



# Excellence and Social Responsibility in Strategic Partnerships

*Tuire Ranta-Meyer and Matthias Knaut*

*Collaborative activities enhance the mental flexibility and increase human capacity of the higher education organization.*

*A high degree of confidence between the parties results in an enriching balance between mutually transferable skills, knowledge and practices.*

*Before stepping into a strategic alliance, it is recommended to have comprehensive discussions with the staff and work out a set of criteria for estimating the potential partners.*

*A strong long-term vision and a short-term action plan for successful next steps give a framework that is needed to have the most of the partnership.*

*Individuals with enthusiasm are the soul and body of collaborative success.*

## Abstract

In our modern world, highest levels of excellence and innovation strength are sought across all value-adding networks. The scope of expertise among higher education organizations is often extended through joint research and development projects as well as through professor and staff exchange. In addition, a growing number of universities build up closer, stronger ties between their international partners and aim to success by sharing strategic knowledge with each other, anticipating future needs of the society together and tapping into the high-class networks of the other.

This joint article shares ideas, starting points, concrete steps and inspiring experiences that lie behind a strategic partnership between two universities of applied sciences: HTW Berlin and Metropolia in Helsinki. They both have deep roots in the capital cities of their home countries and there is a genuine commitment for collaboration. The both higher education organizations seek to work together in developing urban solutions and wellbeing in the society, not to mention the artistic and cultural activities, too. This article describes the mission of being influential innovation drivers in the metropolitan areas, and how it is best achieved in partnership with others.

## 1. Expanding the scope of expertise

An international partnership means that an alliance is built with a foreign university, research institution, or work life organization in order to achieve goals which benefit all parties. A partner of an added value network is called a 'strategic partner' once the cooperation relationship is continuous and intensive, so that in the pace of time the contribution of the other party is clearly visible. Today, to achieve highest possible levels of excellence, the scope of expertise must necessarily be extended through cooperation and alliances within higher education institutions, as well as within forward thinking companies, and science parks or innovation hubs.

When talking about partnerships between higher education institutions, the goal is most often to detract new, underlying trends and needs of the society through the cooperation. The recognition of silent signals, and then the shared research and development work on those very topics increases the knowledge of all participants. Anticipating unfolding phenomena and asking questions that rise from collaborative activities mean an added value for both the competencies and the mental flexibility of the organization.

This article concentrates on strategic international alliances in general, and on the experiences and feedback obtained from the six-year-long solid strategic partnership between the two universities of applied science, HTW Berlin and Metropolia in Helsinki. The text is partly based on an article by the same authors, published in UAS Journal (3/2014), which is an open-access, free-of-charge online journal of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (see <https://uasjournal.fi/in-english/>).

## 2. The vibrant capital areas as an invincible asset for strategic cooperation

The engines of innovation and growth are focusing more and more in big cities and metropolitan areas. When experts and enthusiasts of a certain industry are working near each other, new ideas are unfolding and innovations get on wings. The larger the city, the more versatile is its economy structure.

The two higher education organisations, HTW Berlin and Metropolia are large, multi-disciplinary universities of applied sciences, located in the capital area of the country.

For them, it was natural to step into a closer partnership, because they already had an access to the vibrant and active innovation ecosystems of their region. They both wanted to aim higher, be successful and get the most out of collaboration and shared vision of the future.

In the year 2011, HTW Berlin and Metropolia in Helsinki signed a general cooperation agreement to formally enter into a strategic partnership. With a student body of round-about 13,500, 290 professors, 280 full time staff, and additional 800 part time lecturers (adjunct lecturers) coming from professional practice the Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW) Berlin is the most diverse and largest university of applied sciences in the capital area and in northeastern Germany. With around 74 compact and practice-oriented bachelor's and master's courses in engineering, business, information technology, culture and design, the range of qualifications it provides is impressive. Six of the programs are fully taught in English.

University rankings have consistently established HTW Berlin as one of the leading providers of a modern and professional education. Enjoying an excellent academic reputation, it has received many prizes for exceptional innovation in the university sector, for internal management reforms, the consultation and service packages offered to small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups, and for the commitment to gender equality and barrier freedom.

As one of 50 of the more than 300 German Universities HTW Berlin has successfully achieved the national 'System Accreditation', which is a proof for a comprehensive quality management system of the university for all its study programs. A recent development is the international program HORIZON which provides english taught modules for international exchange (incomings) and German students in today six 'tracks' in engineering, business communication, informatics, design and fashion design for a fully accepted and ECTS rewarded semester at HTW Berlin. The idea is to ease the process and make it transparent to send their students abroad for our partner universities in Europe and beyond.

**“ It is said that a partnership is like an intimate relationship that needs to be cared for and where open sharing of things carries you furthest!**

Metropolia, Finland's largest university of applied sciences, educates the professionals of tomorrow in the fields of culture, business, health care and social services, and technology. At Metropolia, with its 16,500 students and 1,000 full-time employees, people and worlds meet to create insight, expertise and well-being for both the world of work and good life in general. Metropolia's strategic intent is to be a bold reformer of expertise and an active builder of the future. This is done by offering an environment where students, staff and partners can develop their competence and together create something new. An open and experimental operating culture is the core of Metropolia activities.

Metropolia has 48 Bachelor's and 17 Master's degree programs, and 13 of them are conducted completely in English. Since 2015 it has been most popular among all higher education institutes (including the traditional research universities) in Finland in terms of applicants. It complies with the requirements of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as one of very few universities in Finland. In February 2017, Metropolia was awarded a quality label in the international audit conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). The quality system of Metropolia fulfils the criteria for the quality management of higher education institutions in Finland and corresponds to the quality management principles and recommendations of European higher education institutions. The quality label is valid for six years.

The step to build a strategic partnership between these two higher education institutions took place after a longer period of student exchange, a joint international Master's degree in construction and real estate management (ConREM), and other bilateral activities showing that there was a high potential for closer collaboration in the international framework of Europe. Also the very fact that the institutions are situated in capital cities facing the same kind of challenges and possibilities, played a significant role.

### 3. Evaluating preconditions for a strategic partnership

A genuine strategic partnership has a major impact on the parties' thinking and planning. An indication of this is that the top leaders meet each other and support the goals set for the co-operation. Between the allies, there is an open and effective communication at many different levels.

The benefits of the chosen added value partnership are realized only if the alliance between the two parties shares a very high degree of confidence. This results in an enriching balance between mutually transferable skills, knowledge and practices. It is said that a partnership is like an intimate relationship that needs to be cared for and where open sharing of things carries you furthest!

Potential partners and international higher education alliances should be estimated e.g. by going through a list of questions. The following matters, for instance, as criteria for intensive collaboration, were discussed thoroughly before the presidents signed up the agreement between HTW Berlin and Metropolia:

- ▶ *Is the partnership planned to be long-term and systematic?*
- ▶ *Do both parties significantly benefit from the partnership?*
- ▶ *Are the partner's values and strategic goals acceptable?*
- ▶ *Is there a genuine shared willingness for mutual strategic cooperation?*
- ▶ *Are there enough individuals with enthusiasm and hard work for long-term commitment?*
- ▶ *Do the parties commit themselves to intellectual and financial inputs that the cooperation presupposes?*
- ▶ *Does the partnership offer sectorial cooperation, but also generic prospects related to the development of higher education?*
- ▶ *Is the partner's geographical location appropriate concerning the university's commitment to sustainability and an ecological footprint?*

Both in HTW Berlin and in Metropolia the discussions with professors, experts and top management convinced that in the future, both universities are able to see the world through innovative angles, learn new things, and generate creative breakthroughs best in interaction with each other. This was then the trigger for starting a more systematic phase of collaboration between the institutions.

### 4. Practical collaboration methods

In the strategic alliance between HTW Berlin and Metropolia in Helsinki, practical collaboration methods include e.g. annual conferences, thematic seminars, workshops, and regular top management or professor meetings. Discussions concerning changes in national or European level higher education policies and benchmarking administrative processes like quality management, planning of teacher's yearly workload or human resource development, have been an important part of the strategic cooperation.

In addition, a growing interest lies in joint research activities. Both partners try to integrate colleagues in international EU applications, for instance INTERREG Application/ Baltic Sea on 'Baltic Game Industry' in January 2017. Both parties were partners in the ERASMUS project on 'Low Energy Buildings' carried out three times from 2009 until 2011 together with other Baltic participants. Specialists were invited for international cross-evaluation projects for the further development of study programs in engineering. There are new approaches for a next double degree agreement between the business schools of both parties. Bilateral invitations for professors and lecturers to take part in international weeks broadens the number and range of colleagues from both sides in the collaboration network. Most of Metropolia's and HTW Berlin's departments are today involved in the partnership.

Developing and nurturing new relationships with people and organizations outside the universities of applied sciences has become a critical element of successful and sustainable research programs. Both institutions, HTW Berlin and Metropolia, seek to break into new areas and re-invigorate the already well-established strengths in the field of research, and are convinced that this is done best in partnership with each other and each other's allies. Either partner can, of course, do business without the other, but in ideal cases it would be either difficult or not as rewarding as working in close interaction. To reach this level of intensity, the allies should be thinking 5–10 years ahead. Therefore, there is still a need for a stronger vision, clearer action plan and documented assessment processes for successful next steps for this same timescale.

The dynamics of seeing and developing partnership opportunities depend on personal relationships. In most cases, a couple of active and devoted persons are the dynamo for effective partnerships. The organization itself is never energizing: individuals with enthusiasm are the soul and body of collaborative success. Cooperation in the higher education is often dependent of professors and leaders, who understand the intrinsic motivation of people and have the ability to attract them in collaboration.

## 5. Beyond ordinary

Collaboration in the field of research, tuition, student and staff exchange, human resource development, and internationalization are the bedrock in the partnership between HTW Berlin and Metropolia in Helsinki. But there are phenomena, which make it beyond ordinary 'cut-and-dried' international cooperation.

Both parties have strong roots in the capital city area of their home countries and each plays a substantial role, not only in the economic, but also social and cultural life of its city and region. There is a genuine commitment to collaborate: to disseminate, implement, exploit and/or commercialize knowledge in these areas, but also a willingness to seek to work together in developing urban solutions, wellbeing in the society, artistic and cultural activities, too. Both parties share the mission of being influential stakeholders in the metropolitan areas, be it Helsinki or Berlin, which are very well to be compared.

The two higher education institutions will also act as socially responsible partners. They exchange knowledge and experiences regarding social responsibility issues including efficiency of operations and the impact of operations on the environment, and on the key stakeholders: students, staff, and both public and private sector. Planning and implementing agile higher education solutions for instance in regard to the rapid and

unexpected growth of asylum seekers 2015 is an example, where benchmarking the other party's activities really helped the other.

The six-year experience of strategic partnership has shown that there is a mutually shared ambition about high standard that makes the HTW Berlin and Metropolia graduates fit for jobs or further academic endeavors in their home countries, but also in Europe and overseas. Combining strong applied research and development with project study and including this into education is for both parties the essential premise as well as a permanent, everlasting mission.

## 6. Expanding the networks and building new alliances

Today, there is a clear trend towards working in partnerships and thus building up centers of creativity and innovation. Metropolia, for instance, has established in the year 2016 a national strategic alliance with Haaga-Helia and Laurea Universities of Applied Sciences. It is the response in the Helsinki capital area to the stipulation of structural development set up by the Finnish ministry of education. This in-depth allied cooperation will open up flexible study paths and facilitate the designing of learning-centered degrees from the broad-scoped education range offered by the three independent higher education institutions. The alliance forms a better foundation for education export and wider opportunities for research funding, too.

In the same year, Metropolia has established a strategic consortium U!REKA (Urban Research and Education Knowledge Alliance) with five European higher education institutions: Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, and University College Ghent. They all are situated in cities that are significant both financially and geographically. The aim of the consortium is to meet the research and innovation challenges of large metropolitan areas. At the same time, the students and work life organizations will have an easier access to the international possibilities offered by the network. The shared interests of the network include e.g. an even closer cooperation between cities and higher education institutions, the logistics and public transport of the metropolitan areas, and smart solutions.

HTW Berlin has developed the HAWtech alliance together with five other German universities of applied sciences who are strong in engineering and (natural) science education. FH Aachen, HTW Berlin, HS Darmstadt, HTW Dresden, FH Esslingen, and FH Karlsruhe, all six show a very high reputation for the employability of their graduates with the heads of human resource of German companies. Annual surveys rank the six allies regularly under the top five at least the ten of the more than 200 German UAS! HAWtech alliance is regarded as one of the driving forces in the so called German 'MINT initiative' to make engineering and science studies more attractive for girls and young women.

In addition to the strategic partnership with the sister university Metropolia HTW Berlin is involved in international educational activities where HTW Berlin is member of a German consortium, the 'Deutsches Hochschulkonsortium für Internationale Kooperationen – DHIK' which is formed by 26 smaller and bigger German UAS to provide exchange and double degree programs in engineering worldwide. HTW Berlin has a long running program the 'Chinesisch-Deutsche Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften - CDHAW' with Tongji-University in Shanghai, and a new program with Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico.

Similar to Metropolia in Helsinki, HTW Berlin has a strong regional mission and commitment. Therefore the four big Berlin UAS, HTW Berlin, Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin, Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin, and Beuth Hochschule für Technik Berlin together with Evangelische Hochschule Berlin - EHB, and Katholische Hochschule für Sozialarbeit Berlin - KHSB, recently formed the 'BIT 6 Berlin Innovation Transfer' alliance. Taking into account that this alliance has a body of 850 professors, more than 40,000 students, and a broad range of research and development potential the alliance is aiming to build and reinforce structures and formats in the Berlin metropolitan region to intensify and extend co-operation with companies and non-profit organisations. The aim is to develop closer and stronger relations of the UAS for joint innovation and start up company foundations with non-universitarian partners coming from business and society.

In spite of new emerging strategic networks and alliances, HTW Berlin and Metropolia have together a six-year lead in connecting people, making underlying ideas visible and building up bridges in international higher education. The both universities wish to be harbingers, not only in improving their own quality, but in being models for the students as future professionals. Today, it is more important than ever, that the two institutions are open for students from everywhere in the world and want to educate students who feel themselves as citizens of Europe and the world. That is what a strategic partnership is for: opening the capital cities, countries and cultures and let others take part in, and share its opportunities for professional growth and personal fulfillment.

## References

*Hautamäki, Antti and Kaisa Oksanen 2013. Metropolista haastavia ongelmia ratkaiseva innovaatiokeskittymä. Kvartti 1. City of Helsinki Urban Facts Quarterly. See [http://www.hel.fi/hel2/Tietokeskus/julkaisut/pdf/13\\_04\\_17\\_Kvartti\\_1.pdf](http://www.hel.fi/hel2/Tietokeskus/julkaisut/pdf/13_04_17_Kvartti_1.pdf) [Accessed 31.1.2017].*

*Knaut, Matthias and Tuire Ranta-Meyer 2014. If You Can Make it There You Can Make it Everywhere. UAS Journal – Journal of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences 3. See [https://arkisto.uasjournal.fi/uasjournal\\_2014-3/knaut\\_ranta-meyer.html](https://arkisto.uasjournal.fi/uasjournal_2014-3/knaut_ranta-meyer.html) [Accessed 31.1.2017].*

*Ranta-Meyer, Tuire 2016. Innovaatiot kukoistavat ekosysteemeissä. Arene ry:n 20-vuotisjuhla-julkaisu. See <http://maailmanparas.fi/> [Accessed 28.12.2016].*

*Ranta-Meyer, Tuire 2013. Metropolia's Strategic Partnerships. Co-creating Expertise (ed. Kaisu Kiventausta & Tuire Ranta-Meyer). See [rdwpub.metropolia.fi](http://rdwpub.metropolia.fi) [Accessed 30.1.2017].*

*Santalainen, Timo 2009. Strateginen ajattelu & toiminta. Helsinki: Talentum.*

*Strategic Partnerships Manual. University of Leeds. See <http://www.sddu.leeds.ac.uk/uploaded/campus-only/research/knowledge/spm.pdf> [Accessed 30.1.2017].*

*Redecker, Christine et al. 2011. The Future of Learning: Preparing for Change. Institute for Prospective Technical Studies. JRC Scientific and Technical Reports. See <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d866/b9b95d77a1361ce2075ad32494c10600fc4e.pdf> [Accessed 31.1.2017].*