, it first needed to find a consortium to partner up with, with previous experience in Horizon 2020 funded project applications. And since the traditional way of building international consortiums in Haaga-Helia was to rely on previous and personal connections, they remained to be conducted with organizations that were equally inexperienced in Horizon 2020 funding. Therefore, there needed to be a systematic way of building relationships with institutions that were already experienced in Horizon 2020 funding, and doing it in a way that would not only lead to them knowing us, but accepting us as their partners in their future Horizon 2020 applications.

Process model for building an international partner network

As a result of this thesis, a process model for building an international partner network was created (figure 6). The process model was created relying on theoretical framework and through a combination of action research and constructive research as research approaches. The development project included participatory observation and survey as research methods, through which the final

process model and tools were developed. The notions and insights on the process model, tools and research methods are described in chapter 7.

The process model for building an international partner network includes six phases: 1) Identification 2) Internal organization 3) Contacting 4) Online meeting 5) Partner visit, (Online) partner negotiation or Project development and 6) Reporting. As seen in comparison to the preliminary version 1.0 of the process model which was described in chapter 5 figure 3, the final outcome of the process model includes three alternative possibilities for operation in phase 5. During the implementation of the process model, it became evident that instead of having one possibility to move forward after online meeting, it is also possible to progress to additional online meetings and/or project development in addition to conducting the partner visit. The insights of this result are presented in chapter 7.

During the development of the process model, the implementation was conducted in three different ways, paths, in order to create findings on the most suitable path for the implementation of the process model. The end result after participatory observation and survey was that path 3, combining both the partner manager and LAB8 expert into the activities, was chosen as the most suitable alternative.

Tools to support the implementation of the process model

In addition to creating the process model, this thesis also produced 5 tools to support the implementation of the process model (figure 4). These tools include 1) Information package 2) Contact letter 3) LAB8 video 4) Presentation deck and 5) Partner Visit Report (PVR). The position in the process model where the tools are meant to be utilized, is included in the process model. All five tools were tested during the project in real-life situations while implementing the process model. This chapter presents the final forms of the tools as a result of this thesis, and insights and conclusions related to them are presented in chapter 7.

As described in chapter 5, information package includes all the relevant information about the potential partner organization. In this context, relevant means presenting the previously identified project, unit and its linkages, in addition to having all the necessary contact information in a crystallized form.

The second tool that was created during the project was the contact letter. The contact letter was created to provide support for the operators implementing the contacting phase of the process model, enabling them to utilize a ready-made form for initiating contact without having to create the letters themselves. This also supports the systemized approach of the process model by ensuring that every contact is initiated with the similar and carefully designed content. One of the key

elements of the contact letter was that it includes a call for action, and not for the recipient, but to the sender.

LAB8 video and presentation deck were created to support the partner meetings, whether they were conducted live or online. A tool called Partner Visit Report (PVR) was designed to support the information management of the process. PVR is a tool to collect information of the partner visits and other negotiations conducted with the potential partner organizations.

Roles in the process model

During the development of the process model, the testing was conducted in three different ways, paths, in order to create findings on the most suitable path for the implementation of the process model. The end result after participatory observation and survey was that path 3, combining both the partner manager and LAB8 expert into the activities, was chosen as the most suitable alternative. In addition to that, the other two paths can also be utilized to implement the process model, and therefore they too were included in the version 2.0 of the process model (figure 6).

When conducting the project, it became clear that there are different roles that are apparent in the process. Some roles became evident to be more managerial, such as the person who is collecting the information needed for the identification of the potential partner organizations, collecting the information from the partner visits, managing the information received and having the responsibility of the overall implementation of the process model. This role was defined as partner manager, being responsible for the entity as a whole and having a cross-sectional view of the process.

Another role that was defined was the LAB8 expert role. They were identified as the professionals working in LAB8, all highly experienced experts in their respective fields. In order for them to be able to prioritize their time and efforts into the most relevant phases in relation to their expertise, it was beneficial for them too to have the managerial and information-related operations conducted by a partner manager. This way they were also able to receive concentrated information for their benefit.
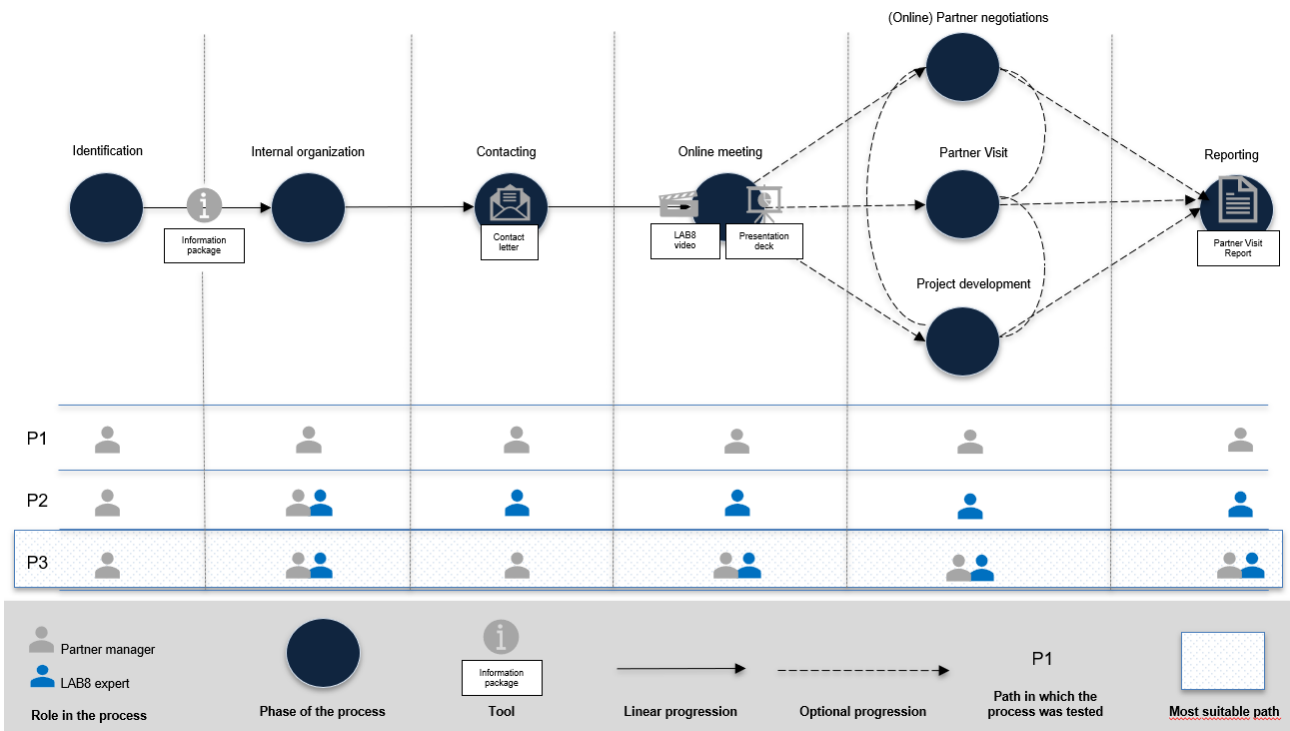
Figure 6. Version 2.0 of the process model for building an international partner network.

7   Discussion and conclusions

This chapter presents the discussion and conclusions of the development project for creating a process model for building an international partner network. As the phases and results of the project have been described in the previous chapters, this chapter concentrates on the findings and insights that were collected during the project. It also takes a look at the evaluation of the process model, the tools that were developed, as well as using action research and constructive research as approaches to conduct this thesis. This chapter also presents notions on the relevancy of the process model to business, before concluding with an evaluation of the thesis process.

7.1   Development of the process model

As described in chapter 5, developing the process model started by creating an initial draft of the model in the beginning of the project, a version 1.0. This process model included six phases in which the building of international partner networks would be conducted: 1) Identification 2) Internal organization 3) Contacting 4) Online meeting 5) Partner visit 6) Reporting. This initial process model was tested in real life situations with a team of experts, who were committed to the project. They all had their specific areas of expertise, aligning with LAB8 core competences and research areas.

The first phase of the process model was the identification of the most potential European organizations to form partnerships with. This phase was conducted as a managerial activity, under the responsibility of the project manager. The initial idea was to concentrate the activity under management in order to provide the experts the time and resources to operate on their other responsibilities while the background information was being collected, a decision which was supported by the team in their evaluation survey conducted at the end of the project. In addition to that, the other benefit that became clear during the testing, was that through concentrating the activity to the hands of limited amount of people, there was an element of synergy that was able to be utilized during the process. The information that was collected when identifying the potential partner organizations, often provided insight on multiple different but equally important core competences in relation to Haaga-Helia's competences. In practice this meant that when trying to identify a suitable partner organization for LAB8, there came across an organization which would be better suited for other units of Haaga-Helia. As all of this information was gathered from the same combined CORDIS databases that were described in chapter 5.1, using the information for the purposes of multiple experts and competence areas is more efficient than by everyone doing the same thing separately. After identifying the most promising potential partner organizations for LAB8, information packages were made of the core information of the organizations and specific experts working in them.

Next the testing of the process model continued to the second phase, Internal organization. After identifying the most potential partner organizations, in this case 11 European institutions with strong experience in Horizon 2020 funding and overlapping areas of interest with LAB8, they all were paired up with most suitable experts from Haaga-Helia. The experts were identified in relation to their past experience in projects and how well they correlated with the expertise of the potential partner organization. The experts were presented with the information that was collected into the form if information packages, which gave them a crystallized presentation of an organization which usually is very large to start with. This helped the experts get a good view of the potential partner organization in a time-saving and efficient way. This was thought to be a useful way of operating in the beginning of the testing, and it was also validated as such in the survey that was conducted at the end of the project.

The preliminary plan for the process model (version 1.0, figure 3) included a linear progression from phase 4, online meeting, directly to phase 5, partner visit. As it became apparent through participatory observation during the implementation of the process model, in reality the case might not always be that straightforward. Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic prevented travelling for an extensive period of time and organizations were unable to conduct in-person meetings, it became important to be able to continue the negotiations without the possibility of partner visit. Ultimately, these alternative possibilities to conduct the process ended up being an improvement to the final model. By including the possibility for alteration in the process model, it ensures that the model supports the act of building international partner network in a flexible way, yet making sure that the systematic approach is followed by linking all the activities into phase 6, reporting. Whichever steps the operator conducting the negotiations end up taking, there will always be a report about the outcome. In the researcher's view, this strengthens the usability of the process model.

7.2   Development of the tools

During the development of the process model, there were also a set of tools that were created to help support the implementation of the process. There was a total of 5 different tools that were created, each supporting mainly 1-2 different phases in the process. The tools which were created are described in more detail in chapter 5.7.

One of the most significant insights during the project was related to the first tool, information package. In the beginning of the project, it was expected that the information package would be an efficient way of communicating relevant information about the potential partner organization in a condensed form. However, what became apparent during the implementation of the process model, was that in addition to being a supportive element in the beginning of the process, the information package actually gave a lot of valuable information that enabled the rest of the phases to go

through successfully. As the identification phase is conducted by crossreferencing the monetary and organizational features of the organization with the specific projects that LAB8 could have already been a partner in, the specialist conducting the partner meeting is able to rely on very specific information about the potential partner organization during the process. This enables the operator to conduct the meetings so that they are able to discuss about topics that are expected to be intriguing to the representatives of the partner organization. The information package made it possible for the LAB8 operator conducting the partner meeting in a way that they had familiarized themselves with the specific nuances of the project in advance, so that they were also able to make sure to match the content and examples that were presented to the partner according to their specifics.

The contact letter that was developed during the project, became a helpful tool to initiate contact with the potential partner organization. After initiating the contact, online meeting and partner visit were supported by LAB8 video and presentation deck. Even though they were designed to support this process model, especially the video is highly valuable in many other situations also. It is a condensed form of communicating LAB8 expertise in a very insightful and enticing manner, which functions well also as a stand-alone material for marketing and promotion purposes.

The PVR which was developed during the project, proved to be very valuable in collecting and maintaining information from the partner meetings. Especially after a long period of time, it is not easy to remember all the details from the negotiations. Filling in a previously designed report right after the meeting ensures the documentation of all the necessary information from the meetings. As the reports are managed by the partner manager, the information they hold get wider visibility than merely from the one who had conducted the meeting. This way, it supports the sharing of information and location of potential partners for a wider audience within the organization.

7.3   The importance of roles

Partner Visit Reports are managed by the partner manager, who is also responsible for the overall implementation of the process model, and in LAB8's case, identification phase and internal organization. By having the partner manager be responsible of the information management also, it enables them to fully utilize the combination of new information with previous ones, and on the other hand, have a condensed view of the overall situation between different partnerships.

In addition to this, the purpose of the partner manager is to act as an overall manager of the relationship with the potential partner organization. Naturally the specific specialists conducting the project activities from both organizations form very important relationships with each other too, but especially during times that there are no active joint projects to conduct, it is perceived beneficial to

have a partner manager to look after the relationship. The aim of this is to maintain an active connection to the partner organization and have a view on their operations even between projects. As the specialists often have many other projects and activities to concentrate on, this type of overall activity was seen beneficial to be conducted by a separate partner manager. The partner manager is also able to look for new possibilities with different departments of the partner organization, even with an active project development being conducted in one. The benefit of a partner manager is having an active birds-eye view on the partnerships as a whole.

7.4   Action research and constructive research as research approaches

This thesis was created by utilizing the research approaches called action research and constructive research. As Moilanen et al (2021, 85) describe, constructive research is suitable for situations, where the aim is to create a construction (e.g. a plan, technique, or a model) as an end result. Since the objective of this thesis was to create a process model for building an international partner network, constructive research was a suitable choice for the approach.

The development process of this thesis was conducted in accordance with Lukka's (2003, 86-89) seven steps of constructive research. These steps include 1) Identifying a problem with practical relevance, which can also propose a possibility for theoretical contribution 2) Examining the target organization's possibility to collaborate in long-term research 3) Acquiring understanding of the subject matter in practice and in theory 4) Creating and innovating a construction to solve the problem 5) Testing the construction by implementing it in action 6) Planning and considering the applicability possibilities of the construction 7) Identifying the theoretical contribution and analyzing it. These steps led to the development of the version 2.0 of the process model (figure 6), and therefore it was a highly suitable method of research to utilize. In practice I found it very beneficial to be part of the organization the development project was conducted for, as it meant that examining the target organization's possibility to collaborate in long-term research and acquiring understanding of the subject matter in practice were very easy to conduct. With that said, they were still important phases to conduct during the project, and having these theoretical steps to rely on, supported my actions as a researcher.

In addition to constructive research, this thesis was conducted utilizing another research approach, called action research. Kananen (2009, 9-20 and Moilanen et al 2021, 28-29) state that action research is a research approach, where the researcher takes active part in the research and development of operations. Since this thesis was conducted by the researcher, myself, being an active participant in the development process, action research was a suitable approach to utilize.

As presented in chapter 4.1, Kananen (2009, 9) stated that the participatory development of action research also supports the professional development of the researcher at the same time. In the beginning of the project, this notion was particularly important to me, as I was very interested in developing my own professional capabilities in this competence area. As I learned throughout the project, this was truly the case as I was able to also test and act out the same operations that had previously been planned.

Conducting this project through action research meant that as a researcher, I truly did take part actively in all the development phases throughout the entire project. I was responsible for the overall execution of the project, planning the activities, implementation, and developing the process model in collaboration with the LAB8 specialists. These actions were conducted relying on theoretical framework in addition to utilizing participatory observation and survey as research methods.

The participatory observation took place in many different situations throughout the project. As the main researcher in the project, I was involved in every planning situation as well as all the team meetings that were conducted during the project. The LAB8 specialists involved in the project had also their own responsibilities, but as all of their activities were eventually analyzed for the benefit of the development of the process model, I was able to receive high amounts of information through collaborative development. There were also team meetings, were all of the team was together to go through the action points of the project, ideate for best solutions to conduct them and give feedback on the past activities. This way, participatory observation truly benefitted the conduction of this project, to develop a process model for building an international partner network, as well as to develop my own understanding and insights about the topic.

The survey was conducted at the end of the project, for all the participating LAB8 experts in the project. In line with the systemized and efficient tone of the development of the process model, the questionnaire was kept short and precise. It included 12 questions in total, part numeric and part verbal. With the results of the survey and through participatory observation during the project, the process model was developed into version 2.0.

7.5 Evaluation of results and continuous improvement of operations

According to Kananen (2009, 99), the results of an action research can be evaluated by comparing them to the goals of the project. Thus, if the creation of international partner network can be done through implementing the actions described in the process model, the goal has been reached. It is also one of the principles of evaluating the effectiveness of action research, according to Kananen, that the evaluation is carried out by the people involved in the research. For the effectiveness of

the evaluation, it is essential that the indicators used are unambiguous and they measure the change that the project was aiming at through action research (Kananen 2009, 99).

As a result of this thesis, a process model for building an international partner network was created, alongside a set of tools that support the implementation of the process model. In order to evaluate their applicability and implementation, a survey was conducted to the participants in the project, to give their feedback on both the process model as well as the tools. The survey was conducted to the entire team of participants and thus, in accordance with the preferred percentage of participation presented by Moilanen et al 2009, 108, collected the information from all observation units. The answers were collected per contacted potential partner organization. The questionnaire was conducted on a scale of 1-4, 1 being "strongly disagree, 2 being "fairly disagree", 3 being "fairly agree" and 4 "strongly agree". The participants were also given an option to choose "Did not happen" if the question was not relevant in their case.

The participating specialists achieved different stages of the process model, which affected their ability to evaluate the whole process. All the participants achieved a level of communication with the potential partner organization, which was often left on the level of online meetings due to Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the participants were however able to conduct actual partner visits, which was a great achievement in relation to being able to fully test the process model in actuality. Because all the communication with the potential partners were documented with Partner Visit Reports, all of the participants ended up utilizing every tool regardless of their position in proceeding with the process.

Evaluation of the process

Most of the participants, 87,5 %, evaluated that the initial contacting was done to the correct person in the potential partner organization. This number validates the importance and meaning of identification phase, to be able to identify the correct operators amongst thousands of experts in European universities and higher education institutions.

When evaluating whether the initial online meeting with the potential partner organization was successful, again 87,5 % of the recipients evaluated it to be highly successful. This validates the previous activities in the process, proving that consistency and systemized approach strengthens the conducting of the negotiations. When evaluating the successfulness of the first face-to-face meeting, 100 % of the participants who had conducted this phase of the process, evaluated it to be highly successful.

87,5 % of the recipient thought that the organization they contacted would be a potential partner for Haaga-Helia's future research and development collaboration. However, even though the

organization was seen as highly potential, when evaluating the likelihood of the negotiations lead-ing now or in the future into project preparation, the answers are more diversified. 62,5 % of the recipients thought this to be highly likely, 25 % considered it somewhat likely, and 12,5 % thought it is unlikely to happen. This type of diversity in the answers brings out the difficulty of being able to penetrate the threshold of convincing other organizations, already highly successful in Horizon 2020 funding, to change their previous modus operandis and welcome a new organization into the discussion, let alone eventually accept them as part of the winning multinational consortium.

Evaluation of tools

When asked if the information package included relevant information of the potential partner organ-ization, 75 % of the participants gave it the highest score. This validates the importance of identifi-cation phase as well as the formation of information package itself, emphasizing the importance of being able to conduct a systemized and planned approach to collect information about the potential partner organization. With systematization and consistency, it is possible to increase the likelihood of both the initial contacting as well as future steps in the negotiations to reach their goals success-fully.

When evaluating the relevance of the information that was included of LAB8 in the presentation deck, 87,5 % of the participants felt strong agreement with the content. Also, the Partner Visit Re-port was evaluated to be easy to use by 75 % of the participants, with 25 % giving it the second-highest score.

7.6   Applicability of the process model

In nature, action research can be characterized as a cyclical development process which aims to continuous improvement of operations (Kananen 2009, 11). Constructive research is a method of creating a construction, according to which the organization will then operate. As the construction is meant to be applied actively and within the future operations of the organization, utilizing a method that concentrates on continuous improvement, is highly valuable. Not only does it result in the creation of a model which has been iteratively tested to begin with, it also creates the notion of continuous improvement into the management of the process itself. This made it appropriate to use these methods of research in the thesis, and I also believe that they can well be applied in many different development projects also.

Combining action research and constructive research approach supported the development of the process model for building international partner networks. The participatory nature of action re-search contributed to the fact that people participating in the development process were able to ac-tively test the process and its tools by themselves, giving feedback and development ideas

according to their experience. When combining this to the development of the construction, the model itself, it was able to be created in a way that best supported their own actions and was able to be implemented in collaboration with the other areas of their respective work.

The practical orientation of linking greatly with working life, seen both in action research and constructive research, supported the aim of this thesis to create a model to be used in the processes of LAB8 in the future. As I was both the participant and researcher in the project, I feel that this dual role made it possible for me to both identify development challenges as well as to react to them in a hands-on and low-threshold manner. Although this dual element also meant that there needed to be extra attention given to the ability for the other participants to also give true feedback and ideas during the project. As there was not an external researcher implementing the actions, the ability to avoid bias and precautionary was crucial.

For me personally, conducting the work with the support of action research and constructive research brought consistency to the work and made myself more aware of the implications of the actions and the changes they cause in the organization and its operations. In addition to this, the utilization of these methods was appropriate in relation to the goals set for the project.

During the project, there was ultimately relatively little amount of the iterative development, even though it was in principle a very important element of the process. However, ultimately the iterative nature of the development was mostly present in the creation of version 2.0 of the model, through piloting activities and feedback. During the project itself, there was not more iterative rounds, which to my opinion is quite alright in hindsight too. The process was piloted and tested in three different paths during the project, so even though the iterative element was only applied at the end of the development project, it was implemented in combination with the process of testing and elimination. This alone made the iterative nature of the process a little bit less needed at this stage of the process, as it was conducted together with other heavily implicative development methods. Instead of doing the project in separate iterative rounds, the development was conducted in three different paths simultaneously.

Data collection methods of participatory observation and survey were considered meaningful for the purpose of this thesis. Participatory observation was the most incremental method of research during the majority of the activities within the project, as it gave direct and first-hand insight to the development elements of the project as well as to the relevance of the framework. Participatory observation made it possible to monitor both of these elements during the whole project as well as to make the necessary changes according to the observations.

Even though the participatory observation was a major method of collecting information throughout the project, the relevance and meaning of the survey conducted at the end of the project can in no way be called less important. The survey made sure that the process and its phases can truly be developed in a way that ensures the functionality of the model and different aspects of the process for many different operators, roles and participants.

Action research approach supported the development of the process model for building an international partner network, as well as did the constructive research approach too. Action research has participatory elements, which I believe helped create a model that is welcomed and applicable to be adapted by the people involved in the activities. Constructive research brings along the act of creating a new way of operating according to the construction that pictures it, and therefore both of these research approaches were very good in this type of development project.

7.7   Importance of the results for business

The initial take on business development of action research and constructive research and their aim to improve the development topics which have risen from work, makes them both highly applicable in the context of this thesis.

The significance of this thesis is constructed in part of the description of the development process and the usability of the description in the future. The aim of the thesis was to create a process model for building an international partner network, and through that create value and new opportunities for Haaga-Helia and LAB8 to collaborate with international potential partner organizations. The aim of this thesis was to concentrate especially to the very first steps of the process, initial identification of potential partners, conducting internal organization, contacting the potential partners, conducting negotiations and reporting the results. All of these actions were meant to be made in a way that the process model could be applicable and implemented in other organizations too. The objective was also to conduct all of these actions in a way that would later be able to be managed and led actively.

This way this thesis brings not only the new process model and tools that are described in the thesis, but also new perspectives to the discussion on international business management. Strategic alliances, which are at the heart of creating these types of new international partnerships, have also concentrated in the overall description and managerial and/or strategic side of operations, which are of course of utmost importance. However, this thesis brings new information on how to take the initial steps in the process and how to create a systematic approach for building strategic partnerships in actuality.

Describing the creation of the international partner network as a process proved to be appropriate. When an activity is described as a process, it also implements the structure and goals of a process. Implementing process approach to a development project helps create an environment, where also changes in the business environment can be more easily adjusted to. Although there were no major changes in the organization the project was conducted in, the effects of Covid-19 caused significant changes in the actualization of the project activities. In hindsight, although these aspects made it at times very difficult to predict the next steps that could be taken (especially when Covid-19 was in full form right at the time that all of the partner visits of the project were supposed to be made), it also brought long-lasting development improvements along with it. Although majority of the visits had to be cancelled due to travel restrictions, including an initial online meeting phase to the process will in my opinion be valuable to keep even after Covid-19 pandemic has ended.

In my opinion, further development of the process model requires not only to determine certain KPIs to measure its usability, but to recognize different challenging parts of the process and create methods to improve them. With this said, one of the implicators of the functionality of the process model are indeed the KPIs set to the activities, and the implications found from the measurement of their fulfillment. As the process creates the environment for the success of the KPIs, they are incrementally linked to each other and should also be viewed in pair with this context.

This thesis presents the development process and the results of the creation of the model for building an international partner network. Supported by the framework, the process and the resulted model have been evaluated by using participatory observation and survey. The practicality of the end results enables them to be utilized in wider sets of business situation. Taking the pictured elements into account when creating an international partner network, it enables to create a suitable environment for a viable and systematic approach.

In addition to creating a model for building international partner network for LAB8, this thesis can also be utilized in other organizations, looking to actively and systematically create new international collaborations. Although the setting for this project was operating between institutions of higher education and value-adding collaborations and relationships without (first) relying on contracts and agreements, the main principals of the process as well as all of the tools can be utilized to some extent in other contexts too. Some of the tools were of course created solely for the purposes of LAB8 and cannot be applied to other organizations as such, however the existence of such tools provides a direct implication of concrete elements to develop as well as proof of their usability. In addition to these, the model itself can also be utilized in many different business settings as such. All in all, this thesis and the model created within it, can be used as a step-by-step

manual for building an international partner network. It is my belief that businesses will be able to utilize the process description pictured in this thesis and create their own international partner networks according to the steps presented in the model.

7.8 Evaluation of the thesis process

In addition to the subject of creating a model for building an international partner network was important for the organization it was created for; the project was important for me personally as it gave me the opportunity to develop my own work and professionalism at the same time. Working in collaboration with the experts in our organization made the project very interesting as well as it gave me direct access to observe their methods of conducting activities in projects, making it highly motivational and educational. Also being able to go through active negotiations and finding ways of collaboration with the top players in European research and development, made the project extremely interesting and rewarding. The aim of this thesis was to create a model for building an international partner network, and through this process, my own understanding of international partnerships, networks and especially the importance of all of them increased tremendously.

However, as interesting as the project was, the thesis process I found to be extensive and at times quite challenging. Although the topic of the thesis was clear from the beginning of the process, as well as its goal and objectives, conducting the actual development project eventually became the easiest part in comparison to the thesis itself. Also, the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic made the practical aspects of the development project a high priority, and thus affecting the time and resources available for the thesis part of the process. Of course, this alone can be seen as a learning experience, as the art of prioritization is an important part of business life as a whole.

By participating in the process as a thesis writer as well as the developer, I feel that I personally got more out of both of the roles than I would have able to do if conducted separately. I have gained more information about the process of internationalization, factors affecting the creation of partner networks, the importance of these types of activities, and also what kind of effect this type of development work has on an organization. The reflection of all of these activities and their implications made the work highly meaningful for me personally. In addition to giving meaningful insights, this thesis also gave me tools, methods and approaches to utilize in future development projects too. With this thesis process, the importance of research in the development of activities was also emphasized, which brought me a new way of working. In action research, the role of the researcher is to be an active influencer (Heikkinen et al. 2006, 16–22), which was thus realized well in this process.

The biggest learning for me personally from this thesis process was the realization that by persistently spending time and "reading oneself in" to a subject, eventually brings true understanding and new knowledge of the matter. At some point, even though this thesis was conducted in the context which is extremely important to me and what I see as the most interesting topic for personal growth, especially the thesis part of the process felt at times very difficult to get a hold of. My biggest struggles were in trying to form the theoretical framework, which sometimes felt difficult to understand as an entity. Eventually, creating the framework became one of the biggest joys for me during the process, as it finally revealed itself to me and I was able to find a logic running through it all, after (stubbornly) spending enough time with it. I must have had tens of different draft versions of the framework, all seemingly relevant but with closer observation not so much, before I eventually found the ones that were discussed in chapter 2. It was a great joy to find frameworks that were linked to each other: Uppsala model being somewhat of a forefather of Network approach, both of which supported the internationalization side as well as the network portion of the thesis. In addition to that, Resource Based View was considered to be one of the major internationalization theories in addition to Uppsala Model and Network approach, which was at some time used to describe the motivations behind International Strategic Alliances. With these linkages to each other, the theoretical framework eventually became one of the most important parts of this thesis process, not only from the theoretical point of view, but also from the personal growth too.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The process model for building an international partner network