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PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE
Case study in a Finnish-Armenian higher education context

Master's Thesis in Education

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The original motive for writing this master’s thesis stems from the numerous questions and challenges that the author has encountered as a member of different professional teams operating in cross-cultural contexts. This thesis is a case study of a transnational cooperation project between the Armenia State Pedagogical University (ASPU) and the University of Oulu Faculty of Education (Oulu FE), in which the primary aim was to develop high-quality, research-based teacher education in Armenia.

This qualitative study examines the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project from a learning-oriented perspective to understand and describe the different aspects and processes of professional and organisational learning in the Armenian-Finnish higher education (HE) context. The following research questions have been used to explore the challenges and opportunities of learning in geographically and culturally fragmented professional teams:

- What have the project participants and their respective organisations learned during the cooperation project? (central research question)
- What kinds of conditions promote/hinder learning in a transnational learning community according to the project participants? (central research question)
- What are the key benefits and challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context according to the project participants? (sub-question)
- What kind of development ideas accumulated during the cooperation project? (sub-question)

This study also discusses the internationalisation of HE from an uncommon perspective. That is, in this thesis the research focus is on the under-researched relationship between professional and organisational learning, on the infrequently examined concepts of academic professionalism and academic communities of practise, and on the experiences of the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project participants as professionals learning at boundaries in an Armenian-Finnish HE context.

The study begins with a description on the political and historical research context, in which the internationalisation of higher education is introduced as the overarching contextual umbrella of the study. The theoretical framework will then introduce theoretical perspectives on professional and organisational learning with a special focus on academics, higher education institutions, and the interconnectedness of the individual and organisational learning process. The research process is based on a research methodology known as hermeneutic phenomenology, and the research data, collected primarily from interviews with the cooperation project participants, is analysed by combining research method elements from qualitative case study and theory-guided content analysis.

The research findings show that cross-cultural cooperation projects based on the Bologna Process framework can offer unique learning opportunities for the academics and their respective organizations. In the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project both parties were ultimately teachers and learners in a transnational context, where cooperation was built on the existing preconditions, resources and strengths of the respective organisations. When examining the research findings as the learning outcomes of an academic community of practice learning at boundaries, the project generated both reflective and transformative learning outcomes. There were reflective learning outcomes which enabled the project organisations and project participants to look differently at their current ways of working by learning from another type of practice. There were also transformative learning outcomes which lead to changes in the existing practices and thought patterns as a result of embracing and applying the ideas of another type of practice. The author believes that this thesis includes both intriguing openings for further research and research findings which are beneficial when planning transnational cooperation projects in the HE context.

Keywords: Academic professionalism, Bologna Process, community of practice, internationalisation of higher education, learning at boundaries, organisational learning, professional learning, transnational learning.
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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANQA</td>
<td>National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance</td>
</tr>
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<td>ASPU</td>
<td>Armenia State Pedagogical University</td>
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<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts</td>
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<td>CEP</td>
<td>Center for Educational Projects</td>
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<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
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<td>ECTS</td>
<td>European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System</td>
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<td>EdGlo</td>
<td>Education and Globalisation</td>
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<td>EHEA</td>
<td>European Higher Education Area</td>
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<td>ENQA</td>
<td>European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</td>
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<td>ESU</td>
<td>European Student’s Union</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>EUA</td>
<td>European University Association</td>
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<td>EURASHE</td>
<td>European Association for Institutions in Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
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<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher education institution</td>
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<td>IDA</td>
<td>International Development Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Master of Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoEC</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland)</td>
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<td>MoES</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Science (Armenia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oulu FE</td>
<td>University of Oulu Faculty of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
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<td>TEU</td>
<td>Treaty on European Union</td>
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1 INTRODUCTION

The original motive for writing this thesis stems from the numerous questions and challenges that I have encountered as a member of different professional teams operating in cross-cultural contexts. How does a geographically and culturally multidimensional team interact and collaborate to reach common goals? Are there any universal characteristics which make it easier for transnational professional teams to achieve a mutual understanding? What promotes professional and organisational learning taking place in cross-cultural contexts? As a result of working in various geographically and culturally fragmented professional teams I have run into these issues on a regular basis, and thus my interest in seeking viable answers to these questions has grown over the years.

The possibility to study the questions listed above in more detail emerged soon after I had joined the Education and Globalisation (EdGlo) programme at the University of Oulu in the autumn of 2012. During my first semester I heard about a transnational cooperation project that was taking place between the Armenia State Pedagogical University (ASPU) and the University of Oulu Faculty of Education (Oulu FE), and immediately became interested in the project as a research target. After studying it in more detail, I realised that the project would provide an intriguing and challenging opportunity for an emerging qualitative researcher like myself to study a project in which a transnational and cross-cultural team was collaborating and learning from each other, not only to achieve a common goal, but also to develop themselves and their respective organisations.

A closer look at the project also revealed that in addition to resonating well with my personal research motives, the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project would enable me to study a phenomenon known as the internationalisation of higher education (HE) from a somewhat uncommon perspective. Although numerous studies have been conducted on the internationalisation of HE, relatively few of them have examined the phenomenon from the perspective of the cross-cultural professional and organisational learning opportunities that the internationalisation projects
generate for the professionals and organisations executing the projects. In this thesis, my research focus is on the under-researched relationship between professional and organisational learning, on the infrequently examined concepts of academic professionalism and academic communities of practise, and on the experiences of the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project participants as professionals learning at boundaries in an Armenian-Finnish HE context.

I will begin my thesis by describing the research context, in which the internationalisation of HE is introduced as the overarching contextual umbrella of this study. As a part of Chapter 2, I will discuss the historical and political context of the ASPU – Oulu FE collaboration project, and I will briefly summarise the current status of the internationalisation of HE both from the Armenian and Finnish perspective. Based on the historical and political background summary, I will also provide an overview of the collaboration project itself including the tasks, objectives and structure of the project.

In Chapter 3, I will elaborate on the scope of my study. I will provide more information on the specific research perspective that I have chosen for this study, introduce my central, as well as secondary research questions, and describe the aims of my study.

In Chapter 4, I will move from the historical and political context of my study to the theoretical context. I will introduce some theoretical perspectives on professional and organisational learning with a special focus on academics, higher education institutions (HEI), and the interconnectedness of the individual and organisational learning process. In the theoretical framework I will aim at bridging the gap between the individual and organisational learning by elaborating on what Lehtinen (2008, p. 262) refers to as the simultaneous nature of individual, social and organisational learning processes.

The research methodology and methods used in this study are discussed in Chapter 5, which I will begin by introducing the ontological, epistemological and
methodological baseline for my study. Based on my research paradigm I will then justify why I have anchored my study on a qualitative approach and a research methodology known as hermeneutic phenomenology. As there are no specific research methods to follow in hermeneutic phenomenology, I will also explain how I have combined elements of qualitative case study and theory-guided content analysis to create a suitable set of research methods for my study.

A description on the data collection and analysis process in Chapter 6 opens up the discussion on the research findings, while the research questionnaire itself can be found in the appendix. In Chapter 7, I will then present a thematised summary of the key research findings based on the narration of my interviewees. I will begin that chapter by discussing the professional and organisational learning that has taken place during the project, both in ASPU and Oulu FE. I will also summarise my interviewees’ views on the benefits and challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context, and I will share the development ideas and suggestions provided by the project participants regarding cross-cultural cooperation in the HE context.

In Chapter 8, I will move on to discuss my research findings through the theoretical lenses introduced in Chapter 4. On a general level, I will discuss the project as a transnational learning experience that has been characterized by socially constructed organisational learning. On a more personal level I will examine the project through the experiences of individual academics learning at boundaries. In the latter part of Chapter 8 I will link the organisational learning to individual learning, and discuss that intersection by examining how the two teams negotiated interculturality as academic communities of practice. I will close the chapter with a discussion on the lessons that the project participants and their respective organisations have learned during the project.

In Chapter 9, I will discuss the ethics and trustworthiness of my thesis. As a starting point for this chapter, I will position myself as an educational researcher, after which I will examine my study from an ethical perspective. In the latter part of Chapter 9, I will
discuss the trustworthiness of my work; in addition to introducing some viewpoints on
the universal challenges of evaluating qualitative research, I will assess the merits of
my work as regards its trustworthiness.

Chapter 10 provides a conclusion for this study. In the concluding remarks, I will aim
to tie together the key themes raised in the findings, provide answers to my research
questions, and suggest themes for further research.
2 RESEARCH CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction to research context

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to give an encompassing and detailed definition of the *internationalisation of higher education (HE)*, which provides the upper level context for this study. The phenomenon is vast and multifaceted, and depending on numerous factors such as national educational policies and organisational strategies, it can manifest in different formats for people in different locations and organisations.

According to Knight (1999, p. 17) there are a number of rationales or motivations for different stakeholders to integrate an international dimension into higher education. She (2004, pp. 21-22) describes four basic rationales, namely political, cultural/social, academic, and economic rationale, but notes that instead of being exclusive, these rationales are becoming more and interrelated (blurred), and that the emphasis and perspective between the different rationales typically depends on whether one is looking at them from a national policy level, a sector level or an educational/institutional level.

As Knight (1999, pp. 17-18) notes, the reasons to internationalise HE based on a political motivation are typically more relevant for the national than institutional level. When viewed from a political perspective, the internationalisation of HE can be seen, for example, as a tool to promote foreign policy, national security, international communications, diplomatic relations and peace among nations. Or currently, in an era of globalised economies, technologies and communication, it can also be seen as a way to strengthen regional/national identity and to respond to the denationalisation effect of globalisation. Knight (1999, p. 20) continues that countries which consider the internationalisation of HE as a possibility both to foster cultural and ethnic diversity/understanding and to counterbalance the homogenising effect of globalisation, typically find a strong cultural and social rationale for internationalisation. She (1999, p. 20) observes however, that even though many
individual academics and students consider the possibility to improve their knowledge and skill base in intercultural relations as the primary rationale for internationalisation, in general the cultural and social rationale appears to be of diminishing importance.

The academic rationale for internationalisation, as Knight (1999, pp. 19-20) sees it, is directly linked to the early history and the development of universities. She (1999, pp. 19-20) points out that even though the cross-border mobility of scholars and the international dimension of research has been a reality for hundreds of years, it has become increasingly important for academic institutions to keep up with new trends and requirements such as the market approach on HE and the importance of achieving international academic standards for teaching and research. A more recent phenomenon categorised as branding is positioned somewhere between the academic and economic rationale. According to Knight (2004, p. 21) branding as a form of internationalisation is about developing a strong international reputation by seeking out accreditation or quality-assurance services from national or international accrediting bodies.

The economic rationale, of which importance and relevance has increased rapidly during the last decade, typically views the internationalisation of HE mainly as a tool that can be harnessed to boost the economic growth and competitiveness, support the labour market by developing highly skilled and knowledgeable work force, and to gain financial incentives from different forms of education export (Knight 2004, p. 23). Like the trend of striving towards international academic standards and brands, the results of the economic rationale have been criticised by many scholars for generating excessive uniformity and homogeneity within tertiary education. But that has not stopped the ball from rolling. On the contrary, as Knight (2014, p. 43) notes, “cross-border education has gradually shifted from a development cooperation framework, to a partnership model, and now to a commercial and competitiveness model”.
Bearing in mind the overlapping rationales and the varying starting points in different countries, cultures and education systems, Knight (2004, p. 11) provides a working definition for the internationalisation of HE according which it is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. Harman (2005, p. 120) argues that in practise the internationalisation of HE typically includes one or a combination of the following activities:

- The international movement of students between countries,
- The international movement of academic staff and researchers,
- Internationalization of HE curricula to achieve better understanding about other people and cultures, and competence in foreign languages,
- International links between nation states through open learning programs and new technologies,
- Bi-lateral links between governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) in different countries for collaboration in research, curriculum development, student and staff exchange, and other international activities,
- Multi-national collaboration via international organisations or through consortia such as the Universitas Global, and
- Education export where education services are offered on commercial basis in other countries.

These different aspects related to the internationalisation of HE have previously been researched mostly from humanistic (philosophical) and economic perspectives. In this study the upper level context (internationalisation of HE) is the same, but the focus is more on the competency perspective; that is, on the professional and organisational learning processes that have taken place in a particular cross-cultural collaboration project.

In this chapter I will discuss the historical and political context for the collaboration project that I have studied, and I will also briefly summarise the current status of the internationalisation of HE from the Armenian and Finnish perspective. I will begin by
describing the development steps that have led to the creation of the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, which have steered the internationalisation of HE in Europe for more than a decade now. From there I will move on to addressing the current developments and debates on the internationalisation of HE in Finland, which are heavily influenced by the desire to generate financial incentives from educational export.

To complete the description of the historical and political background for my study I will elaborate on the internationalisation of HE from the Armenian perspective. And finally, based on the historical and political background summary, I will provide an overview of the cross-cultural ASPU – Oulu FE collaboration project that I have examined for this thesis.

2.2 Internationalisation of higher education in Europe

2.2.1 Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy

Holford (2014, p. 8) argues that the institutional, if not intellectual, foundations of what a university is can be traced back to Europe in nearly all cases and countries. The universities of the world today are naturally not identical, but they have common European roots dating back to the imperialism and colonialism of the early 19th century. Furthermore, as Holford (2014, p. 8) notes, institutions that are based on the European ideas of the university can also be found outside the former European colonial empires in countries such as China, Japan, Turkey, and in former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Why has the European idea of the university been so successful? According to Boulton & Lucas (2008, p. 3) the remarkable success of the ‘western comprehensive university’ originates from the ideas of two powerful higher education thinkers, one being Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and the other John Henry Newman (1801-1890). For von Humboldt the entire educational system from elementary and
secondary school to the university was based on the principle of free and universal education for all citizens, and in his vision a university was based on four crucial elements. First, there had to be a freedom of teaching and learning according which students had the right to choose their instructors and subjects just as professors had the right to decide what and how they teach. Second, a university depended on the unity of teaching and research meaning that both the students and professors were there for science (and scholarship). Third, a university needed the unity of science and scholarship, which meant that there was no fundamental distinction in principle between the natural sciences and the humanities as science applies to both. And fourth, von Humboldt saw that in a university ‘pure’ science was primary over specialised professional training, and that science was more about a process of inquiry than a specialised knowledge. (Holford 2014, pp. 8-9.)

For Newman the focus of a university was on the liberal education of an informed and critical citizen, and in his book titled The Idea of a University he wrote that a university is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, discoveries are verified and perfected, and errors exposed by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge (Boulton & Lucas 2008, p. 3). However, unlike von Humboldt Newman considered teaching to be the primary purpose of a university rather than research. In The Idea of a University Newman also stated that a university “is a place of teaching universal knowledge” where the object of teaching is intellectual instead of moral, and it is about the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than its advancement (Newman 1907, p. ix; emphasis in original). Thus Newman believed that there were more suitable institutions than universities for stimulating philosophical inquiry and extending the boundaries of human knowledge (Holford 2014, p. 10).

Holford (2014, p. 13) summarises that in von Humboldt’s vision the key characteristics of a university were scientific research and autonomy in teaching, whereas for Newman students and their liberal education and character formation were at the core of his idea of the university. Although often seen as having opposing or conflicting ideas about what universities are for, Boulton & Lucas (2008, p. 3) argue
that the views of von Humboldt and Newman can actually be seen as complementary and the idea of the western comprehensive university can be regarded as a fusion of their thinking. In fact, as Boulton & Lucas (2008, p. 3) point out, the perceptions of Newman and von Humboldt have dominated western thinking as regards the functions of universities, and they are represented, to a varying extent and in different ways, in the objectives and structures of the contemporary European universities.

In a way the more recent developments regarding the idea of a European university can be seen as a continuum to the visions of von Humboldt and Newman. But whereas von Humboldt and Newman were not intentionally aiming at disseminating their ideas on a global scale, Holford (2014, p. 13) argues that the European Union (EU), including several member states and many European universities, is deliberately promoting a European model of higher education across the world using tools such as the Bologna Process. As Robertson (2009, p. 77) argues, the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) should be seen as “ambitious global strategies”; in addition to trying to achieve uniformity within Europe, they are also a mechanism designed to transform higher education globally to fit the European image and the European interest.

The endeavour to achieve uniformity in higher education within Europe as well the intentionality of promoting the European idea of the university globally are both fairly recent phenomena. As Keeling (2006, p. 204) notes, EU’s emerging higher education activities, such as the ERASMUS mobility programme launched in 1987, were cautiously acknowledged in the Maastricht Treaty (also known as the Treaty on European Union/TEU) signed in 1992, but the primary responsibility for higher education remained expressly reserved to the EU member states. However, as Keeling (2006, p. 204) continues, the involvement of the European Commission (EC) in European higher education intensified significantly as a result of the influential ERASMUS mobility programme, particularly in the areas of credit transfer and university networking. Furthermore, the Maastricht Treaty did encourage the member states to embrace the ‘European dimension’ and international mobility, which
provided the EC a new mandate to develop a wider range of inter-university cooperation programmes under the SOCRATES framework.

By the late 20th century the European higher education system and the higher education institutions were increasingly affected by international pressures. Heinze & Knill (2008, p. 502) note that the Bologna Process must also be considered as Europe’s response to various global pressures. On the one hand it was considered that many European higher education systems lacked competitiveness when compared to most Anglo-Saxon universities. Many EU member countries also understood the growing importance of higher education on the country’s general welfare and its ability to transform into a ‘knowledge-based economy’. Thus, to overcome the global pressures and to establish a ‘European Higher Education Area’ of compatible national systems, 29 European governments signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999 to initiate the Bologna Process.

According to the historical overview on the Bologna Process/EHEA official website, the Bologna Process was originally designed to introduce a system of easily recognisable and comparable academic degrees that are based on two cycles (Bachelor, Master). In addition the system aimed to promote the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, ensure high quality teaching, and incorporate the ‘European dimension’ into higher education. Even though the basic principles of the Bologna Process have remained the same until today, the system has gone through a series of changes as a result of the biennial ministerial meetings and Bologna Policy Forums (Prague 2001; Berlin 2003; Bergen 2005; London 2007; Leuven 2009; Budapest-Vienna 2010, Bucharest 2012).

Since the initiation of the Bologna Process, the EHEA has been officially launched (in 2010), the system has changed into promoting a three-cycle (Bachelor, Master, PhD) degree structure, and new key themes such as the social dimension, lifelong learning, employability and transparency mechanisms have been introduced. As Keeling (2006, p. 207) points out, the extended membership of the Bologna Process places it
clearly outside the EU’s formal policy making process, and currently the Bologna Process involves 47 participating countries and the EC as full members, as well as numerous other representative organisations operating at the European level, including representatives of students (ESU), higher education institutions (EUA and EURASHE), quality assurance agencies (ENQA), employers (BUSINESSEUROPE) and academic trade unions (Education International).

In addition to the Bologna Process, the remodelling of the European higher education has been influenced greatly by the Lisbon Strategy, which was agreed upon in 2000. While committing themselves to the Lisbon Strategy, the EU Heads of State and Government pledged to strive towards remodelling the EU into the most ‘dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ by 2010. The educational activities envisioned in the Lisbon meeting of 2000 gained more momentum in 2002, when the first European-level Work Programme for Education and Training 2010, a joint effort by the European Council and the EC, was endorsed by the national Ministers responsible for education. This decade-long plan was drawn up to modernise the education systems in EU Member States, and it had three overarching objectives: To improve quality and effectiveness, facilitate access, and open up the national education and training systems to the world. (Keeling 2006, pp. 204-206.)

As a part of the Lisbon Strategy and the plan to build the most ‘dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’, the EU set a goal of raising the overall expenditure on research and development to 3% of GDP, and the EC issued an action plan titled Investing in Research, in which the higher education institutions were recognised as the ‘key stakeholders’ in European research. In this action plan the EC emphasised that to contribute to the Lisbon goals, there needs to be coherence in research policies, increasing public support and resources for research, and improved framework conditions for research and development in Europe.

Like the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy has evolved after its initiation, and the EC has been the driving force behind the changes. In 2005 the EC redefined the
focus of the Lisbon Strategy to two primary goals: growth and jobs. And calling for a new social contract between the higher education sector and society, the EC has since made recommendations concerning institutional governance, financing arrangements and curricular reform, while emphasising the need to guarantee universities’ operational autonomy. The EC has actually been exceptional in the way that it has also suggested very detailed measures for university reform, including performance-linked pay for academics, tax incentives for university-industry cooperation, and output-related funding for higher education institutions. (Keeling 2006, pp. 205-206.)

After being active for more than a decade now, some of the effects resulting from the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy are visible, while others remain unclear. Keeling (2006, pp. 208-215) notes that as the EC’s educational activities have expanded, its vision for tertiary education has gained greater political weight together with an increased impact on a wider scale, and it has begun to shape, or even dominate, the discourse on HE in Europe. The EC has started to deploy a discourse that constructs HE as purposeful, inherently productive activity in which researchers create innovations, new technologies, knowledge assets, and intellectual property, while professors and teachers help the students to accumulate and generate knowledge that can be measured, preferably as economically beneficial outputs. Furthermore, with the help of the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy the EC has promoted an external dimension into European HE extending far beyond the university, and steering HE towards a more collaborative activity with industrial partners and transnational university networks.

The succession of economic crises from the late 2007 onwards has resulted in certain goals, especially the ones related to growth and jobs, gaining more prominence, while others, such as the social dimension, have faded in the background. According to Salais, Rogowski & Whiteside (2011, p. 1) the attention has shifted from the provision of social protection to the promotion of employment, and as Holford (2014, p. 20) points out, totally new concepts such as flexicurity have been born to respond to a
perceived need for more flexible labour markets without totally abandoning the EU tradition of welfare and social dialogue.

In the shadow of the ongoing economic crises the European idea of the university is heading towards 2020 and even though it has already come a long way from the originating ideas of von Humboldt and Newman, it is obvious that the tides of change will continue. According to Tauch (2011, pp. 70-71) the EHEA has a new Education and Training 2020 strategy in place with four long-term strategic objectives:

1. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality.
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education.
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship.
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education.

The new goals still include ‘soft’ values such as equity and social cohesion, but the EC has a heavy emphasis on innovation and the economic dimension of HE, which is also manifested in the biggest ever EU Research and Innovation programme titled Horizon 2020. As stated on the Horizon 2020 home page, this programme, with nearly 80 billion Euros of funding available over seven years (from 2014 to 2020), is seen “as a means to drive economic growth and create jobs with an emphasis on excellent science, industrial leadership and tackling societal challenges”. In short the goal of the programme is to “ensure Europe produces world-class science, remove barriers to innovation, and make it easier for the public and private sectors to work together in delivering innovation”. However, whether or not the benchmarks and goals set for the Education and Training 2020 strategy and Horizon 2020 programme can actually be achieved depends largely on the ability of the EU to recover from the economic slump.

It is difficult to evaluate the overall success of the different EHEA objectives that have been set so far, especially as the geographical and institutional differences can be significant. But one thing is sure: The EC has rapidly extended its involvement in the
European higher education sector; first, by driving the institutional and structural reform of the tertiary sector via the intergovernmental Bologna Process, and second, by seeking for more growth and jobs through the Lisbon Strategy. And despite the fact that these systems have not achieved all of the benchmark targets that were originally assigned to them, they have introduced a widely-accepted, even hegemonic, perspective for HE at the European level, and they continue to have what Keeling (2006, p. 208) refers to as a “decisive impact on almost all aspects of the higher education in Europe”.

2.2.2 Internationalisation of higher education in Finland

If the primary goal of internationalisation is to improve the quality of HE, and not just to develop international export markets, it is essential to find a balance between income generating motives and academic benefits. This statement by Knight (1999, p. 19) encapsulates the discussion that is currently surrounding the internationalisation of HE in Finland. As Saarela (2013, pp. 62-65) notes, at one end of the scale there are the revenue opportunities that Finland’s excellent reputation in education is generating for the country; opportunities deriving primarily from the positive evaluation results in international studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). And at the other end of the scale there is the long-standing tradition of the Finnish education system (including higher education) as being equal, accessible and very affordable (mostly free). But which end of the scale is heavier and where will Finland lean towards when it comes to the internationalisation of Finnish HE?

It is vital to recognise that internationalisation needs to be understood both at the national/sector level and at the institutional level, as the overall approach to internationalisation characterises the values, priorities and actions that are exhibited during the implementation phase (Knight 2004, p. 18). In Finland the current national level guidelines for implementing internationalisation in HE stem from a policy document titled Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in
Finland 2009–2015, issued by the Finnish Ministry of Education in 2009. It (pp. 10-11) sets the following five primary aims for the internationalisation of the Finnish HEIs:

1. Establishing a genuinely international HE community.
2. Increasing the quality and attractiveness of HEIs.
3. Promoting the export of expertise.
4. Supporting a multicultural society.
5. Promoting global responsibility.

In this policy paper none of the five primary aims is given a primacy over the others, and the concrete measures (p. 10) of the strategy are directed at removing obstacles to and weaknesses in the internationalisation of HEIs as well as at facilitating international cooperation among HEIs. However, studying the opening lines of the introduction written by Henna Virkkunen (Finnish Minister of Education and Science at the time when the policy was published) clearly shows that the underlying values and priorities of the policy are closely connected to the current ideology of the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, which emphasizes the economic dimension of internationalisation:

Investment in knowledge and competence is the sustainable core of Finland’s national success strategy. International comparisons and evaluations have shown that a high-quality education and research system affords us significant strength and a competitive edge. The higher education institutions have contributed positively to the renewal of society and the development of the economy and productivity. The significance of higher education institutions is emphasised in a global operating environment. In addition to market position and capital, competition is increasingly based on an educated workforce and on research resources.

In addition to clearly reflecting the highly popular economic rationale of internationalising HE, Virkkunen’s vision also reflects the mounting role of HEIs in what Scott (2010, p. 3) refers to as the knowledge-services industry – the supply chain of the knowledge economy that is designed to produce highly skilled workers
and useful knowledge. Scott (2010, p. 3) argues that the ‘commercial and competitiveness’ trend of internationalising HE is often seen as unavoidable as the ‘single-path’ neo-liberal globalisation trend, which is considered to be on an inevitable trajectory toward free-market capitalism, mass-media culture and global brands. That is, as a simplistic relationship it is often assumed that like the neo-liberal manifestation of globalisation, the ‘commercial and competitiveness’ trend of internationalising HE is an irresistible and non-stoppable force.

It is obvious that the Finnish approach to internationalising HE follows, to some extent at least, the ‘commercial and competitiveness’ trend of internationalising HE. This image of the Finnish approach is supported by the fact that in 2010 the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture published a separate strategy for education export (titled Kiinnostuksesta kysynnäksi ja tuotteiksi – Suomen koulutusvientistrategia), in which the focus is on how Finnish education could be productised into goods that can be bought and sold. The basic premise of the strategy is that there is an enormous demand for Finnish educational know-how globally, but Finns have not been able to supply what the global educational markets are seeking, partly due to various restrictions in the Finnish legislation.

Furthermore, in 2013 the original strategy was updated with a follow-up memorandum (titled Suomi kansainvälisille koulutusmarkkinoille) with the primary aim of setting a new action plan to promote the export of the Finnish education services. In the follow-up memorandum a working group appointed by the current Finnish Minister of Education and Culture Krista Kiuru focuses especially on Finnish higher education institutions, and suggests (pp. 10-13) the following key measures as means to enhance education export:

1. **Focusing on quality assurance and learning.**
2. **Recruiting highly motivated foreign students to Finland.**
3. **Removing the legislative barriers preventing education export.**
4. **Making education export a profitable business.**
5. **Utilising education export to support development cooperation.**
6. *Utilising education export to promote a positive country brand.*

The memorandum does provide some new concrete targets, such as the goal according which there should be at least 60 000 foreign degree students in the Finnish higher education institutions by 2025, but the majority of the measures suggested are more general guidelines than specific goals. From the more generic guidelines it is worth noticing that the work group emphasises (p.12) the need for higher education institutions to make a strategic decision on whether or not they choose be actively involved in education export. Furthermore, the work group states that the institutions which decide to pursue education export need to plan carefully how to integrate education export projects into their everyday work so that they too support the existing goals of the institution in question.

But is the ‘commercial and competitiveness’ trend of internationalising HE the only viable track for Finland, and is making education export a profitable business the ultimate goal? Brandenburg & De Wit (2011, pp. 16-17) suggest that there is a need to enter the ‘post-internationalisation’ age – to rethink and redefine the way we currently look at internationalisation of HE. For them it means reconsidering the preoccupation with instruments and means, such as student/staff exchange, degree mobility and recruitment of international students and personnel, and returning back to the original primary goal of improving the quality of HE education and research with the help of internationalisation.

What could be the Finnish alternative, a ‘post-internationalisation’ route for internationalising HE and planning education export? The revenue aspect is bound to be a part of it, especially now that Finland and the Finnish HEIs are going through financial hardships. But as making money has never been at the core of Finland’s educational philosophy, the alternative must include other dimensions too. One alternative route can be found by taking a closer look at how *promoting the export of expertise* has been summarised (p. 41) in the 2009 strategy for internationalising Finnish HEIs:
Finnish higher education institutions are attractive and reliable cooperation partners who engage in high-quality and mutually beneficial international research, education and cultural cooperation. Higher education and expertise are nationally significant exports.

By leaning towards a concept like reliable, high-quality and mutually beneficial international research, education and cultural cooperation partner Finland could establish an alternative approach to internationalising HE, an approach that would not only stand out from the purely ‘commercial and competitiveness’ trend, but would also produce revenue for Finnish HEIs in the long run. What is more, this type of an approach would not need artificial branding as it would make it possible to internationalise Finnish HE with what Saarela (2013, p. 63) refers to as “a new purpose that is more in line with its societal foundation and values”.

2.2.3 Internationalisation of higher education in Armenia

As regards internationalising HE, the Armenian context is very different from the Finnish context. Armenia, located at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, was officially recognised as an independent state in 1991 when the Soviet Union was dissolved. Armenia’s independence has been followed by a political and social transition period including economic crisis, increased poverty and unemployment, and according to Navoyan (2011, p. 193) Armenia’s tertiary education sector has undergone a considerable reform as a part of the transition period with the primary objective of moving away from the strong Soviet heritage and establishing a modernised HE sector.

The conditions in which the Armenian HE renewal has been pushed forward are unique. To begin with, Navoyan (2011, p. 194) emphasises the importance of Armenia’s geopolitical status as a framework for the entire transition period as well as for the HE renewal by stating that “Armenia’s geographic and political location has generated serious challenges for national policy, security, and economic development”. With Iran and Russia Armenia has fairly well functioning political and
economic relations, and the supply of Iranian gas, the road links to Teheran as well as the military security provided by Russia are all crucial for Armenia. However, the relations with other neighbouring countries are more challenging. Due to long-lasting disputes and conflicts, Armenia has no official diplomatic relations with either Turkey or Azerbaijan, and both countries have closed their borders on all Armenian trade and land transport. Armenia’s relations with Georgia are also hindered to some extent because of issues concerning Armenian minorities in Georgia, but Armenia depends on Georgia for its land connection with Russia. (Navoyan 2011, pp. 194-195.)

Furthermore, when the Soviet regime collapsed the Armenian HE faced what Karakhanyan (2011, p. 18) describes as “a period of flux”. First, the transition from a planned/centralised economy to a market economy required that the functioning and management of the entire Armenian HE system had to adapt to meet new demands. Among other things, this adaptation meant that the transforming Armenian HE system had to encounter the decades-long legacy of Soviet regime firmly rooted in all aspects of Armenian life, culture, beliefs and values. Second, the transition was also affected by social impairments as corruption gnawed both social cohesion and the reputation of the HE system. And finally, globalisation trends and Armenia’s desire to become internationally visible resulted in the diffusion and transfer of educational policies from Western Europe and North America. (Karakhanyan 2011, pp. 18-19.)

Facing all of the economic, geopolitical, political and social challenges mentioned above, the Armenian government set out to reconsider the whole architecture of the Armenian HE system already in the early 1990s, when the first pilot projects aiming at the renewal of the Armenian HE system were carried out by a group of leading universities. The universities themselves often initiated the pilot projects, receiving funding from international sources such as the World Bank. However, in the midst of the flux there was not enough administrative capacity for change management, and a clear overall vision for the renewal, as well as the uniting guidance from the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), were missing. As there was ambiguity regarding what should be done, how and why it should be done and in what
sequence, the pilots were reduced to superficial modifications while the deeper content and culture remained unaltered. (Karakhanyan 2011, pp. 19-20.)

However, the process shifted gears when MoES developed a *Strategy for Higher Education Reforms* in 2003 and Armenia passed the *Law on Higher and Post-Graduate Professional Education* in 2004. Karakhanyan (2011, p. 54) notes that the *Law on Higher and Post-Graduate Professional Education* introduced new ideas which aimed at establishing a modern model of quality assurance and accreditation as well as the definition of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). And according to Kataoka, Shahverdyan & Harutyunyan (2013, p. 4), the *Strategy for Higher Education Reforms* led to Armenia signing the Bologna Declaration in 2005.

After Armenia joined the Bologna Process, MoES took the initiative, and using experiences from the pilot projects in which many of the Bologna principles had already been tested, embarked on a more structured renewal of the Armenian HE system. Karakhanyan (2011, pp. 20-21) elaborates that since the signing of the Bologna Declaration, MoES has produced new strategic outlines for the renewal (*Strategic Vision for Education: Restoring Armenia’s Strength in Education*, 2007), and the Armenian government has established special committees to involve different stakeholders in the guiding of the process. The reforms have been aimed at the education structure, curricula, management, modernisation of resources, and the management of the steeply increasing student demand for HE. As concrete examples of the renewals already done, Armenia has established a National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance (ANQA), and the three-tier degree system (BA, MA, PhD) has been obligatory for all Armenian universities since the start of the academic year 2006-2007.

However, despite the renewals that have been done, Armenia still has steps to take while aiming to achieve the Bologna goals. Even though in general the majority of both the leaders and the actual implementers (e.g. teachers) of the Armenian HE
renewal have had a basic positive attitude towards the reforms based on the Bologna principles, the implementation process has been complex and impaired by various challenges. Many of the actual implementers have resisted the policy diffusion and transfer modes; some have felt disheartened by the outlook of having to abandon the good practices they had during the Soviet times, and many have rebelled against the top-down transfer methods that they have experienced as being coercive. The implementers have also criticised the leaders for lacking change knowledge and for bringing in many international consultants instead of involving them into the process as local change owners and equal stakeholders. In addition the process has been hampered by the pressure to achieve quick results, and stagnated at times due to in conducive organisational structures and lack of resources. (Karakhanyan 2011, pp. 71-75.)

Yet, despite the profoundly challenging Armenian HE context, the World Bank report on the HE reforms in Armenia (Kataoka, Shahverdyan & Harutyunyan 2013, p. 1) states that “since joining the Bologna Process in 2005, the Armenian government and HEIs have made significant progress in reforming the HE system”. As regards the internationalisation of Armenian HE, it has been characterized by what Karakhanyan (2011, p. 74) refers to as a desire to “make quick changes geared towards recognition at international level”. Bearing in mind the internationalisation rationales introduced by Knight (2004, pp. 21-28), it is obvious that the internationalisation of Armenian HE has been prompted by both national and institutional aspirations. On the national level the internationalisation of the Armenian HE has been characterised by the desire to enhance the human resources development, build strategic economic and political alliances, and to support the intercultural understanding and nation-building efforts of the independent Armenia. On the level of HEIs internationalisation has been motivated by the need to build international profile and reputation, develop students and staff, build academic alliances and enhance research and knowledge production. In addition to the national and institutional aspirations it is noteworthy, as Navoyan (2011, p. 196) points out, that in the Armenian context the external financing from the World Bank and other bilateral/multilateral organisations has significantly directed the
content of the HE reforms, and Armenia has been highly dependent on external resources and technical expertise when implementing the reforms.

According to Kataoka, Shahverdyan & Harutyunyan (2013, p. 7) the Armenian government’s vision for HE is currently clearly stated in formal documents, in which the Armenian HE system and its institutions are envisaged to be “internationally competitive and compatible, and aligned with the European-wide higher education reform agenda, the Bologna Process”. Thus it seems that Armenia now has a clear vision for renewing and internationalising its HE; a vision steered by the Bologna guidelines and backed up by the basic positive attitude that both the leaders and the implementers have towards the Bologna reform principles. So the vision and willingness is there, but how to capture the moment? Karakhanyan (2011, pp. 75-76) argues that Armenia must acknowledge the fact that a change process of this magnitude is by no means a quick fix; instead it is a hard task which demands time and resources combined with a joint effort from all stakeholders. And most importantly it requires trust in the value of the change. With these prerequisites in place, it is possible for Armenia to achieve what Cuban (1988, p. 229) refers to as second-order or fundamental changes - changes that go deeper into the structure of organisations and can thus transform attitudes, perceptions, behaviours, relationships and the way in which people collaborate with each other.

2.3 ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project

As a part of their HE renewal, the Armenian Center for Education Projects (CEP), operating within MoES, issued a tender in April 2010 in which they were looking for a European university with whom they could build up a long-term partnership to raise the professional quality of teacher preparation in Armenia in the context of the Bologna Process. In the tender, entitled Education Quality and Relevance Project in Armenia: Consulting Services for Cooperation between a European University and Armenia State Pedagogical University (ASPU), it was stated that ASPU would be in a coordinating role while the partnership arrangements would be extended to other
Armenian pedagogical institutes as well, and that the funding (credit) for the project would come from the World Bank’s International Development Association (IDE).

In the tender, there are obvious links to the contextual framework described in the earlier sections. To begin with, the tender was set in the context of the Bologna Process, and thus it was written with the aim to enhance the quality and relevance of the Armenian education system according to the ‘European dimension’ of higher education. Also, when viewed from an Armenian perspective, the tender was in line with the current HE vision of the Armenian government, in which the Armenian HE system and its institutions are envisaged to be internationally competitive, compatible, and aligned with the Bologna Process higher education reform agenda. The tender was also closely linked to the Lisbon Strategy and the Work Programme for Education and Training 2010, which was initiated in 2002 to modernise the education systems in Europe with three overarching objectives: To improve quality and effectiveness, facilitate access, and open up the national education and training systems to the world. Furthermore, the tender also reflected the ‘external dimension’ of European HE that has been promoted by the EC to steer European HEIs towards a more collaborative activity with transnational university networks.

When viewed through the Finnish context, the tender presented the kind of opportunity described in the Finnish strategy papers addressing the internationalisation of Finnish HEIs – an opportunity which would not only facilitate international cooperation among HEIs, but also enable removing obstacles to and weaknesses in the internationalisation of HEIs in Finland. Also, as CEP and ASPU were looking to build up a long term partnership, the opportunity described in the tender was in line with the Finnish vision of exporting HE expertise, in which Finnish higher education institutions are perceived as attractive and reliable cooperation partners who engage in high-quality and mutually beneficial international research, education and cultural cooperation.
For the University of Oulu Faculty of Education (Oulu FE) the participation in the tender procedure was a strategic decision to become more actively involved in the export of educational expertise. Oulu FE expressed their interest in the project, made an offer for it, and won the project. The contract between CEP (the client) and Oulu FE (the consultant) was signed in August 2011, and the project was specified to last for 31 months with the final report due in February 2014.

In the agreement, it was specified that the starting point of the project was to develop, in cooperation with ASPU, high-quality, research-based teacher education in Armenia. On the level of practical assignments, Oulu FE was assigned to carry out/participate in the following development tasks:

1. Support the revision of the BA/MA study programmes at ASPU to be in compliance with the Bologna Process.
2. Improve students’ practical training system.
3. Strengthen ASPU’s internal quality assurance system.
4. Assist in the creation of a Career Centre at ASPU.
5. Provide consultancy on the training of ASPU personnel (training of trainers) regarding new teaching methodologies and technologies.
6. Assist in the development and implementation of good governance and transparency policy for ASPU.
7. Organise the exchange for ASPU staff members to Oulu FE, providing distance support on the tasks, and monitoring the development and performance of the cooperation.

During the project, a total of 12 consultants from the University of Oulu participated in the project. For tasks 1-6, the institutions established separate working groups and subgroups (listed in Table 1 below), each with a dedicated number of ASPU staff and 1-2 Oulu FE consultants so that there were approx. 5 participants in each group. All the assignments related to task 7 were carried out by the project leaders and coordinators.
Table 1. Working groups and subgroups in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Working groups</th>
<th>Subgroups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Consultancy on the BA’s and MA’s programmes</td>
<td>• Pre-primary education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Languages</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Mathematics and informatics</td>
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<td>• Social sciences</td>
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<td>• Sciences</td>
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<td>• Special education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Psychology and social psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Arts education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Improvement of students' practical training system</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Strengthening of ASPU’s internal quality assurance system</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Assistance in the creation of a Career Centre at ASPU</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Consultancy on the training of trainers</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Assistance in the development of good governance and transparency policy for ASPU</td>
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The entire cooperation project was divided into phases with specific timeframes and objectives for each phase. However, within the jointly agreed basic project framework the groups were able to operate fairly independently according to the needs of each group. Also, to support both the project-level and the group-level work, face-to-face visits and joint seminars were organised on a regular basis. The first face-to-face visit (fact finding visit) took place already before the project actually began as some Oulu FE representatives visited Yerevan to gain an initial understanding of the Armenian HE and teacher education context.

During the project there were nine joint seminars of which four took place in Oulu and five in Yerevan (including the closing seminar in December 2013). In the joint seminars, the project participants from ASPU and Oulu FE discussed their respective
educational systems and understandings, organised lectures and workshops on the different project themes (e.g. objectives of teacher education, the concept of curriculum, teaching methods, student assessment, and quality assurance), discussed the progress of the working groups, and set objectives for the next phases of the project. In between the seminars the national groups worked in both countries; they exchanged material, gave feedback, and discussed specific topics with other project members and their respective working groups and subgroups both nationally and internationally.

As noted already in the project agreement, to understand the aims of the project and for the cooperation to work in practice it was highly important for ASPU staff to acknowledge the ideas and methods of the cooperation, and for Oulu FE to explore the local conditions in Armenia. Thus the importance of cooperation and the possibility for a two-way collaborative learning process was emphasized in the agreement as both parties understood that the development of sustainable practices requires a high level of participation from both institutions. All in all, the agreement emphasized the necessity of reaching a shared understanding before developing the concrete actions for the cooperation, and the importance of building the capacity of the ASPU staff so that they would have the readiness for continuous further development after the project implementation phase.
3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In this study, my intention is not to evaluate the success of the entire ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project nor how the different working groups have succeeded in their tasks. Instead, utilising the perspective provided by the contextual overview and theoretical framework, my focus is on studying the two-way cross-cultural and collaborative learning that the project enabled. The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project (case) from a specific learning-oriented perspective to understand and describe the different aspects and processes of professional and organisational learning in the Armenian-Finnish transnational HE context. The secondary purpose of this study is to discuss the cooperation project as one unique manifestation of a phenomenon known as the internationalisation of HE.

As regards the audience of my research, I aim to provide a useful and interesting study for all of those who are interested in the internationalisation of HE as a phenomenon, and want to learn more about the processes of professional and organisational learning taking place in a transnational HE context. I especially hope that my study provides useful information for the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project participants and for both ASPU and University of Oulu as organisations.

3.1 Research questions

Instead of studying a particular objective that was written in the project agreement, I was more interested in studying a specific aspect of the collaboration project itself as a process. That is, primarily due to my own professional learning experiences in various cross-cultural contexts, I was interested in examining what and how the project participants and their respective organisations can learn as an intercultural academic community.

The idea of studying the cooperation project from a specific learning-oriented perspective enabled me to form more focused research questions that would seek
answers to the challenges and problems that I had personally experienced as a member of various geographically and culturally fragmented professional teams. As a result of refining the initial idea and the original draft questions, I formulated the following two central research questions:

What have the project participants and their respective organisations learned during the cooperation project?

What kind of conditions promote/hinder learning in a transnational learning community according to the project participants?

As the first central question implies, right from the start I wanted to study both the learning of the project participants and the learning of the respective organisations; ASPU (and CEP) in Armenia and Oulu FE in Finland. Furthermore, as sub-questions to the central research questions I wanted to explore what the project participants considered as the key benefits and challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context, and what kind of development ideas they had accumulated during the cooperation.

3.2 Aims of the study

According to Creswell (2007, p.3) the focus of all qualitative research needs to be on understanding the phenomenon being explored rather than solely trying to understand the reader, the researcher, or the participants being studied. So instead of trying to rate the ASPU – Oulu FE collaboration project as a learning experience or estimate the exact level of learning resulting from the project, the purpose of my research questions is to allow the voices of the project participants (interviewees) to be heard in order to better understand what I consider a complex and increasingly topical phenomenon of professional and organisational learning in transnational learning contexts.

By asking the project participants open questions about the contents, conditions, challenges, benefits, and possibilities regarding their learning, I aim at discovering the individual experiences and opinions of each interviewee, and then utilise them to form as holistic as possible an understanding of how professional and organisational learning was experienced in this particular intercultural academic community. I aim to
uncover challenges that can hinder professional and organisational learning in transnational learning contexts, and discover practices and conditions that can promote both the learning process as such and the successful execution of cross-cultural cooperation projects like the one carried out by ASPU and Oulu FE. Due to the characteristics of the case that I am studying my primary focus is on the HE context, but I also hope to be able to make development suggestions that are applicable (transferrable) to other transnational learning contexts as well.
4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Introduction to theoretical framework

Working life, heavily influenced by continuous technological development and the trends of the seemingly omnipresent global economy, is under a profound and relentless change process, which is gravitating around knowledge. The majority of working people on the globe today are somehow participating in what is known as a knowledge-based society – a society which places a variety of new skill and competency requirements for employees and employers alike. What is more, the pace of change seems to become more rapid year by year, while the moulding of the knowledge-based society itself is characterised by unpredictability and ever-increasing complexity. (Lehtinen 2008, p. 261.)

One of the core mantras of today’s working life is that the success of employers, public organisations and enterprises is becoming increasingly dependent on their ability to create and process knowledge. But who can tell what kind of knowledge is needed in five or ten years time? The fluidity and unpredictability of the knowledge-based society seems to shorten the life-span of relevant knowledge; what is considered highly relevant knowledge today might be replaced with something more relevant in a few years time, leaving prior knowledge secondary, if not totally obsolete. Thus the speed and ubiquitous nature of the change generates tremendous expectations on the learners and all the learning environments that we go through during our lives. It actually seems likely that clear boundaries between working and learning, as well as between learning and knowledge creation, will gradually disappear as the traditional forms of formal and informal learning in schools are not sufficient for us to cope with all the learning challenges that we come across during our lives. (Lehtinen 2008, p. 261.)

In this chapter I will move from the historical and political context of my study to the theoretical context, and examine the boundaries between working and learning. I will
introduce some theoretical perspectives on professional learning, focusing especially on those of us whose primary task it actually is to process and create knowledge, namely the academics. I will begin by providing some insights on adult and professional learning in general and on higher education institutions as professional learning environments in particular. From there I will proceed to describing some key theoretical perspectives related to organisational learning with a focus on the interconnectedness of the individual and organisational learning process.

In the final two sub-chapters I will aim at bridging the gap between the individual and organisational learning by elaborating on what Lehtinen (2008, p. 262) refers to as the “simultaneous nature of individual, social and organisational processes”. That is, I will take a closer look at the specific characteristics of the kind of learning environment in which the ASPU – Oulu FE collaboration took place, and examine learning at boundaries as well as the situated learning taking place in communities of practice.

4.2 Professional learning and the changing academic working environment

A number of different adult learning schools, also known as orientations or metatheories, have emerged during the last century. Marquardt & Waddill (2004, pp. 187-188) summarise five central learning schools, originally categorised by Merriam & Caffarella (1999), as follows:

Cognitivist – Cognitivists focus on how humans learn and understand using internal processes of acquiring, understanding and retaining knowledge. Cognitivists believe that humans are capable of insight, perception, and attributing meaning. Learning occurs when humans reorganize experiences, thereby making sense of input from the environment.

Behaviourist – The behaviourists concentrate on learning through control of the external environment. The emphasis is on changing behaviour through processes such as operant conditioning. Behaviourists believe that learning is built on three assumptions: (1) changed behaviour indicates learning; (2)
learning is determined by elements in the environment; and (3) repetition and re-enforcement of learning behaviours assist in the learning process.

*Humanist* – Humanists emphasize the development of the whole person and place emphasis on the affective domain. This orientation views individuals as seeking self-actualization through learning, and being capable of determining their own learning. Self-directed learning is embraced by members of this school.

*Social learning* – Social learning theory (often referred to as social cognitive theory) focuses on the social context in which people learn; i.e., how they learn through interacting with and observing other people. People can learn from imitating others (thus the importance of role models and mentoring). Social learning occurs, for example, when the culture of the organization is passed on to new employees teaching them how to be effective in that organization.

*Constructivist* – Constructivism stresses that all knowledge is context bound and that individuals make personal meaning of their learning experiences through internal construction of reality. This school emphasizes the importance of changing oneself and the environment. Reflective practice is a key manifestation of this orientation.

Despite the fact that all of these learning schools have their distinctive features, they also have overlapping/shared characteristics. Marquardt & Waddill (2004, p. 186) actually argue that instead of focusing on safeguarding the boundaries of the learning theory silos, it would benefit both academics and practitioners to recognise and distil the similarities and shared principles that the theories have. After all, it is very likely that while learning in practice, adults mix, unconsciously or consciously, different learning methods depending on individual preferences, learning goals and learning contexts.
And obviously, even though the approaches described above are listed as adult learning orientations, they can also be applied, to a varying extent, to the learning of children. However, the field of adult learning (andragogy) recognizes and acknowledges a number of factors which distinguish adult learning from the learning of children (pedagogy), and Merriam (2001, p. 5) notes that andragogy has five central assumptions which describe the adult learner as someone who:

1. Has an independent self-concept and can direct his or her own learning.
2. Has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning.
3. Has learning needs closely related to changing social roles.
4. Is problem-centred and interested in immediate application of knowledge.
5. Is motivated to learn by internal (e.g. self-esteem, self-actualization) rather than external factors.

Merriam (2001, pp. 5-7) continues that despite being appreciated as an orientation that promotes a learner-centred approach to adult learning, andragogy has received criticism for not being a proper theory and not necessarily being true of all adults. Merriam (2001, p. 8) concludes that more recent discussions regarding andragogy demonstrate both its usefulness for exploring the definitional and philosophical aspects of adult education as a scientific discipline, and its strengths and weaknesses as a guide to practice.

Basically the adult learning orientations and theoretical approaches described above are applicable irrespective of whether the learning occurs in formal, non-formal, or in informal contexts. And the same contextual variation is true of professional learning as well. Especially at EU level the possibilities of validating professional learning occurring in different learning contexts has been given special attention, and lifelong as well as lifewide learning have been studied and promoted with the aim of making visible the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, irrespective of the context where the learning originally took place. In many respects this has been a necessity as uninterrupted lifetime employment is becoming an
exception, and the labour market turmoil, reflecting evolutions in technologies, markets and organisations, requires that skills and competences are transferrable and can be ‘reprocessed’ according to each new working environment. (Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004, p. 69).

However, according to Harteis & Billett (2008, p. 210) much of the existing research on professional learning has focused on either individual or organisational perspectives to learning through working life, while placing less emphasis on the relationships between the organisational and individual contributions. This tendency, they argue, has left shortcomings in conceptions and theories about workplace learning. First, by failing to acknowledge that individual contributions are socially influenced by the organisationally generated demands/tasks that individuals encounter as a part of their daily work. And second, by failing to recognise that individuals contribute to the social construction of knowledge at workplaces as they apply their personal constructions of meaning and practice developed via particular life histories.

Billett (2008, p. 232) suggests that instead of focusing on either individual or organisational perspectives, professional learning through work should be understood as a relational (negotiated) interdependence between the affordances of the workplace (factors that invite workers in particular ways to participate, and access both support and reward), on the one hand, and the engagement of workers, on the other. In his view (2008, p. 233) both learning and remaking practice are “products of the inter-psychological processes between social and personal contributions: The social suggestion – premised on cultural, social and situational factors, and individual’s intentionality and agency – premised on their history of life experiences, their cognitive experience and how it is deployed”. Billett (2008, p. 233) argues that workplaces are, in fact, reliant upon individuals’ agency (their intentional actions) to secure workplace continuity through active processes of remaking, learning and transforming the workplace practices according to the changing needs.
What kind of workplace affordances do the higher education institutions of today have to offer for the academics working in these institutions? Clegg (2008, p. 330) uses the term *super-complexity* to refer how universities and academic life is becoming more complex and dividing into differentiated spaces exemplified by the fracturing of the presumed unity between teaching and research. She (2008, p. 330) points out how governments internationally are pressured by the twin concern of global competitiveness and the need to produce local, flexible, and employable workers according to the supply-side neo-liberal economic strategies. While pursuing these goals many governments are simultaneously reducing state funding per student, widening student participation into HE allured by the prospect of reducing unit costs, and de-investing in student support by gradually transferring more and more of the financial burden onto students and their parents.

Furthermore, the government actions have been accompanied by new controversial management ideologies emphasising the importance of (external) quality and audit procedures, corporate management practices, and the view of students as consumers in search of the latest knowledge and pedagogical/technological innovations, all of which Clegg (2008, p. 330) views as undermining the autonomy and respect traditionally accorder to academics as intellectuals and professionals. And on top of all that many academics have by now entered the interesting, yet demanding world of global relationships, colleagues, and competitiveness.

Gibbs (2009, p. 284) argues that these changes in the academic professionalism can be best summarised as a forced shift from creative production to repetition of labour accompanied by the surveillance of outcomes which allow only limited levels of tolerance. That is, he (2009, p. 284) sees a reduction of core identities of professions within academic communities in which “trans-disciplinary skilled workers and labourers use their skills not to be creative, but to satisfy consumer imperatives or managerial edicts of teacher satisfaction, research recognition, institution mission, business engagement and research funding accumulation”. For Gibbs (2009, p. 284) the dominating view of academic professionalism presents a cluster of low- as well as
high-level skills that are harnessed to an intensive and repetitive work, which is able to flourish only under certain procedural conditions.

And yet, despite the increasing performativity pressures and shrinking possibilities for academic freedom and creativity, academics are typically very committed to utilising their personal agency to create spaces in which they are able to maintain and develop highly distinctive academic identities. In fact it is not uncommon for academics to have covert resistance and overt frustration towards the performativity pressures alongside a strong desire to practise their work with integrity. Also, academic identities are often understood as being interwoven entities joining the personal and intellectual identities, and thus they are experienced as being intellectually meaningful and deeply personal. That is, instead of being regarded as something that can be taken off and put back on again, academic identities are more typically characterised by reflexivity and a passionate involvement with 'being' – an academic, an intellectual and a practitioner hybrid. (Clegg 2008, pp. 333-340).

Thus, as Edwards (2012, p. 24) notes, personal (emotional) engagement with the motives embedded in practices appears to be a distinguishing aspect of expert work. Also, as a result of examining different models of innovative knowledge communities, Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen (2002) have discovered that when learning is primarily oriented towards seeking knowledge advancement (as in the academia), it can be understood through what they refer to as the knowledge-creation metaphor. In this learning approach, they argue, the focus is on deep understanding and meaning construction with the following six key characteristics:

1. Learning is understood broadly to involve overall knowledge advancement (pursuit of newness).
2. Innovative learning requires mediating elements (e.g. theories, questions) to instigate cycles of innovation.
3. Learning is fundamentally social and ideas grow primarily between individuals.
4. Individuals however play important roles as instigators of innovation.
5. Tacit knowledge is an essential resource of creative experts.

6. There is a focus on conceptual and theoretical modelling using externalisation of tacit knowledge and theory.

All in all however, it is evident that academic professionalism and learning are by no means easy concepts to grasp. As Kolsaker (2008, p.516) points out, academic professionalism is a challenging concept to research because it is a relatively under-researched field to begin with, and the research that exists is somewhat ambiguous and lacks solid theoretical foundation – mainly due to the inherent difficulty to pinpoint the exact characteristics of professionalism. Furthermore, Clegg (2008, pp. 331-339) argues that in addition to being lived and experienced spaces, universities and academia are also conflictual and imaginary spaces in which people’s understanding of the relationship between different aspects of the academic practices varies considerably depending on the local contexts and individual interpretations.

4.3 Organisational learning

The discussion and research regarding the learning of organisations is typically characterised by two distinct, though often interconnected and also partly overlapping concepts: Organisational learning and the learning organisation. Academics examining organisational learning concentrate on the observation and analysis of the individual and collective learning processes, and aim to understand the nature of learning and unlearning both within and between organisations. The concept of learning organisation, on the other hand, is more typically utilised by consultants who have a clear action orientation that is geared towards designing and using specific diagnostic tools which can help to indentify, evaluate and promote the quality of learning inside organisations. Thus, when dealing with the concept of the learning organisation the aim is typically to develop normative models which can be used to create change and improve learning processes. (Easterby-Smith & Araujo 1999, pp. 1-8).
Despite the fact that the concept is somewhat ambiguous, I will use the organisational learning approach to answer my research questions in this study. Prange (1999, pp. 24-25) argues that organisational learning has been given a myriad of different classifications and uses, resulting in what can be described as an ‘organisational learning jungle’. According to Prange (1999, pp. 24-25) many of the various communities interested in organisational learning have had an excessive concern for the ‘usefulness’ that research theories on organisational learning should provide for the practising managers, and the desire to discover quick action remedies for specific problems has left very little room for deliberation, thus impeding more reflective and descriptive research approaches from gaining ground. Prange (1999, pp. 24-25) actually views the dominating quick action perspective as skewing the overall contribution from the field of organisational learning in favour of generating prescriptive tools with a narrow focus on solving specific problems in applied settings.

Even though Prange (1999) acknowledges that it is impossible to discover one unifying core theory on organisational learning, he (1999, pp. 25-26) notes that consistency, completeness and the ability to guide thinking are the trademarks of a solid and apt theory. By completeness he refers to questions that are considered to be reasonable and relevant by the researchers working on the field in question, and for organisational learning he suggests the following as the key questions to be probed:

1. What does organisational learning mean? (definition)
2. Who is learning? (learning subject)
3. What is being learned? (content of learning)
4. When does learning take place? (incentives and motives for learning)
5. What results does learning yield? (efficiency and effectiveness of learning)
6. How does learning take place? (processes of learning)

With the questions listed above as a basis, Prange (1999, p. 33) argues that instead of focusing on the mere ‘usefulness’ of organisational learning theories, it is beneficial to extend the value of those theories by placing more emphasis on their practicality. He (1999, p. 33) notes that “in contrast to mere usefulness, a theory’s practicality lies
in its ability to sensitise one to what may be, and not to predict firmly what will be”. That is, instead of considering theories useful only as prescriptive tools to remedy applied problems, they can be utilised in applied settings as lenses which enable us to gain a more varied and thorough perception on organisational learning.

In this study I will place a special emphasis on the social perspective of organisational learning. When viewed from a social perspective, organisational learning is seen as emerging from social interactions in the natural work setting, and the focus is on the way people make sense of their experiences at work. This school of thought, as Easterby-Smith & Araujo (1999, p.5) understand it, views organisational learning as socially constructed, as a political process and as manifested in the culture of an organisation. To begin with, the premise of socially constructed organisational learning is the recognition that data have no significance as such until people determine their meaning and worth, and that much of the crucial organisational information actually exist within the ‘community’ as a whole. As Nicolini & Meznar (1995, p. 740) point out, organizations construe, through the action of those in charge, their identity by transforming past choices, past experiments, new inventions and changes into rational accounts of knowledge.

Second, the perspective of organisational learning as a political process is tied to the concept of organisational unlearning. Organisational unlearning and learning, regarded as successive phases by some scholars and as abrupt simultaneous occurrences by others, are closely interconnected aspects of the overall learning process, in which unlearning can often prove to be the more challenging aspect. The concept of organisational unlearning is established on the basic idea that making room for new ideas and thought patterns in organisations is vital to foster new knowledge. But the challenge comes from the reluctance to leave old ways of thinking and acting, even if they would be recognised as ineffective or no longer functional. It is obvious however, that organisational, political, personal and psychological resistance to change interferes with the unlearning process and therefore ultimately hampers organisational renewal. Thus, even though politics and power relations are a
natural part of all social processes, recognising, admitting and acting to change patterns that no longer support the organisational goals make it possible to lay a solid foundation for organisational learning. (Nicolini & Meznar 1995, p. 732).

And third, the social perspective promotes the notion that organisational learning is a cultural composition too as it occurs within a particular organisational culture. As Kalliola & Nakari (2007, pp. 191-192) note, the shared working environment, involving values, norms, identities and shared meanings, bonds professional communities together and generates organisational cultures. Following Schein (1985), Kalliola & Nakari (2007, pp. 191-192) suggest that organizational culture typically consists of different, interconnected levels, of which basic or core assumptions form the essence of the culture. Other levels, such as values and artefacts, can be regarded as manifestations of the core assumptions.

When discussing organisational culture Kalliola & Nakari (2007, p. 192) emphasise the role of organisational leaders, and argue that “the critical task of the management is to build and maintain a sustainable system of shared meanings in the organisation as a whole”. This is by no means an easy task as organisational cultures are becoming more fragmented and temporal; there are varied sub-cultures with differing and sometimes even conflicting views between individuals. And what is more, work – especially knowledge-intensive work – is increasingly being carried out in transnational communities of practice, to which experts are recruited from different organisational cultures to execute a particular task within a specified time frame. In the next chapter I will examine the characteristics of learning in these new types of working environments which require crossing and bridging various boundaries.

4.4 Learning at boundaries

A lot of professional learning still takes place within fairly well-bound spaces and practices such as tailored trainings and well-defined work assignments. However, more and more learning occurs at different boundaries as we interact with people from different professions, disciplines and cultures, and move across and participate
in different practices. In fact, looking forward we can expect to encounter more working life boundaries caused by differences in, for example, norms, knowledge or power, as specialisation and globalisation increase our interactions between and movement across sites, and as a result contribute to the multiplicity and diversity of our human interactions. Therefore many professionals are likely to come across situations in which they are required to learn at boundaries, which Akkerman & Bakker (2011, p. 1) define as “socio-cultural differences leading to discontinuity in action or interaction”.

There are various different types of boundaries (e.g. personal, historical, social) that professionals may face during their careers, but as Wenger (1998) argues, if people want to learn and challenge themselves, they need to cross the boundaries of their communities to get new input from the outside. Engestöm, Engeström & Kärkkäinen (1995, p. 319) note that “experts face the challenge of negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid solutions”, and that is what professional boundary crossing is all about. According to Wenger (1998, pp. 105-110) boundary brokers are people who can introduce elements of one practice into another and who are thus members of multiple communities. And to assist in crossing boundaries brokers can utilise abstract or concrete boundary objects, which may have different meanings (or interpretations) in different social worlds, but their structure is common enough so that they can be recognised in different worlds and used as means of mediation and translation. In addition, boundary brokers can promote boundary interactions between the actors of different practices.

While crossing different types of boundaries people have to surpass what Kalliola & Nakari (2007, p. 192) refer to as thresholds. Mental boundaries relate to the confining of the core ideas and concepts that are central and particular to the group or organisation in question, and there the threshold refers to the extent that outsiders can assimilate the core ideas and concepts. Social boundaries reflect the social bonding between people which ties the group or organisation together, and there the threshold refers to the extent that it is possible for outsiders to be considered as full
members of the group. Physical boundaries indicate the formal rules and physical structures that regulate human action and interaction, and there the threshold refers to the extent formal structures hinder the recruitment/participation of outsiders. Naturally reactions to boundaries and thresholds differ between individuals, and as Murtonen et. al. (2008, p. 213) point out, while the modern complex and networked working environments may be regarded as open opportunities for intellectually inspiring activities and continuous learning by some, others may experience them as being more emotionally demanding, demotivating and anxiety-generating spaces with conflicting duties and roles.

One of the most challenging trends of today’s knowledge-intensive working life, incorporating mental, social and physical boundaries alike, is the tendency of work to be situated in transnational settings, as was the case in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation. The term transnational, even though sometimes used synonymously with the term international, carries a specific meaning. As Knight (2004, p. 8) notes, whereas the term international emphasizes the notion of nation and refers to the relationship between and among different nations and countries, the term transnational is used in the sense of across nations (cross-border) and does not specifically address the notion of relationships. Knight’s standpoint is supported by Kim (2009, p. 395) who argues that transnational needs to be differentiated from the conventional understanding of ‘inter-national’, primarily because it refers to events taking place in ‘transnational space’ that are typically not part of official ‘inter-action’ between nations. Thus, following Tyrrell (2007, 2nd paragraph), it can be characterised that transnational “concerns the movement of peoples ideas, technologies and institutions across national boundaries”.

But what is learning like in these transnational spaces? George & Svels (2013, pp. 327-328) suggest that through transnational learning we purposefully look for ideas, knowledge and innovations that have been successful in other nations, and then assess whether or not they can be applied in our own environment to gain positive results. While elaborating on transnational learning, George & Svels (2013, p.328)
distinguish between two levels of learning. On the surface level it is a question of *knowledge transfer*, which is associated with the *exchange* of knowledge within networks/groups. On a deeper level it is about *knowledge diffusion* that refers to the extent to which the exchanged knowledge is spread, absorbed, adopted and employed by the members of the recipient group. However, knowledge diffusion does not imply an absolute transfer and adoption of new knowledge; it is typically more an incremental process in which the combined diffusion and transfer can result in innovation and transformation.

Furthermore, Mariussen & Virkkala. (2013a, pp. 2-3) emphasize the importance of recognising that knowledge is not an asset, item or object that can simply be bought, sold, accessed and transferred. Instead, following the theory of organisational knowledge creation developed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), Mariussen & Virkkala. (2013a, pp. 2-3) argue that knowledge is *context dependent*, and that transnational learning involves new knowledge creation through the localised *conversion of knowledge*. In their theory of organisational knowledge creation Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) refer to this type of learning as the SECI process, in which new knowledge is created via the sequenced phases of *socialisation (vision)*, *externalisation*, *combination* and *internalisation*. The core of the SECI process, as Mariussen & Virkkala (2013a, p. 3) understand it, is the conversion of tacit, embedded and context dependent knowledge into explicit knowledge that can be *translated* and *transformed* to fit into a new context, where it can then become internalised.

The starting point of transnational learning should always be the existing resources, preconditions, knowledge assets and systems of innovation, which can then be developed further. First, because new knowledge is more easily absorbed when it can be related to something that is already known. And second, because using the existing know-how as a basis for learning makes it possible to reduce the unavoidable discomfort of moving from solid existing knowledge towards uncertain new knowledge. That is, knowledge in transnational learning is also *fragile* in the way that it requires the exposing of existing (tacit) knowledge for analysis, peer review and
other forms of external evaluation. As the balance between knowledge protection and learning is fragile, the knowledge creation process should start with the sharing of knowledge in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, and the entire learning process needs to be well-coordinated throughout. (Mariussen & Virkkala 2013b, pp.157-159.)

In general boundaries offer both strong barriers to and rich opportunities for learning. As Mariussen & Virkkala (2013b, p.155) note, cognitive learning is typically both enabled and restricted by spatial and organisational frameworks, which can at times lead into lock-in mechanisms and create narrow trajectories. Transnational learning, as a process of crossing and bridging boundaries, is often motivated by visions that aim to break certain spatial and organisational limitations. However, Akkerman (2011, p. 21) emphasises that despite the potential, learning does not evolve naturally from a co-location of diverse practices and perspectives, and thus boundaries should be approached with a proactive learning agenda. She (2011, p. 21) states that as the boundaries that people encounter can easily remain implicit or hidden during interaction, they need to be indentified and explicated after which they can be discussed, mediated and processed collectively to promote the learning of all those involved. As Akkerman & Bakker (2011, p. 3) note, with a proactive learning agenda boundaries can be exploited for generative, expansive and creative processes, in which learning can be broadly understood to include identity developments and transformation of practice. And thus, depending on the context and goals, Akkerman & Bakker (2011, p. 3) suggest that learning at boundaries can include:

1. **Identification**: Boundary crossing can lead to the identification of the intersecting practices, whereby the nature of the intersecting practices can be (re)defined.

2. **Coordination**: Boundary crossing can also lead to processes of coordination in which routine exchanges between practices are established to make transitions smoother.

3. **Reflection**: Reflection is a more profound effect of boundary crossing. It is about learning to look differently at one practice by taking on the perspective of
another practice. On this level learning is considered to be fundamentally social where ideas grow primarily between individuals.

4. Transformation: In the case of transformation boundary crossing leads to changes in practices or even in the creation of a new in-between (boundary) practice.

As George & Svels (2013, p. 328) note, learning at boundaries, including transnational learning, occurs through different structures and social collectives: communities of practice, of interest and of networks. In the next chapter I will discuss learning at boundaries in intercultural academic communities of practice, which involve both a high degree of specialisation and interdisciplinary work, and thus require continuous investigation and discussion regarding professional boundaries.

4.5 Intercultural academic communities of practice

An individual process which is separated from the rest of our activities, takes place in an institution and is the result of teaching, has a distinct beginning and an end, and can, at times, be boring and arduous... This is the first association for many of us when we think of learning. But is that really how we gain the majority of our learning during our lives? According to Wenger (1998, p. 3) the association described above is far too narrow and simplistic, and he argues for a different perspective in which learning is placed in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world. In the perspective that Wenger (1998, p. 3) promotes, learning is viewed as an inevitable part of participating in social life and practice, reflecting “our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing”.

So for Wenger (1998, pp. 4-5) learning is situated in social practice, and participation refers to learners both as active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. The cornerstone of Wenger’s social theory of learning is a community of practice, which integrates four main components that characterise social participation as a process of learning and knowing:
1. **Meaning**: As experiencing our life and the world as meaningful.
2. **Practice**: As the shared historical and social frameworks that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
3. **Community**: As a social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence.
4. **Identity**: As a form of learning and becoming in the context of our communities.

In Wenger’s (1998) community of practice learning takes place as people participate and engage in actions and interactions that transform the social and cultural structure. The community is the social arena for understanding cultural meanings and developing identities, which are manifested in practices. Meanings are negotiated through the two continually converging and complementary processes of participation and *reification*, in which the participants give form to their experiences and understandings by producing objects and shared concepts. For Wenger (1998, pp. 7-8) learning in a community of practice has different implications for individuals, communities and organisations:

- **For individuals** it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities.
- **For communities** it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members.
- **For organisations** it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organisation knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organisation.

In this study I will examine the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation by using the concept of *intercultural academic community of practice*, which Otten (2009, p. 407) regards as providing an appropriate level for analysing the process of *negotiating interculturality* in institutions of HE. Otten (2009, p. 407) argues that *cosmopolitan professionalism* in the international academic field is an ambitious vision for negotiating interculturality as an act of intellectual growth in modern academia, and that any analysis of
interculturality in HE has to focus on interaction patterns of academic practices and the negotiation of cultural meaning. He (2009, pp. 407-408) conceptualises interculturality in two complementary ways. First, as an interpretative precondition of social practice that manifests and embodies itself in perpetual negotiations of (cultural) meaning. And second, as a conceptual approach for institutional development.

Otten (2009, p. 407) states that to overcome naïve assumptions about intercultural developments on academic communities of practice, the analysis needs to address the intersection of both the individual and organisational level. He (2009, p. 409) elaborates by stating that the lived cultural worldviews of ‘academic tribes’ are crucial to enable academic communities of practice to reflect and develop a professional cosmopolitan practice, and instead of zooming in on the mere quantities of different nationalities on campus, it is more important to focus on the social and organisational embeddedness of intercultural practices. Thus interculturality becomes an issue of organisational learning, which can generate tensions in well-established HE institutions. As Otten (2009, p. 409) points out, the traditional (public) university typically represents a very robust example of a change-resistant organisation, largely due to the contradictory organisational culture of universities: On the one hand they are extremely formal in their official procedures, but on the other hand they can offer, at least for tenure professors, very liberal professional autonomy in the form of the ‘free’ academic scholar.

To examine intercultural academic communities of practice at the intersection of the individual and organisational level, Otten (2009, pp. 411-413) introduces an intercultural orientation model with two main dimensions: The organisational level of structures and formal belonging and the personal level of attitudes and practices (see Figure 1 below). Otten (2009, pp. 411-413) sees the two dimensions as interconnected aspects of every social change process, in which change can take place on different levels (conscious/unconscious) and with different magnitude ranging from slow and subtle shifts of values and hidden forms of social evolution to
various explicit transitions such as planned processes and actions initiated to achieve a certain goal.

Figure 1. Dimensions of intercultural orientations in international HE (Otten 2009, p. 412)

The vertical dimension of the model represents the structural changes on the organisational level, which affect the sense of belonging that is manifested through formal and informal membership and participation as well as through internal power status of people and groups. As regards cultural diversity, changes on the vertical dimension can lead to a more homogenous or diversified (heterogeneous) organisational structure. A homogenous organisational structure typically has a powerful mainstream structure, and it expects and requires similarity and conformity of its members. Those who do not ‘fit’ into the mainstream structure can easily find themselves in precarious positions with less influence and decision-making power within the community. A diversified organisational structure, in turn, is based on the diversity of people and groups within the community, and membership together with the possibility to influence decisions is based on complementary cohesion rather than similarity or conformity. (Otten 2009, p. 412).
The horizontal dimension illustrates the way individual and collective members think, feel, act and do the things they are supposed to do in their organisation or community. The personal level changes regarding social practices and cultural reflections indicate whether cultural diversity is encountered with assimilation and protective routines, or whether it is welcomed as an opportunity to rethink previous practices and to embrace creativity. The static and assimilative end of the horizontal scale reflects overemphasised ethnocentrism, which can easily lead to the collective problem of institutional discrimination, whereas practices on the creative and adaptive end of the scale allow multiple perspectives while seeking to expand understandings on (cultural) meaning. (Otten 2009, pp. 412-413).

To analyse the combined effect of the vertical and horizontal dimensions, Otten (2009, pp. 411) uses the concepts of closure and opening, which he sees as two distinct gravity poles that continuously exert push and pull effects on the process of negotiating cultural adaptation. In the mode of closure the institutional cultural status is carefully protected against external and internal influences that challenge the basic patterns of action, truth, reward and sanction. A systematic underestimation of cultural and social aspects within institutional processes and structures is an example of a typical closure reaction that organisations can have towards expanding interculturality. On the opposite gravity pole, in the mode of opening, institutions make an effort to explore new areas of unknown cultural and intellectual knowledge that can be accessed via intercultural encounters and domestic diversity. Individuals, communities and organisations that embrace the mode of opening typically have an intrinsic and unforced motivation to cope with dissent, and they are driven by a strong determination of turning 'problems of unsolved action' into 'challenges of learning'.

Whether intercultural academic communities of practice operate from a mode of closure or a mode of opening depends highly on their ability to build and achieve common knowledge. Language of course plays a central role in building common knowledge, and as Elkjaer (1999, pp. 84-86) points out, on the level of the individual language provides the mediational means for internal thought processes which
enable us to reflect upon our actions and learn by reorganising and reconstructing our experience. Language also provides the mediational means for external communication, and in intercultural academic communities of practice the members need what Collins (2004) defines as *interactional* and *contributory* expertise. By *interactional expertise* he refers to the ability to use commonly shared language in conversations and interactions with others, whereas *contributory expertise* refers to the ability to use relevant and topical professional language while interacting with other experts. In short, with the help of interactional and contributory expertise experts are able to understand and to be understood.

Furthermore, following Carlile (2004) Edwards (2012, p.25) points out that when the difference between what is known and what is new increases, the demands on the knowledge held in common, and therefore the difficulty in working with the new knowledge, also increase. Thus academics operating in multipolar communities of practice need to be able to move beyond *personal agency* when interpreting problems and evaluating actions and outcomes. Edwards (2012, p.26) suggests that all inter-professional collaborations call for *relational agency*, which involves:

1. **Working with others to expand the object of activity so that its complexity is revealed**, by recognising the motives and the resources that others bring to bear as they too interpret it.
2. **Aligning one’s own responses to the newly enhanced interpretations**, with the responses being made by the other professionals as they act on the expanded object.

Edwards (2012, p.26) summarises that inter-professional collaboration taking place at boundaries requires *relational expertise*, which is a matter of “recognising what others can offer a shared enterprise and why they offer it; and being able to work with what others offer while also making visible and accessible what matters to you”.

In general building common knowledge while working across inter-agency boundaries is challenging and according to Christensen & Laegreid (2007) it can involve various problems starting from time management, resource allocation, and over ambitious
goals that stem from unintended risks and uncontrolled consequences. Thus Christensen & Laegreid (2007, p. 1063) argue that collaboration across boundaries between organisations cannot easily be imposed from the top down; instead what is needed is a cooperative effort in which the role of a successful reform agent is to act more as a ‘gardener’ than an engineer or an architect. Edwards (2011, pp. 36-39) shares this view and emphasises that to generate common knowledge, boundary spaces need managing and meetings. For Edwards (2011, pp. 36-39) meetings which give time to examine the ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘where to’ of shared practices are a prerequisite to finding solutions, and they should always be augmented by the meta-level aim of developing mutual recognition, which in turn promotes the establishing of, if not fully shared common knowledge, at least a partially shared understanding or a ‘reasonable agreement’.

All in all, as Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, pp. 27-29) suggest, a strong community can foster interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust, practice combines the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains, and the domain of the community makes it possible to create common ground and a sense of shared identity; it can “inspire the members to contribute and participate, guide their learning and give meaning to their actions”. Thus at its best a community of practice is a tremendous asset when learning at a boundary. As Wenger (2000, p. 233) eloquently portrays:

*There is something disquieting, humbling at times, yet exciting and attractive about such close encounters with the unknown, with the mystery of ‘otherness’: a chance to explore the edge of your competence, learn something entirely new, revisit your little truths, and perhaps expand your horizon.*
5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

As Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2007, p.12) note, the reality unfolds differently for a researcher depending on how and with what tools s/he examines the reality. This fundamental, yet crucial, notion indicates that there are different, just as valid, ways to approach a given research topic and thus no inherently superior research approach exists. Furthermore, according to Guba & Lincoln (1994, p.108) all the various research approaches and analyses are human constructions and as such subject to human errors. Therefore, as Guba & Lincoln (1994, p.108) continue, justifying a research approach is not ultimately about proving the incontrovertible rightness or wrongness of a given research approach. Instead, it is more about relying on the persuasiveness and utility of the selected approach. In this chapter I will justify my research methodology and methods, and hopefully also convince my readers of their usefulness for answering my research questions.

Raunio (1999, p. 26) suggests that one can examine research methodology from a broader or narrower perspective. When viewed from a broader perspective, research methodology is understood as a framework that examines the basic fundamentals of reality and knowledge, basic scientific starting point and worldview. When viewed from a narrower perspective, research methodology is understood as covering only descriptions on how specific research methods are used to discover new knowledge about the reality. In this chapter I will give an introduction on my research methodology using both the broad and narrow perspective, as I believe that they need to be intertwined to build a solid basis for a research. I will begin by introducing the ontological, epistemological and methodological baseline for my study, and based on my research paradigm I will then discuss my research methodology and methods in more detail.

The details regarding the collection and analysis of the research data will be discussed in the next chapter.
5.1 Research paradigm and methodology

Scientific argumentation entails that a researcher is able to justify the choices that he/she has made, but there is a limit as to how far one can rationally justify the choices made. That is, when making justifications there comes a point when a researcher is left with nothing more than his/her beliefs or attitudes that cannot be rationally justified. Naturally, a researcher can state that his/her research problem or research question defines the type, strategy and approach of his/her research, but in the end s/he cannot escape the fact that his/her beliefs and attitudes are already an integral part of defining both the research problem and research questions. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2007, pp. 67-68.)

Guba & Lincoln (1994, p.107) refer to these basic belief systems that researchers have as research paradigms, which are based on the researchers’ ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.107) define paradigm as follows:

It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do.

Guba & Lincoln (1994, p.108) elaborate further that research paradigms define for researchers “what it is that they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry”.

Following Guba & Lincoln (1994, p.108), to learn the ontological assumptions that a researcher has, s/he needs to seek answers to the question of “what is the form and nature of reality, and therefore, what is there that can be known about it”. And to discover the epistemological assumptions, a researcher needs to clarify what is his/her (knower or would-be knower) relationship to what can be known. That is, before the researcher can decide which research methodology/methods to use, s/he should first know the nature of what s/he is studying - what is real (ontology), and how to best understand that particular object of study - what is knowledge (epistemology). Guba & Lincoln (1994, p.108) emphasise the close connection between the
ontological and epistemological understandings, and thus argue that the epistemological understanding is highly dependent on the ontological understanding.

Once a researcher has positioned himself in terms of his ontological and epistemological assumptions, it is possible to determine the research methodology and methods that will both suit the researcher’s personal worldview and provide answers to his/her research questions. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.108) the selected research methodology is not just a question of methods as the methods must fit the selected methodology. That is, as Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2007, p.13) argue, when viewed from the narrow perspective the research methodology provides rules and regulations on how to use particular research methods and tools to achieve the research goals, and the use of certain research methods and tools in turn partly justifies and explains why certain kind of research results have been gained.

For my study I first needed to examine the ontological question to decide between the quantitative and qualitative methodology. As a result of examining the ontological question, it was obvious that I needed to opt for qualitative methodology based mainly on my research setting and research questions. First, in this study my aim is not to verify or falsify any particular hypothesis in my study, which is the typical starting point for quantitative studies. Second, I do not aim to quantify the level or amount of learning achieved in the collaboration project; instead I aim to examine the possibilities and challenges of people’s professional learning in a cross-cultural setting as a part of a community of practice. That is, I am examining what Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2007, p.63) refer to as social reality, which is dependent on the human mind and is made out of (constructed by) different meanings, interpretations and other constructs of the human mind. And third, I want to get a holistic account of the collaboration project including the rich and complex contextual information attached to the individual experiences of the interviewees, and like many scholars (e.g. Creswell 2007; Guba & Lincoln 1994; Miles & Huberman 1994; Shah 2004) I believe that qualitative methodology provides a better starting point for understanding human social reality within its complex contextual setting.
Then, keeping in mind my ontological assumptions, research questions and research setting, I needed to evaluate what would be the most useful way of understanding social reality and humans as the primary object of my study. While seeking answers to this epistemological question I studied different qualitative research frameworks (or -isms) and concluded that social constructivism comes closest to providing a suitable framework for my study. Social constructivism is a research framework in which the researcher seeks to understand the world, and the specific context, in which individuals live and work. Instead of trying to narrow individuals’ varied and multiple meanings into few categories and ideas, the researcher looks for the complexity of views. The subjective meanings that individuals develop based on their experiences are seen as being negotiated socially and historically, and thus they are also formed through interaction with others and through the historical and cultural norms that govern people’s lives. Thus, when using social constructivism as a qualitative framework, the researcher’s intent is to “make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world”. (Creswell 2007, pp. 20-21.)

Methodologically the constructivist framework can manifest in different types of research approaches. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.111) argue that the varying and personal nature of social reality indicates that individual understandings can be uncovered and refined only via the interaction between and among the researcher and the research participants, and that the varying social reality should be interpreted using conventional hermeneutical (interpretative) techniques, and compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange. Creswell (2007, p.21) in turn notes that phenomenological studies, in which a group of individuals describe the meanings of their lived experiences of a certain phenomenon, are typically based on the constructivist framework. As a result of reflecting on both phenomenology and hermeneutics, I understood that in my research I would need to bind understanding and interpretation together to answer my research questions in a thorough manner, and thus I would need a combination of these two approaches. On the one hand my study requires me to form a holistic understanding of professional learning in a cross-
cultural context, the structure and organising principles that give form and meaning to it as a phenomenon. On the other hand, I also need to include an interpretive aspect to my study to recognise the historical, cultural and social context of the interviewees’ experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and social levels (Laverty 2003, pp. 4-15).

So in the end a research methodology known as *hermeneutic phenomenology* appeared to be the best fit for my study. Laverty (2003, pp. 7-16) notes that hermeneutic phenomenology, originating from the pioneering work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), concentrates on meanings that arise from the interpretive interaction between historically produced texts and the interpreter. Kvale (1996, pp. 46-47) clarifies the interpretive aspect further by stating that hermeneutics interprets human cultural activity as texts (e.g. written or verbal communication) to find intended or expressed meanings. In hermeneutic phenomenology this interpretive process, Laverty (2003, p.9) elaborates, is achieved by using a *hermeneutic circle* in which the researcher moves back and forth between the separate parts of the experience and the whole of the experience to increase the depth of engagement with and understanding of the texts being studied. Kvale (1996, p.47) notes that in principle the cyclical hermeneutic circle can be an infinite process, but in practise it ends when the researcher has reached a sensible and valid meaning that is free of inner contradictions.

According to Laverty (2003, pp.17-18) hermeneutic phenomenology is also characterised by the overt naming of the researcher’s assumptions, influences, and biases as key contributors to the research process; they are embedded and essential to the interpretive process. Laverty (2003, p.17) emphasises that a researcher utilising hermeneutic phenomenology needs to engage in thorough self-reflection at the beginning of the research process, and preferably write down the key findings of that process for his/her research. Furthermore, evaluating one’s assumptions, influences, and biases is a part of getting to know one’s *historicality* and *pre-understanding*, which according to Laverty (2003, p. 8 ) includes all those influences
and characteristics that our culture hands down to us from birth, thus presenting us with specific ways of understanding the world. And yet, Laverty (2003, p. 8) continues, while meaning and understanding is partly found in the way we are constructed by the world, we are simultaneously constructing the world from our background and experiences.

According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2007, p.35) the primary aim of a hermeneutic phenomenological research is typically to conceptualise the phenomenon (meaning of the experience) in question. That is, to acknowledge or highlight a phenomenon (or a certain aspect of a phenomenon) that is already known, but is for some reason unacknowledged, taken for granted or forgotten. In my study this aspect is the professional learning of the project participants, which is not the primary focus of the collaboration project and thus perhaps partly unacknowledged, but still a vital part of the success of the project.

However, as a research methodology hermeneutic phenomenology does not provide any specific research method to follow. As Laverty (2003, p. 16) points out, it is more a creative approach to understanding, which requires the researcher to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience, using whatever approaches are responsive to particular questions and subject matter.

5.2 Research methods

As my research paradigm, social constructivism, and my research methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology, are not locked into any particular research methods, I needed to find research method(s) that would fit not only my research paradigm and methodology, but also the object of my study. While evaluating suitable research methods, I used the following six key research activities that van Manen (1990, pp.30-34) has outlined as a guidelines for researching lived experience:

1. Turn to a phenomenon that seriously interests you and commits you to the world.
2. Investigate the experience as it is lived rather than as it has been conceptualised before.

3. Reflect on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon.

4. Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.

5. Maintain a strong and oriented (focused) relation to the phenomenon.

6. Balance the research context by considering both its parts and the whole.

Primarily due to the nature of my study as a study of a phenomenon explored through one case within a bounded setting (Creswell 2007, p. 73), I decided that I need to follow the practicalities of a case study as a research method. And to support the upper level data analysis guidelines derived from my research paradigm, my research methodology and van Manen’s guidelines listed above, I decided that I will utilise the principles of traditional qualitative content analysis.

5.2.1 Qualitative case study

The distinctive need for case studies, as Yin (2003, p. 2) sees it, arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena, and to gratify that desire, the case study method enables researchers to maintain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events. According to Yin (2003, p. 1) case study is a suitable research design when the researcher has little control over the events taking place and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with some real-life context. In fact Yin (2003, p. 13) believes that case study is a particularly suitable research method when the researcher believes that the contextual conditions are highly relevant to the phenomenon of study. Yin’s view is supported by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000, p. 181) who note that as real-life contexts are always unique and dynamic, case studies investigate and report the complex interactions between events, human relationships, and other factors in a unique instance, and thus they can help readers to understand various phenomena more profoundly than by presenting the phenomenon in question only through abstract theories and principles.
Different scholars provide different definitions for qualitative case study depending on whether they approach it, for example, as a state of inquiry (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln 2005), a methodology (e.g. Merriam 1998) or as a comprehensive research strategy (e.g. Yin 2003). Creswell (2007, p. 73) understands qualitative case study to be both a type of research design and a product of the inquiry, and he defines it as an approach in which the researcher explores a bounded system (case) over time through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and finally reports a case description and case-based themes. Yin (2003, p. 14) adds that a case study inquiry typically benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions that can be used to guide data collection and analysis. In my case study it is obvious that the ASPU – Oulu FE collaboration project is a bounded system in terms of the time frame, the participants and the project context. Due to time and access limitations the data sources in my study are not as varied as they could be, but the relatively large number of interviewees (for a master's level study) adds richness and thickness to the research data. And while developing my research paradigm and searching for relevant theoretical ‘lenses’ through which to examine the project, I have found additional resources that provide guidance for me in my data collection and analysis phase.

Merriam (1998, p. 34) argues that case study research in education is commonly conducted to identify and explain specific issues and problems of practise. In my research I study professional and organisational learning in a cross-cultural context to identify and explain the possibilities and challenges that it entails. Following Merriam (1998, pp. 38-39), my study can be categorised as being largely interpretive in that it seeks to develop conceptual categories (themes) inductively from the data to examine the initial assumptions rising from my research paradigm and the theoretical framework of my study. According to Merriam (1998, p. 39) these types of case studies are sometimes also referred to as being analytical because they include a greater amount of analysis than purely descriptive studies. However, instead of trying to construct a whole new theory, in this study my aim is mainly to suggest
relationships among the different themes to achieve an initial level of conceptualisation.

My study is also partly descriptive in the way that it provides some narrative accounts from the project participants as well as an upper level description of the collaboration project as a whole. It is vital to remember however, that my study is not an analysis of the entire case; instead it is an embedded analysis of a specific aspect (professional and organisational learning in a cross-cultural context) of the case (Creswell 2007, p. 75). In the end my study is distinguished more by the subjects/objects of the study than by the research methodology that it employs; it focuses on the project participants and seeks to understand their perception of professional and organisational learning in the project, while seeking to highlight specific themes that are relevant for the case (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995, p. 317).

5.2.2 Theory-guided content analysis

Qualitative content analysis aims to organise the raw data into a concise and organised format without losing any of the information that the original data contains. The purpose of performing a content analysis on qualitative data is to increase the informative value of the data by aiming to create meaningful, clear and coherent information out of the initial, unorganised raw data. Once the data is analysed, it enables the researcher to make lucid and reliable conclusions of the phenomenon in question. The qualitative content analysis is based on logical reasoning and interpretation, in which the raw data is first divided into smaller units, then it is conceptualised and finally assembled again into a new, more logical entity. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, p. 108.)

As Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 95) point out, the logical reasoning in qualitative research is traditionally considered to be either inductive (proceeding from details to more general concepts/theories) or deductive (proceeding from general concepts/theories to details). However, this traditional dichotomy between inductive and deductive reasoning often overshadows a third possibility, abductive reasoning,
which in qualitative research can be understood as a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. That is, in abductive reasoning the research data and theoretical concepts take turns in directing the researcher’s thought process while s/he is conducting the content analysis, and the researcher aims to combine the two sources of information while producing the findings of his/her research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, pp. 95-97).

Based on the division between inductive, deductive and abductive reasoning in qualitative research, Eskola (2007, p. 162) talks about data-driven, theory-driven and theory-guided studies, respectively. In my study I have chosen to use Eskola’s theory-guided reasoning for my content analysis for three main reasons. First, because of my background, my previous work experience and my studies (especially in the EdGlo programme), I feel that it is not possible for me to conduct a purely data-driven (inductive) study on my thesis topic as I already knew some of the key concepts related to my study before I began my thesis work. Second, as my intention is not to test any specific theory/hypothesis, I have used fairly open questions (not linking them into any specific existing theory) when interviewing the project participants. And third, I feel that the multifaceted context of my study requires me to examine my topic through several theoretical concepts (‘lenses’) to understand and interpret it more thoroughly. Due to the last two points I cannot use a purely theory-driven (deductive) approach in my study either, and thus the theory-guided approach provides the most suitable starting point for my content analysis.

The theory-guided content analysis is based on inductive reasoning and the theoretical framework is incorporated into the study both to help the analysis process and to guide the formation of the end result. However, there are no set rules as to when the theoretical insights should to be brought into the analysis process, and thus it is a decision that each researcher makes based on his own data and intuition. The influence of the theoretical framework and researcher’s pre-understanding can be recognised from the analysis, but instead of using the existing knowledge to test a certain theory, its purpose is to help the researcher to create new understandings and
open new horizons to the phenomenon being studied. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, pp. 97-100.)
6 COLLECTING AND ANALYSING THE DATA

Creswell (2007, p.118) refers to data collection in qualitative research as “a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions”. He (2007, p.118) lists the following seven, often overlapping, key activities that are typical when collecting data for qualitative research: Locating site/individual, gaining access and making rapport, collecting data, sampling purposefully, recording information, resolving possible field issues, and storing data for analysis.

In this chapter I will utilise Creswell’s list of key activities as a framework to describe how I collected data for this study. In addition to describing the data collection process, I will also introduce my data sample as well as the basic principles and stages that I used for analysing my data.

6.1 Data collection process

Since my aim was to gain as holistic as possible an understanding of how professional and organisational learning was experienced in this particular transnational learning community, I wanted to gather data from all key sites; from CEP and ASPU in Yerevan and from Oulu FE in Oulu. In addition I wanted to gather data from different sources, but as the confidential project reports were not available for me to study, I aimed at gathering rich and diverse data from the project participants themselves.

To gather data from project participants, I designed a semi-structured (theme interview) questionnaire with pre-formulated questions (see Appendix for details). However, during the interviews there was no absolute adherence to the pre-formulated questions, which made it possible for me to ask additional questions during the conversation. In the questionnaire there were open-ended and broad questions ranging from the expectations and roles of the project participants to the learning experiences they and their respective institutions had had during the project.
At the beginning of the questionnaire I briefly introduced my research (its scope, purpose, and aims), the relation of my research to the actual cooperation project, as well as the measures that I was aiming to take to secure the confidentiality of the recorded comments given by each interviewee. I also explained the basics of my research as well as the confidentiality measures to each interviewee at the beginning of the interview.

When designing the actual questions for the questionnaire and conducting the interviews I followed an approach to which Schutt (2012, pp. 344-345) refers as case-oriented understanding; an understanding of social processes in a group, formal organization, community, or other collectivity that aims to reflect accurately the standpoint of participants. Thus, while interviewing I allowed the interviewees to talk about the aspects of the project that were important to them, while making sure that I covered the same key questions with each interviewee. So even though I used the same questionnaire as a basis for all the interviews I conducted in Yerevan and Oulu, each interview was still unique as regards the length, depth and emphasis of the interview.

Due to my own study schedules as well as the schedules of the collaboration project, it was more convenient for me to begin my data collection process from Armenia. With the help of the International Cooperation Unit of ASPU I was able to combine the data gathering for my thesis with the compulsory internship that is a part of the EdGlo programme, and in September 2013 I travelled to Yerevan. I was exceptionally well received in both ASPU and CEP, and during late September and early October (23.9. - 11.10.2013) I interviewed a total of 10 project participants in Yerevan. All the interviewees listed below (in alphabetical order) are from ASPU unless stated otherwise:

Zhanna Andreasyan (Head of Higher Education Subcomponent/CEP)
Armine Avagyan (Dean of the Faculty of Special Education)
Mkrtich Avagyan (Project manager, Head of Education and Quality Reforms)
Gagik Demirkhanyan (Dean of Natural Sciences)
During my visit to Yerevan the main challenge was to utilise the time available (three weeks) as effectively as possible to gain access to the project participants. The majority of the project participants in Yerevan were extremely busy with their everyday work and other projects that were ongoing simultaneously, but relying on the generosity and hospitality of the interviewees themselves and with the indispensable help from Kristina Tsaturyan (Head of International Cooperation Unit), I was able to interview enough people in Yerevan to collect what I regard as a fairly purposeful sample. Regarding the research that I did in Yerevan, Kristina Tsaturyan acted as a “gatekeeper”, a person who as a member of the Yerevan team was my initial contact and who helped me, a “stranger” to ASPU, to gain access to other project participants (Johl & Renganathan 2010, p. 42).

After returning from Yerevan I planned the interviews in Oulu FE. In Oulu my “gatekeepers” were Jani Haapakoski, Gordon Roberts and Rauni Räsänen, who introduced me to the Oulu FE staff members participating in the cooperation project. When planning the interviews of the Oulu team, I recognised the possibility for further research beyond the master's thesis level, and as I was aiming at gathering diverse data from the project participants, I decided that if possible, I would like to interview all of the Oulu FE staff members who took part in the cooperation project.

As in Yerevan, all the project participants in Oulu FE were very busy with their everyday work and Christmas holiday preparations, and thus I needed a longer time frame (12.11.2013 – 27.1.2014) to organise and carry out the interviews. But like in
Yerevan, I was exceptionally well received by the interviewees, and I interviewed all the 13 project participants from Oulu as listed below (in alphabetical order):

- **Jani Haapakoski** (Project planning and coordination)
- **Hannu Heikkinen** (Consultant, Arts education)
- **Eila Jeronen** (Consultant, Natural sciences)
- **Tiina Kemppainen** (Consultant, Career Centre activities)
- **Marko Kielinen** (Consultant, Training of trainers)
- **Riitta-Liisa Korkeamäki** (Project manager and Consultant, Good governance and transparency & pre-primary education)
- **Eeva-Liisa Kronqvist** (Consultant, Special education)
- **Hasmik Minasyan** (Consultant, Languages)
- **Eva Maria Raudasoja** (Consultant, Good governance and transparency)
- **Gordon Roberts** (Consultant, Social sciences)
- **Rauni Räsänen** (Consultant, Languages)
- **Vesa-Matti Sarenius** (Consultant, Practical training and mathematics)
- **Tuomo Vilppola** (Consultant, Special education)

With the exception of the small group interview with Gagik Demirkhanyan and Samvel Harutyunyan, all the interviews were conducted one-on-one. Unfortunately there was no possibility to conduct pilot interviews before the actual interviews, so some minor adjustments to the interview structure were made after the first interviews. However, the adjustments concerned more the order rather than the contents of the questions.

Gohar Arakelyan and Lilit Sahakyan from the International Cooperation Unit acted as translators in some of the interviews that I conducted in Yerevan, and some of the interviews in Oulu were held in Finnish. In addition to me taking notes during the discussions, all the interviews were also recorded with digital recorders for further analysis, and the recordings were stored into the Oulu FE network drive and my personal USB memory stick.
6.2 Data sample

Wolcott (1994, p.10) defines three major modes through which qualitative data is typically gathered: participant observation (*experiencing*), interviewing (*enquiring*) and studying materials prepared by others (*examining*). In my research, I used all of these modes to some extent, but the vast majority of my data was gathered via interviews. In terms of examining key materials prepared by others, I had access only to the project agreement as the confidential project reports were not available for me to study. Regarding participant observation, I was able to participate in some project activities (discussions, student interviews, a visit to Gyumri) during my visit to Yerevan, but from those activities I only took hand-written notes for my study.

In my sampling, I aimed mainly at achieving *maximum variation*, but I also wanted to gather a sample which Miles & Huberman (1994, p.28) define as *stratified purposeful*. With maximum variation Miles & Huberman (1994, p.28) refer to a sample which makes it possible to document diverse variations and identify important common patterns, whereas a sample that is stratified purposeful also makes it possible to illustrate subgroups and facilitate comparison.

In terms of maximum variation, I felt that my sample enabled me to identify important common patterns, but in the sample gathered from Armenia I was not able to fully register the variety of voices involved in the project. That is, my Armenian sample, though sufficient in terms of the number of interviewees, consists mainly of people who were in leading roles in the project and in their respective sub groups. Thus, the voices of the professionals working in non-leading roles remained marginalised in my sample. This was clearly due to my inexperience as a researcher as I was not able to provide adequate guidance and requests for my ‘gatekeeper’ in Yerevan.

When evaluating the sample from the viewpoint of whether or not it is *stratified purposeful*, it was obvious that the sample made it possible for me to illustrate subgroups and facilitate comparison between the teams in Oulu and Yerevan. In addition the sample enabled me to investigate other possible subgroups such as
groups of professionals from both Oulu and Yerevan with similar experiences regarding the possibilities and challenges of their professional learning.

All in all, when viewing from the perspective of my research questions, I felt that my data sample was big enough for me to achieve the goals of my study. However, I also realised that having a total sample of 23 interviewees for a master's level research was bigger than required. That is, while the sizeable sample would give me a possibility to form a holistic picture of the participant’s experiences, I realised that the diversity of the study participants could also make it more difficult for me to grasp common experiences, themes and the overall essence of the experience for all participants. (Creswell 2007, p.122.)

So in the end, when weighing the size of my data sample, it was obvious that I needed decisive data reduction measures to properly answer my research questions within the timeframe available. The semi-structured questionnaires that I used for the interviews allowed the interviewees to elaborate on their experiences in a way that was at times beyond my research questions. Therefore, I decided to do more detailed transcriptions only on those parts of each interview that provided answers to my research questions (primary data). The parts of the data which did not provide direct answers to my research questions (secondary data) I documented by writing down only a brief summary of the comments - in case there would be unexpected/interesting findings that could eventually be used to clarify the answers to my research questions.

6.3 Data analysis process

The stages (and concepts) of theory-guided content analysis differ to some extent depending on what kind of overall research methodology the researcher is using. Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 102) stress however that instead of viewing the stages of the data analysis as strict technical steps for executing the analysis, they should be regarded more as orientation guidelines which aim to synthesize the interpretive process and reduce the arbitrariness of the interpretation.
In my study, hermeneutic phenomenology is the research methodology that steers my use of theory-guided content analysis to achieve a more logical understanding of my research entity. Koch (1995, p.835) summarises the way in which understanding is achieved in hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology as follows:

*Understanding occurs through a fusion of horizons, which is dialectic between the pre-understandings of the research process, the interpretive framework and the sources of information.*

Laverty (2003, p. 21) elaborates that the process of understanding includes the “self-interpreted constructions of the researcher and each participant, thus reflecting many constructions or multiple realities”. She (2003, p. 21) continues that as the interpretation arises from pre-understandings and dialectical movement between the separate parts and the whole of the texts being examined, the interpretive process in hermeneutic phenomenology cannot be governed by a finite set of procedures. Instead, there is an obligation to understand the context under which the texts were produced to generate interpretations of meaning. That is, the researcher needs to use his/her imagination, the hermeneutic circle and have a keen attention to language and the writing process to bring forth interpretations rising through a fusion of the text and its context, as well as through the contexts of the participants and the researcher himself/herself.

According to Laine (2007, p. 40-45) a content analysis based on the hermeneutic/phenomenological tradition begins with the researcher going through the raw data and sorting out (clustering) the essential information based on his/her research questions. But instead of categorising his/her data into reduced expressions, subcategories and higher level categories, a researcher following hermeneutic phenomenology is looking to group his/her data into smaller meaning entities according to the relevant *themes* that emerge from the data. After the initial grouping, there can be numerous themes that the researcher may then combine, if it appears logical or necessary, into larger themes during the research process. Laine (2007, p.
42) emphasises however, that the purpose of thematisation is not to fade out all the individual or unique characteristics of the data, and thus for example a comment given only by a one single interviewee can be a theme if it is significant in the way that it addresses the research questions.

In my study the key themes started to emerge already while I was doing the interviews. I noticed that many of my interviewees were discussing similar topics while describing the organisational as well as their personal learning process, and I made notes of these emerging themes during the interviews. In addition I also made notes of unique and exceptional comments whenever they appeared to address my research questions. Thus I had an initial collection of key themes and comments after I had finished the interview process.

Once the thematisation phase is complete, the themes are synthesised (abstracted) in order to draw conclusions from the data. In theory-guided content analysis, this is the stage where the empirical data needs to be joined (compared, contrasted etc.) with the theoretical framework - if it has not already been done in an earlier phase of the analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, p. 117). In my research, I selected the majority of the contextual and theoretical readings after I had already done the interviews. The process of studying the contextual and theoretical background readings enabled me to build a deeper, broader and more structured perspective through which I was then able to examine my research topic and my research data.

I eventually joined the contextual and theoretical framework into my data analysis when I started to go through my interview recordings in more detail. Originally, I wanted to bring the contextual and theoretical concepts into my data analysis in a fairly late stage to avoid limiting the research findings only to the concepts that could be found in the contextual and theoretical background readings. However, while analysing my interview recordings I also noticed how crucial the background readings were for fine tuning and understanding the themes that were emerging from the data. The readings on the Armenian context were especially important in terms of
improving my pre-understanding of the Armenian HE context and they provided a support to which I could lean on while I was interpreting the data that I got from my Armenian interviewees.

In the final stage of the theory-guided content analysis the researcher presents the findings and conclusions of his/her research. As a part of this final stage the researcher provides a rich (and often complex) description of the phenomenon that s/he has studied, introduces the key themes and concepts of his study, and describes the interlocking connections between the themes. Also, while preparing the conclusions the researcher strives to reflect and describe the experience from the viewpoint of the research participants; what are the understandings of the research participants that the researcher has focused on learning throughout his/her entire research process and what has the experience meant to them. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, pp. 112-113.)

In this study I will present my research findings by using an alternate rhythm of Armenian and Finnish viewpoints. I will provide a thematised summary of the key themes and concepts, and I will include quotes from my interviewees to present their voices and to invigorate my research findings. I will also provide a rich description of the opportunities, benefits and challenges that cross-cultural learning can provide for HE organisations and the professionals working in these organisations. Furthermore, as a part of examining my research findings I will utilise the concepts derived from the contextual and theoretical framework to discuss the similarities and differences of the Armenian and Finnish learning experience in the cooperation project.

And finally, as my study is an embedded case study, I will also summarize the context and meaning of the case, or as Eskola (2007, p. 164) notes, the “lessons learned” from the study.
7 RESEARCH FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction to research findings

In this chapter, I will present the key findings of my research based on the narration of my interviewees. That is, this chapter provides a thematised summary of my findings derived from the following research questions:

*What have the project participants and their respective organisations learned during the cooperation project?* (central research question)

*What kinds of conditions promote/hinder learning in a transnational learning community according to the project participants?* (central research question)

*What are the key benefits and challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context according to the project participants?* (sub-question)

*What kind of development ideas accumulated during the cooperation project?* (sub-question)

In the first sub-chapter, I will examine the professional and organisational learning in ASPU, beginning with a summary of the conditions for professional learning as experienced by the project members in ASPU and CEP. Utilising a similar sub-chapter structure, I will then move on to describe the professional and organisational learning in Oulu FE based on the experiences of the Oulu FE project members.

The third sub-chapter portrays my interviewees’ views on the benefits and challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context, some of which stem from years of experience gained from various cross-cultural collaboration projects. And in the final sub-chapter, I will share the development ideas and suggestions provided by the project participants regarding cross-cultural cooperation in the HE context.

In Chapter 8, I will then move on to discuss my research findings through the theoretical lenses introduced in Chapter 4.
7.2 Professional and organisational learning in ASPU

7.2.1 Conditions for professional learning in ASPU

When examining the overall conditions for professional learning, it is vital to notice that the individual interviewees from ASPU and CEP entered the project from very different starting points. While some had been working in ASPU for a longer time already, the majority of the interviewees had experienced considerable changes in their professional career at the time when the project began. Some had changed roles within their respective institution, and four out of ten interviewees had joined ASPU just before or soon after the project began. Also, while all the interviewees were experienced in the field of education, prior knowledge about cross-cultural cooperation, the Bologna Process, and the upcoming cooperation project with the Oulu FE varied considerably from one interviewee to another.

The majority of the interviewees did not define any specific factors which would have hindered their professional learning during the project. However, the variety of starting points from which people entered the project showed on the comments of those who did specify factors that hindered their learning during the project. Some of those interviewees commented that the first impression (first lectures and presentations) given by the Oulu delegation made them feel as if they would know very little about the topic at hand, and thus they felt reserved and undervalued at the beginning of the project. Some commented that as the project participants entered the project from such varied backgrounds, there were challenges at times to find common understanding within the project team in ASPU, partly due to people using different terminology to refer to same things. Others pointed out that professional learning at the beginning of the project was difficult, as the colleagues and their skills were unknown. And for some the hindrances of professional learning were related to the tight deadlines of certain parts in the project, remembering that the project tasks were carried out on top of the everyday work, and to the challenge of overcoming and unlearning one’s own barriers, stereotypical views and understandings on how things can and should be done.
When asked about factors that *promoted* their professional learning in the cooperation project, several interviewees mentioned the *way of working* and *overall knowledge* of the Oulu delegation as a promoting factor; the representatives of Oulu FE were described as being kind, open and inspiring, qualities which enabled the working groups to build mutual trust and understanding. In addition to the approach of the Oulu delegation, the interviewees emphasised the importance of *face-to-face meetings, visits to Oulu* and the *possibility to share ideas* with colleagues (in both ASPU and Oulu FE) as factors which promoted their professional learning during the project. A few interviewees also mentioned their participation in other cross-cultural collaboration projects and prior involvement in Armenia’s Bologna Process work as experiences which helped their learning in this project.

7.2.2 Professional learning in ASPU

Prior to the start of the project the interviewees from ASPU and CEP had *varying expectations* towards the project. Some of them did not have any specific expectations. For some, the lack of expectations was due to the fact that they had joined the project just before or right after it started, for some it was their first cross-national project, and some experienced a lack of expectations because they simply knew very little about the project details (concrete goals etc.) before it actually started. A few interviewees noted that their expectations were contradictory, pessimistic, or even negative; either because they expected major confrontations in the attempt to replace the existing Soviet-based education system with a European system, or because they had taken part in different development projects which had not produced tangible or lasting results. There were actually only a few interviewees who had specific expectations on the project; they expected that the project would further the HE internationalisation process in Armenia, help ASPU to achieve Bologna standards (enabling ASPU then to assist other Armenian universities to achieve them), provide tools to improve the management, and help to organise the steps to improve the curriculum.
When asked about what they learned as professionals during the project, many interviewees commented that it is somewhat challenging to analyse one’s professional learning, and some shifted the focus more towards organisational learning. Some of those who did discuss their professional learning in more detail noted that they had discovered the importance of introducing new educational ideas and methods to a wider audience. That is, they had discovered that for new educational ideas and methods to take root, it is beneficial to introduce the ideas to all of those who are effected as soon as possible (e.g. including special education as a part of education in all faculties), and that in a bigger project it is very effective to divide the big group into smaller working groups, who can then innovate the working and implementation methods suitable for the group in question. For one interviewee, the working group had offered a special opportunity to improve the methodological approach to teaching and learning, based on the comforting and welcoming atmosphere and on the absolute priority of student participation. For this interviewee, the learning experience was enhanced by the vivid and illustrative examples and the ‘learning by doing’ approach used in the consulting process, which resulted in both professional and personal growth. Another interviewee also noted the benefits that can be achieved with a phased method of working in which the distinct phases make it easier to see how the expected outcome can be reached.

A theme discussed by several interviewees was the way in which the project enhanced the understanding and acceptance of the differences between the Finnish and Armenian way of working, and provided opportunities to learn how to deal with people from different cultures, how to be in between them, and how to mix and operate between the different ways of working. As observed by one interviewee:

*The project was very much about operating among two different educational and cultural systems, not necessarily from the premise that one is better than the other, but from the premise that both systems have their strengths which can be utilised in the project.*

Another interviewee continued on the same theme, while stating that *time plays an important part in any cooperation project between two different cultures and nations.*
As noted by the same interviewee, time is needed to understand each other and to build something together, and thus those involved need patience as regards the project results. For this interviewee, the main professional learning outcome was the understanding that effectiveness and results can be achieved through long-term and diverse cooperation combined with a long-term vision of intercultural projects.

The project also generated effects and results which the interviewees did not expect to see at the beginning of the project. One interviewee stated that even though one of the goals of the contract was to establish long-term cooperation between the two sides, it was a surprise how openly the parties were able to discuss the continuation of the cooperation, even though the actual contract was ending. But for the majority of the interviewees the biggest surprises came from the project results, which exceeded their expectations - especially as regards the renewal of the internship system at ASPU, which was described as having undergone a dramatic change for the better.

7.2.3 Conditions for organisational learning in ASPU

As regards the conditions for organisational learning, the interviewees from ASPU and CEP identified several factors which they considered as hindrances to the learning of their respective organisation. One interviewee commented that the Armenian context in general includes obstacles which are great in number; there is financial scarcity, there are social problems, there are political and geographical difficulties, and the youth is migrating abroad in massive numbers. When commenting on the conditions of the cooperation project itself, several interviewees commented that organisational development and learning was very difficult at the beginning of the project due to a variety of reasons: The staff at ASPU was not properly included in the project, the project itself was not well organised within ASPU initially, there were personnel changes in the project and new employees joining the project, there were communication problems and misunderstandings due to a language barrier, there was a lack of written materials, and they were challenged by the different way of thinking reflected by the Oulu FE participants. Thus it was very difficult to find common ground from which to start the project. One interviewee also noted that many
of them experienced considerable pessimism before the project began, primarily because they did not like the top-down attitude in which the project was handed down to ASPU.

Some interviewees also commented that especially at the beginning of the project there was strong resistance/inertia towards the project stemming partly from the different type of management and thinking of the Soviet tradition, but also from the fact that the ASPU staff (including the project participants) had not been properly explained why the development is needed, what are the specific goals of the project, and how they can be achieved in practice. As discussed by some interviewees, the lack of briefing on the project goals and rationale hindered organisational learning during the project as well; it was difficult for the project participants to introduce the development ideas to those members of the ASPU staff who were not involved in the working groups; without a well-founded rationale they found it hard and questionable to unlearn what they had learned and utilised in their work for years. Furthermore, for some interviewees this inertia and resistance was reinforced by what they experienced as one sided interaction (Oulu FE teaching, ASPU learning) at the beginning of the project.

As the project progressed some interviewees were frustrated by the fact that even though one of the aims of the project was to renew ASPU’s structure according to the basic structure of European HEIs, there was not as much room for new inventions and implementations on the institutional level as these interviewees would have liked there to be. These interviewees commented that if the existing structures would have allowed more institutional level inventions and implementations, ASPU could have taken, with the help from the Oulu delegation, the organisational learning and structural renewal much further. Other interviewees also pointed out the difficulties regarding reporting practicalities in the early stages of the project. As these interviewees noted, the difficulties had a lot to do with the fact that as a coordinating body CEP actually had three different contracts with the implementing organisations; two contracts with ASPU and one with Oulu FE. Each of these contracts had different
reporting requirements, which caused misunderstandings between Oulu FE and ASPU.

In addition to introducing the factors that hindered organisational learning, the interviewees also listed several factors which promoted the learning of their respective organisations. Like in the comments regarding the factors that promoted their professional learning, many of the interviewees emphasized the positive impact of the consulting approach used by the Oulu FE delegation. The Oulu FE delegation was complimented on their ability to provide valid recommendations and positive feedback, their willingness and ability to solve problems, their willingness to go beyond the limits defined in the agreement, their willingness to participate in the development work on a very practical level, and on their overall positive and open attitude towards the cooperation. One interviewee described the Oulu FE consulting approach as follows:

As the project went on there was an atmosphere of "we are not teachers, you are not students, we are all equal". They had an "open door policy" approach to the cooperation, people were always welcomed to ask for more information if they wanted to.

The possibility to discuss the cooperation development in face-to-face meetings was another key factor identified by the majority of the interviewees as promoting organisational learning. The visits of the Oulu FE delegation to Yerevan as well as the visits of the Armenian colleagues to Oulu were considered especially beneficial as gatherings which initiated changes in attitudes towards education and students, and illustrated new ways of working in practice. Some of the interviewees also noted that despite the challenges and problems that had been identified, there was a very strong determination within ASPU to succeed in the renewal process; and the cooperation with the Oulu FE was seen as a concrete step towards reforming ASPU and the Armenian HE system. One interviewee also highlighted the pro-European attitude of the young lecturers in ASPU and the success of the initial results as factors which
encouraged ASPU in the continuation of the project and continuous organisational development and learning.

Many of the interviewees indentified a connection between the gradual establishment of mutual trust and understanding and the improvement of personal and organisational learning. The conditions for personal and organisational learning were described as being very challenging at the beginning of the project, but as the two parties began to understand each other better, they were able to overcome many of the initial problems and challenges via a joint effort. And as described by many interviewees, the process of achieving mutual trust and understanding was greatly enhanced by the mentor-like consulting approach of the Oulu FE delegation, the determination of the ASPU leadership and project team to succeed, and the possibility to make visits and discuss the project matters in face-to-face meetings. One interviewee also emphasized the crucial mediating role of those project participants who had prior experience on both cultures, pointing out that they made a significant contribution to the process of developing mutual understanding between ASPU, CEP and Oulu FE.

7.2.4 Organisational learning in ASPU

When examined from the Armenian HE perspective, the cooperation project was one activity in a bigger framework of activities that aimed to reform the pedagogical universities in Armenia. In the cooperation project, CEP was the contractor in the project, it had designed the project with the assistance of the World Bank, and the World Bank and the Republic of Armenia were the financing parties of the project. The role of CEP included the coordination, supervision and management of the cooperation project. For ASPU, the main aim was to get involved in internationalisation, to implement changes towards adopting the European education system, and to increase the readiness for further development. In short, as summarised by one interviewee, ASPU aimed to become understandable to and recognised by other partners (universities) outside the Armenian borders.
Based on the comments of the interviewees, the organisational learning was challenging at first, partly due to the roles that the organisations had been assigned to in the contract, and the way the project participants perceived these roles. That is, the cooperation was seen as too formal/official at the beginning partly because Oulu FE was regarded as the ‘teacher’ and ASPU as the “student”, and both organisations were searching for their place and ways of working in these initial roles. But as the cooperation continued the attitude towards and understanding of the initial organisational roles became more flexible, leaving more room for genuine interaction. One interviewee described the development of the roles as follows:

*The role of ASPU developed in three phases. In the initial phase ASPU did whatever Oulu FE said. In the second phase ASPU became a co-operator, and in the final phase ASPU started to show initiative and started to regard itself as a partner in a joint project. ASPU was ready for the final phase after realising that it can achieve good results and after understanding that it wants to, it can and it should lead the development process.*

When asked about organisational learning during the project, the Armenian interviewees described organisational learning to have taken place on different levels. Many interviewees listed *learning outcomes on a practical level* ranging from new student assessment methods and new management practices to new course structures/descriptions, new educational methods (e.g. student centeredness), and new educational programmes that had been initiated during the project. On the level of practical learning outcomes the changes made to the teacher internship/work practice system was highlighted as being the most visible renewal, with an emphasis on the need to include master’s level studies when preparing students to become teachers. Several interviewees also noted that as a result of the cooperation project ASPU staff had learned about a more systematic working culture and working procedures.

Many interviewees also discussed organisational learning outcomes on a more intangible level. They felt that the *project had significantly promoted the overall*
capacity building of the staff, especially regarding the professional and organisation standards required by the European HE community. As an organisation ASPU had learned more about how to initiate and carry out reforms and innovations in the European HE context, especially regarding the importance of long-term planning and ongoing monitoring of these kinds of projects. Also, many interviewees noted that to succeed, HE organisations in projects like these need to promote wide staff inclusion (cross faculties, including administrative personnel) and the ability to combine different requirements, preferences and opinions. One interviewee emphasised that the acceptance and combination of different views calls for a common language:

> It is crucial to have a "common language" - not necessarily an actual language like English, but a language of issues, solutions and topics. A professional language, the same vision as regards the professional goals, which makes it possible to succeed even though the communication on the actual language would be challenging.

Another interviewee highlighted the egalitarian atmosphere and bi-directional nature of the organisational learning experience:

> In this project ASPU has been a student of the University of Oulu, but it has also inspired the Oulu FE staff while serving as a platform for open discussions. ASPU has given development ideas for the University of Oulu as well.

As an important organisational learning outcome, the same interviewee also emphasised the need to widen the bi-directional organisational learning experience by pointing out that many universities in Armenia face the same challenges as ASPU does, and would thus like to learn from ASPU's experience. According to this interviewee colleagues from other Armenian universities have been very interested in how the cooperation has proceeded and they have shown great interest in participating themselves. During the project there have already been some active contacts and discussions with other Armenian HE institutions (e.g. in Gyumri), even though these institutions have not been official participants in the cooperation project.
The interviews with the professionals from ASPU and CEP have shown that despite the challenging overall conditions in Armenia, and the challenges at the beginning of the project, considerable learning outcomes and results can be achieved both on a personal as well as organisational level. But to achieve results, a willingness and determination to learn and change is needed both on an individual as well as on an organisational level.

7.3 Professional and organisational learning in Oulu FE

7.3.1 Conditions for professional learning in Oulu FE

When comparing the overall starting point of the project teams, the initial situation for the Oulu FE project team was more balanced than it was for the project team in ASPU. The key balancing factor was that all of the Oulu FE project participants were already familiar with the University of Oulu as an organisation, and thus there were no members in the team who would have arrived to an entirely unfamiliar work setting. Yet there were differences between the team members as regards their knowledge and experience about Armenia, the Bologna Process and the cooperation project itself. A few members had already worked in Armenia in an NGO project (Mission East) prior to the collaboration project with ASPU, some members knew more about the Bologna Process as a result of participating in the Bologna development work at the University of Oulu, and some members had more knowledge about the collaboration project as a result of having been involved in the application process. But like in ASPU, there were also a few members in the team who had joined the project when it had already started, and thus had to adapt to the project setting very quickly.

When asked about factors which hindered professional learning during the project, many Oulu FE team members mentioned the language barrier, which generated challenges especially at the beginning of the project. To begin with, the lack of English materials on the Armenian education system, Armenian HE system and
ASPU made it very difficult to get acquainted with the project context before the project actually began. Also, in some working groups it was difficult at first to establish natural interaction as some of the workgroup members in ASPU were not fluent in English. In general the interviewees from Oulu FE were grateful for the work done by the interpreters, but some interviewees also pointed out that as there were several interpreters involved in the project, the use of different terminology among the interpreters sometimes generated misunderstandings. And in cases where the group members themselves had to act as interpreters, their contribution to the working group was partly impaired by the interpreting responsibilities.

Several Oulu FE interviewees also mentioned the *vagueness of the project management and leadership* as a factor which hindered their professional learning. These interviewees commented that a solid project planning and project management was missing from the Oulu team (and from the project in general), and thus for example the team meetings were somewhat confusing at times. A few Oulu FE interviewees noted that the challenges related to project planning and leadership were primarily due to *systemic discrepancies*. That is, the organisational structure at the University of Oulu did not adequately support the building of the project organisation. To begin with, the actual project planning phase was very short and thus the resourcing for the project had to be done on top of the existing responsibilities, which varied among the project participants. For some there was more synergy between the university role and the project role, whereas for others the role in the university was very different from the role in the project. Furthermore, the division of labour for the project had to be done among a fairly limited group of people with specific expertise, which then resulted in a situation in which the workload could not be evenly distributed.

In addition to the two themes listed above, several Oulu FE interviewees mentioned the *differences in the working culture* as a factor which hindered professional learning to some extent, especially at the beginning of the project. For many it took a considerable amount of time to get used to the Armenian (ASPU) working and
communication culture characterised by what was described as including “continuous multitasking” and “sudden changes in schedules and plans”. A few interviewees also suggested that the lack of solid project management between Oulu and ASPU was partly due to the differences in the working and communication culture, starting from practicalities such as the role and importance of emails in communication. Whereas the Oulu FE team members were used to communicating via emails on a daily basis, email communication was not considered as important among the colleagues in ASPU.

If there were factors which hindered the professional learning of the Oulu FE project participants, there were also significant factors which improved the conditions for professional learning. As with the interviewees from ASPU and CEP, the theme that stood out from the comments was the importance of face-to-face discussions in building mutual trust and understanding. The vast majority of the Oulu FE interviewees emphasised the role of face-to-face discussions with their colleagues (both in Oulu and in Yerevan) as a promoting factor in their professional learning. In Oulu the often unofficial discussions enabled individual Oulu FE team members to benefit from each others’ expertise, while also giving them a chance to share ideas and reflect on the happenings, ways of working, and problems related to the project. And in Yerevan the Oulu FE participants were able to have thorough discussions with their Armenian colleagues on the strengths and weaknesses of the different educational systems and approaches, focusing on the special needs of each working group.

The Oulu FE interviewees regarded the visits of the Oulu FE delegation to Yerevan as well as the visits of the Armenian colleagues to Oulu as absolutely vital in building mutual understanding among the parties involved. For the Oulu FE team members the visits to Yerevan not only gave them an opportunity to discuss face-to-face with their Armenian colleagues, but also provided an opportunity for intensive team work outside the daily rush of their home university. The cross-cultural visits and face-to-face meetings promoted learning on all levels, and as commented by one
interviewee, “everything started to work better when the working group members started to trust each other”. The process of gaining trust and mutual understanding was gradual however, as illustrated by a comment from the same interviewee:

*First seminar in Yerevan was very chaotic, the second was more structured already, the third seminar was a good and organised gathering, and the fourth visit was just brilliant!*

One distinct beneficial feature related to the visits in Yerevan, mentioned by several Oulu FE interviewees, was the way in which the Armenian hosts were mitigating the cultural differences by introducing the Armenian culture to their guests via concerts, art exhibitions etc.

Some interviewees mentioned their *prior experience and knowledge about cross-cultural collaboration and the Bologna Process* as a factor that helped them with their learning during the project. A few interviewees found their prior working experience in Armenia (via the Mission East NGO project) helpful in terms of understanding the cultural context, whereas some interviewees mentioned their prior experiences related to the Bologna Process as helpful in terms of understanding the “big picture” and the project context. One interviewee applied a longer, career-wide perspective while stating that all the years of working in various cross-cultural projects had enhanced awareness of different negotiation strategies, multiculturalism, and cross-disciplinary scientific collaboration in general.

Several interviewees also mentioned the importance of *one’s personal attitude* in professional learning. They noted that the openness and willingness to learn helped them (and the whole Oulu FE team) in their learning; it made it easier for them to accept feedback, ask questions, and deal with the cultural differences. Furthermore, a few interviewees noted that their enthusiasm and curiosity helped them personally to navigate through and learn from the challenges of the somewhat turbulent starting phase of the project.
7.3.2 Professional learning in Oulu FE

As regards the expectations prior to the project, the vast majority of the Oulu FE interviewees saw the project primarily as a *unique opportunity for personal and professional growth*. They were excited and curious about the Armenian culture in general, about the Armenian educational culture and the way education is organised in Armenian universities, and about getting to know their Armenian colleagues. A few interviewees were looking forward to the project specifically as an interesting professional challenge that would enable them to test their skills and expertise in a very different professional context.

Based on the information available before the project (e.g. project contract, information received during the fact-finding visit), some interviewees were expecting the work of the Oulu FE to focus more on general training and pedagogical development work, and thus they were surprised to find out that the project focus was geared more towards concrete curriculum renewal. One interviewee commented that this was partly due to the different, even contradictory, project expectations that were presented by CEP and ASPU during the fact-finding visit. In the comments of some interviewees the contradictory project expectations were combined with questions about how the Oulu FE team would be received at ASPU, and the anticipation that the team was likely to meet change resistance in ASPU. One interviewee also commented on the project expectations from a wider and more sceptic perspective:

*I was also a bit cynical towards the project. I was questioning the motives of the World Bank, the Armenian government, and ASPU. I saw the project as being something much more than just making ASPU Bologna-ready, and thus my expectations went beyond the actual contract.*

Despite the varying expectations, the interviews with the Oulu FE team clearly showed that the project was an encompassing learning experience for the participants. The different themes of learning elaborated by the interviewees included the practical aspect of managing a cross-cultural project, the role of working as a consultant in a multidisciplinary team, the sphere of professional development and
expertise, and the importance of tactful cross-cultural communication in achieving mutual understanding.

Many Oulu FE interviewees commented that they learned a lot about what is actually required to participate in a large-scale cross-cultural collaboration project. For the Oulu FE (and for the University of Oulu) the project with ASPU was the first of this magnitude, and thus a lot had to be planned from scratch. Depending on the role, the interviewees commented that they had learned on a very concrete level about how to apply for, plan, resource, coordinate, manage, and work in these kinds of complex projects with a wide coverage. Many interviewees highlighted *the need to invest more time and effort as a team for the project preparation phase and the need to define on a more detailed level the tasks that will be a part of the project scope*. As one interviewee summarised:

*This project taught me about best practices as well as bad practices regarding cross-cultural project planning, project management and team leadership.*

For many Oulu FE interviewees the collaboration project provided a rare opportunity to work as a consultant in a bigger team. In fact, the majority of the interviewees commented that they learned a lot about *teamwork* and *what it requires to participate in a large-scale cross-cultural project as a consultant*. As many of the Oulu FE interviewees noted, the process of learning teamwork within a group of experts with different starting points required making compromises and finding common ground, but it also enabled the team members to discover new, previously unrecognised sides, strengths and expertise in their colleagues.

Several Oulu FE interviewees also noted that the project resulted in significant increase in metacognition about their own expertise. That is, they learned more about what they already knew and what they still have to learn. As described by one interviewee:
You learn a lot about yourself when you train others - especially in a cross-cultural setting as you have to reflect and justify to yourself and to others why something is, should, or could be done in a certain way.

A few interviewees also reflected upon their own and the Oulu FE team’s expertise in relation to the expertise of their colleagues at ASPU. These interviewees pointed out that in general working with people who have a very different professional approach to the topic enables deepening and widening one’s own expertise. One interviewee elaborated, however, that the initial professional setup between the Oulu FE team as the expert group and ASPU as the customer was very challenging, required a lot of balancing, and thus also provided a space for learning. The same interviewee commented that even though the starting point for the collaboration was a shared project with two groups of people working in the same direction, there were some clashes in the beginning where the Oulu FE experts did not necessarily always know as much about the substance as their customers at ASPU did, and thus some ASPU team members very likely felt patronised due to the expertise supremacy indicated by some Oulu FE participants.

The challenges and clashes at the beginning of the project illustrated the importance of professional and cultural sensitivity as well as communication and negotiation skills in achieving mutual understanding. Several Oulu FE interviewees noted that the project provided valuable lessons on how to work and interact with people coming from very different (working) culture and expecting another type of approach to consulting; these interviewees commented that their colleagues in ASPU and CEP seemed to be expecting consultants who would come and tell them exactly what to do, and that it took some time for them to understand and accept the mentor-like consulting approach applied by the Oulu FE team.

Even though the Oulu FE team did not change their mentor-like consulting approach as such during the project, many team members commented that once they learned more about the Armenian working culture, it became easier for them to negotiate and
convey their message via joint discussions and reflections, and encourage their colleagues at ASPU to take on a more active role. And as noted by many, the process towards achieving a common understanding became a lot easier once partnership replaced the initial division to experts and customers. A few interviewees actually pointed out that reaching a shared understanding on the topic of the workgroup enabled them to make significant progress even though there were challenges related to using English as a means of communication; the shared understanding on their field of work provided a ‘language of profession’ that was shared by the workgroup members.

The *significance of context* was another professional learning outcome discussed by many Oulu FE interviewees. On the one hand the interviewees had discovered similarities of context as the project progressed. There were aspects about working in ASPU which reminded them about the HE context in Oulu, and some of the challenges that ASPU was struggling with were challenges that the University of Oulu had struggled with as well. However, a few interviewees emphasized the need to recognise that *each context is unique*. As one interviewee noted:

*Teacher education is never context free - there is a need to find unique solutions which fit specific contexts.*

Another interviewee took a wider perspective while stating that in cross-cultural collaboration projects one cannot assume that solutions which have worked in one context would automatically work in other contexts too.

When asked about whether there was something unexpected about their learning experience, the majority of Oulu FE interviewees identified the substantial differences in the way of communicating and working between the two teams as the most surprising discovery. Several Oulu FE interviewees were surprised by the working dynamics and the importance of power hierarchies in ASPU and Armenia in general. For example, it was very difficult for them to know why certain people did not say anything in the working groups and why the Armenian participants talked in certain order. Some also commented that it was difficult to know how information flows and
who makes the decisions in ASPU. Many interviewees mentioned the restless atmosphere of the first seminar week as an example of an encounter during which the differences between the two teams became very visible. And yet, though many Oulu FE team members found the differences to be challenging, encountering differences also produced tangible learning outcomes. As described by one Oulu FE project participant:

As a result of the project I learned spontaneity; I learned to tolerate unexpected happenings, changes and incompleteness a lot better.

Some of the Oulu FE interviewees were also surprised by the reception that they got at ASPU. One interviewee commented that in their role as advocates of the Bologna renewal they were received at ASPU by people with surprisingly thorough deconstructed knowledge about the Bologna Process in ASPU, and a plan to implement it in Armenia. In addition to fairly neutral responses, the Oulu FE delegation also met representatives of two extremes: On the one hand there appeared to be people with enthusiasm to abandon the entire Soviet academic heritage at ASPU, and on the other hand there seemed to be people determined to resist any kind of change to the existing way of working. Some Oulu FE team members were also surprised by the reception they got as individuals and professionals: Whereas some commented having difficulties communicating throughout the project, others were surprised about how quickly they gained mutual trust and transformed from colleagues to friends.

In general the Oulu FE interviewees referred to the project as a pioneering experiment and an eye-opening encounter between two very different working cultures. As portrayed by one interviewee:

The depth of the learning took me by surprise; you think you know things, but you don’t really know them until you’ve been there and experienced them.

For some the project strengthened their professional belief in the possibility of change and the possibility of making progress from a challenging starting point. For many the
project also demonstrated that a considerable amount of time is needed to implement bigger changes, as they also require changes in people’s thinking and attitudes.

7.3.3 Conditions for organisational learning in Oulu FE

In addition to the overlapping resourcing and complex work allocation mentioned earlier, *cultural differences manifested on different project levels* was another theme which clearly stood out from the Oulu FE interviews as hindering organisational learning. Some of the cultural differences hindering organisational learning were related to the practicalities and ways of working. In general, many Oulu FE interviewees commented that they were somewhat puzzled by the very hierarchical structure of the Armenian education system and that they lacked knowledge on how the different levels of the hierarchy should be addressed to convey one’s message - which topics should be discussed with whom. This challenge was further emphasised by the fact that at the beginning of the project there were several new people appointed to the project in ASPU when the project was already underway. Also, some interviewees commented that at the beginning of the project they were confronted by a very strict and formal bureaucracy, and perhaps also a differing focus on the Armenian side as regards for example reporting. These challenges were regarded as being at least partly due to the fact that the roles of CEP and ASPU were unclear as these organisations appeared to have somewhat differing ideas/understanding about the project goals and objectives.

But there were organisational learning hindrances also within the University of Oulu. As commented by some of the Oulu FE interviewees, the internal bureaucracy and formalities (e.g. work plans, financing etc.) at the University of Oulu did not yield particularly well to the specific requirements of cross-cultural project work, and thus many of the biggest challenges at the beginning of the project had to do with the way operations were structured at the University of Oulu. As one interviewee commented:

> On the level of idea everybody at the University of Oulu was very flexible, but when push came to shove and there was money involved, things got more difficult.
When reflecting on factors which promoted organisational learning during the project, the interviewees from Oulu FE returned to the significance of visits, face to face discussions and the support that they got from their team members, Oulu FE and the University of Oulu as an organisation. At first the University of Oulu top management was commented to have been sceptic or even reluctant towards the project, but their involvement and support increased as the project went on. A few of the Oulu FE interviewees commented that it was important, especially regarding future cooperation opportunities, that the interaction was also established on the level of rectors. And as noted by some interviewees, the Oulu FE team also received support from the Oulu FE management as well as from other faculties within the University of Oulu.

When examined from the viewpoint of organisational learning, several interviewees commented that the support received from other team members was especially important as regards teamwork. The discussions within the team helped to build a joint understanding of the Oulu FE consultants as a team of experts. As one interviewee commented:

*Despite the challenges and disagreements, there was a sense of duty within the team.*

This sense of duty, a desire to achieve the targets of the reform, and a positive and open attitude towards co-operative sharing and learning were regarded as the key promoting factors of organisational learning via teamwork. Also, a few interviewees emphasized the role of those team members who due to their cultural knowledge from both Finland and Armenia were able to mitigate problems, clarify misunderstandings and promote Oulu FE team communication as a ‘bridge’ between the Finnish and Armenian contexts.

Even though many of the Oulu FE interviewees commented that the team in ASPU initially appeared to expect a more conventional team of consultants with ready-made information packages, the mentor-like consulting approach of the Oulu FE was still
regarded as beneficial for organisational learning in the long run. This consulting approach, reflecting the overall way of working at the Oulu FE, was discussed among the Oulu team members, and even though there was no shared agreement about the detailed way of working within the team, the mentor-like consulting approach was a conscious decision from the Oulu FE team. Based on dialogue and discussions, and stemming from the idea that the Oulu FE members are not experts on issues related to Armenia, the starting point of the team was that they cannot provide ready-made answers or a model for the Armenians to follow. Thus the Oulu FE team set out to share their experiences as partners to find solutions for the Armenian needs together with their Armenian colleagues.

Some interviewees commented that the Oulu FE team was not very articulate in explaining their approach to their Armenian colleagues, and thus the visits to Oulu were crucial also in terms of illustrating what the mentoring-approach actually meant in the context of day-to-day work at the Oulu FE. As one Oulu FE interviewee commented:

*Organisational learning became a lot easier once the interaction transformed from the initial consultant - customer setup into two organisations working in cooperation towards a common goal.*

7.3.4 Organisational learning in Oulu FE

When examined from a Finnish HE perspective, the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation was an example of the kind of "educational export" project that MoEC has encouraged Finnish universities to participate in. For the University of Oulu and Oulu FE it was the first cross-cultural collaboration project of this magnitude, and as such also a conscious choice to become more active in the field of education export and cross-cultural collaboration on an organisational level. In the interviews, the Oulu FE team members did not recall receiving any specific expectations from MoEC or the University of Oulu, but a few interviewees did point out that external expectations came from the Finnish national and political level strategies, in which Finnish
universities were expected to promote and succeed in educational export, and from the organisational profile that the University of Oulu had defined for itself.

Bearing in mind the national expectations, the central learning goal of the University of Oulu and Oulu FE was to gain organisational experience and ideas through the project; ideas which they could utilise to further develop their own approach to cross-cultural collaboration and educational export. As noted by several interviewees, from the very start, the project was also regarded as a fine opportunity for learning on the organisational level (including the in-service training of the staff). In the end the majority of learning took place on the faculty level, but it reflected beyond the faculty too. As described by one interviewee:

*When the project started, suddenly almost every faculty became aware of what was happening in Oulu FE. It woke up the awareness about the educational export possibilities and political pressure from outside throughout the university. Perhaps it changed attitudes as well - helped people to see educational export more as an opportunity than a threat.*

Throughout the project there was organisational learning regarding the various aspects of educational export as a concept. A few interviewees emphasised that to begin with, the Oulu FE learned more about what kind of approach and attitudes work in cross-cultural collaboration projects. As described by one interviewee:

*You cannot really “export” anything as such in the field of education. You can take some structures and contents, but not entire systems as such: Big renewals take time to be implemented and need to be carried out one step at a time, understanding the suitable pace of renewal. Small visible steps can require very big steps in people’s thinking.*

The same interviewee elaborated that for organisations to succeed and learn it is crucial to understand the importance of good relations and building trust between people and organisations; nothing will really proceed until you get to know the people. And getting to know the people requires the ability and willingness to respect the different context, history and ways of doing things.
On a more practical level one of the key organisational learning outcomes for the University of Oulu and Oulu FE was the designing and development of special rules that enabled them to run the project within the university. As one interviewee elaborated, the basic challenge originated from the fundamental question of whether the university was to be regarded as a business in this type of project even though at the core it is a public institution. As this interviewee noted, it was difficult to apply some of the changes that would have suited the project well because of the existing ways of operating. Thus designing of the special rules was a question of finding a balance between how things typically work at the University of Oulu, and how changes can be applied to the existing ways of working (e.g. handling of the finances) so that these types of projects can be carried out.

Another major organisational learning outcome was the understanding of the minimum requirements and basic framework required when participating in cross-cultural projects as a consultant. Several interviewees noted how organisational lessons were learned regarding strategy, structures, ways of working, and the organising of the team and the working groups. That is, the project provided a real eye-opener on what needs to be done in Oulu FE and the University of Oulu if there is a desire to be involved in similar projects. Both of them also learned the basics of how to plan and fit additional projects to everyday work in advance. As a result there is now more organisational knowledge about how to estimate the effort needed, and how to plan the economical, resourcing and staff workload aspects of these kinds of projects.

Related to project planning, a separate organisational learning outcome emphasised by some Oulu FE interviewees was the vital importance of clarifying the ‘big picture’ and the overall project goal right at the beginning of the project. At the beginning of the collaboration there was a lot of uncertainty and vagueness about the project goals on both sides of the table, which resulted in many misunderstandings and even antagonism. As described by one Oulu FE interviewee:
Overcoming the misunderstandings and antagonism required a lot of balancing, promoting mutual understanding, and explaining the “big picture” and the ultimate goal of the project when the project had already started. It required promoting the idea of moving from the “us and them” thinking towards the "we are in this together” understanding, and it required explaining why the project is done and what kind of benefits can be expected as a result.

The same interviewee continued that the initial turbulent situation improved considerably and there was a notable shift to more positive attitudes once the rationale of the whole project had been explained to everyone.

As described by one interviewee, the project has shown that when viewed from the perspective of Oulu FE staff and student development possibilities, the faculty cannot afford not to take part in these kinds of activities, and that there are ways to do education export in an ethical and open manner, which can also be disseminated. Furthermore, as a part of the project new inputs have also been gained regarding the development of the Oulu FE’s daily work. As noted by another interviewee, reflecting on the procedures used at the Oulu FE as a part of the collaboration project has strengthened certain ways of working within the faculty (such as teacher training and the existing evaluation methods). And via the people who have participated in the project, it has also given more tools for the whole faculty to justify why certain things are done the way they are done.

On the level of the Oulu FE team one interviewee emphasized the importance of learning teamwork and learning the fact that in this project the Oulu FE members were not just a collection of individual experts taking care of their own part of the project, but primarily a team of experts representing the University of Oulu and Oulu FE. The project enabled the team to understand what kind of team building and team management it requires to work as a big team, what is their responsibility and commitment as a team, how to give feedback as a team, and how to collaborate instead of compete. Another interviewee noted that on a team level they also learned that even challenging processes can be managed so that they produce good results.
In general the interviews demonstrated that cross-cultural collaboration projects provide plenty of learning opportunities for individuals and organisations alike. As summarised by one interviewee:

*All projects are learning processes with learning happening on many different levels at the same time.*

But the way these opportunities are seized depends highly on the overall readiness and willingness to learn. As pointed out by another interviewee:

*The personal as well as organisational learning has a lot to do with the attitude of the people; you can get involved on a personal level too and participate as a co-learner even though your role is a consultant.*

### 7.4 Challenges and benefits of learning in a cross-cultural context

When asked about the challenges of learning in cross-cultural context, a theme that was discussed by some interviewees in ASPU and CEP was the *difficulty of overcoming the existing attitudes, thinking, and ways of working*. One interviewee noted that there is a considerable amount of inertia and change resistance stemming from the Soviet tradition of education, and for that to change, more transnational cooperation with other universities is needed. Another perspective to the same theme was given by another interviewee who pointed out that the new system requires new methods, which then requires staff that is ready to implement the new methods. If the average age of the staff is around 50 years, it can be challenging for them to learn the new system (e.g. ways of working and methodology) – especially if the pace of change is very rapid. As this interviewee continued, it can be a group of good professionals who just require a longer process (with phases) to implement the changes in their everyday work.

An additional challenge discussed by some interviewees in ASPU and CEP was *the continuation of the change process that had begun during the project*. These interviewees were, partly as a result of their experiences from previous cross-cultural projects, concerned about the sustainability of the results and the possibilities to
ensure that the development will continue. The discussions on this challenge focused on the availability of funding and resources, but they also dealt with the possibilities of widening the participation within Armenia. As one interviewee commented, to enhance the sustainability of the results more people (including students) should be involved from ASPU and CEP, but also from other HEIs in Armenia. As assessed by this interviewee, the overall impact of the ASPU – Oulu FE project was not as good and wide on the level of the whole Armenia as it could have been due to the lack of regional involvement in the cooperation project.

As regards the benefits of learning in cross-cultural context, the majority of interviewees in ASPU and CEP discussed the project as a beneficial instrument, which enabled them to increase the cross-cultural readiness and competence of their staff and students. One interviewee noted that in general it increased the openness and readiness for cross-cultural cooperation while also promoting the organisational confidence in carrying out cross-cultural cooperation projects, which can be utilised in future projects with other universities and organisations. Another interviewee pointed out that the project offered first hand exposure to the European processes, ways of thinking, and the culture of working; and thus initiated thinking and analysis regarding the existing processes and ways of working in ASPU; it showed opportunities for improvement and ways to increase effectiveness. As summarised by one interviewee:

> The project enabled us to combine the “best of both worlds”, take the positive sides of what Oulu FE had to offer and then mix that to the local culture and surroundings.

For the interviewees from Oulu FE the majority of the challenges related to learning in a cross-cultural context were somehow connected to establishing trust and achieving a mutual understanding with their Armenian colleagues. As described earlier, the challenges were partly due to the difficulties of using English as a shared language of communication. However, several interviewees noted that many of the challenges actually arose from the notable cultural difference that existed between the Armenian
way of working (based on the Soviet HE tradition) and the Finnish way of working (based on European HE tradition).

As described by the Oulu FE interviewees, there were cultural differences between the two teams ranging from everyday practices to theoretical orientations, which then reflected in the cooperation starting from details like the terminology that was used to broader themes like the way in which the two teams understood the academic practice. As noted by one interviewee, it was challenging at times to open up the possibilities of the European academic tradition to the representatives of the Soviet academic tradition. And as some interviewees described, adapting to the substantial cultural difference required a considerable adjustment from the Oulu FE team as regards the starting point for the project. They needed to focus more on trying to recognise what could perhaps be changed and renewed (without imposing the European cultural values), how much could be expected to change, and what were the cultural traditions and norms that perhaps could not (and should not) be changed during the project - or at all.

Some of the factors listed as challenges in the cross-cultural context also produced learning benefits for the Oulu FE interviewees. Several interviewees mentioned that the cultural differences in the cross-cultural context can spark learning which might not happen at all in a more homogeneous environment. As described by one interviewee:

*Meeting difference inspires learning, it acts as a catalyst. There are more why questions in a heterogeneous environment than in a homogenous environment... You see the challenge, you recognise the challenge, you do something to meet the challenge, and that’s where the learning happens.*

In general the comments by Oulu FE interviewees reflected the notion that the possibilities of learning more about one’s own profession (broadening one’s professional horizon) increase significantly when the profession is practised in another cultural context. As noted by another interviewee:

*Differences can bring up things that you have never thought before.*
While reflecting on the benefits of learning in a cross-cultural context many Oulu FE interviewees referred to the project as a *mirror*. One interviewee noted that the project enabled learning about alternative constructions and using them as tool to analyse one’s own, sometimes taken-for-granted constructions:

*By examining the Armenian HE system, I learned more about the conscious choices that have been done in European HE system – choices which have eventually become invisible norms.*

Furthermore, several Oulu FE interviewees emphasized that these types of projects provide excellent mirrors for examining one’s own actions and procedures; they invite the participants to ask “why” and then reflect back on their own practices. As summarised by one interviewee:

*Sometimes you have to travel far to see close.*

One interview also pointed out that the Oulu FE team was able to act as a mirror for their Armenian colleagues as well: As a result of entering the project as outsiders to look at ASPU and the Armenian higher education system from the inside, they were able to give their colleagues a different reflection on the Armenian system.

*Enriching grass-roots experience* was another characterization used by many Oulu FE interviewees to describe the learning benefits of the cross-cultural context. Professionally it was regarded as important and enriching in the way that it produced opportunities for evaluating and challenging one’s own conception of one’s expertise and know-how, provided new substance and perspectives to be used in teaching, while also enabling the participants to widen their cross-cultural networks of expertise. On a more personal level it was regarded as enriching in the way that it increased the appreciation and respect towards other cultures and made it possible to pinpoint the cultural challenges of one’s own culture.

One interviewee emphasised the importance of cross-cultural learning encounters for anybody who works in the field of education by stating that as teachers and educators they need a very wide worldview to be able to educate the future citizens to meet the
challenges of the globalising world. The same interviewee continued that even the knowledge about different alternatives of acting and thinking is very important for educators: As one-track mind limits the generation of innovations, educators with a wide worldview are important in fostering new innovators, new innovations, and transformations.

Commenting on the connections between factors which were referred to as being both challenges and benefits in cross-cultural learning, one interviewee summarised that the view between seeing differences as challenges (threats to one’s own beliefs and worldview) or benefits (opportunities for learning) depends to a great extent on one’s own attitude; it depends on the willingness to challenge oneself, the willingness to change, and the ability to accept certain cultural differences.

### 7.5 Development ideas and possibilities

In the final question of the interview all the interviewees were given an opportunity to discuss the development ideas and possibilities they had discovered during the project. For this question all the interviewees from ASPU and CEP emphasized that the continuation of the cooperation would be of vital importance. On the one hand the comments dealt with the continuation of the original project, and a few interviewees noted that the project should have a follow-up phase in which the implementation of the curriculum renewal could be evaluated and refined by the same Oulu FE consultants who participated in the original project. On the other hand the majority of the interviewees suggested that the cooperation should be extended to include more people and cover new areas. As described by one interviewee:

*Continuation of the cooperation would be very important. The preliminary phase is now completed, but the next phase should include student and staff exchange, scientific and research cooperation as well as the exchange of other educational projects.*

The majority of the interviewees from ASPU and CEP highlighted the scientific and research cooperation as an area which could already have been included in the first
phase, and should definitely be included in the next phase of cooperation. As an example of scientific and research cooperation some interviewees mentioned the consultation on the latest research methodology and tools from the European research communities and the possibility to establish joint masters and doctoral programmes (research groups). As described by one interviewee:

Since 2005 the Armenian focus has been on making the BA and MA study programmes compatible with the European education system. Very little attention has been paid on research, and there is a lack of knowledge about the latest research methods. Also, with the exception of natural sciences, very little practical research is done in humanities, social sciences etc. Research would enable Armenians to stop copying, think for themselves and develop new ideas and products suitable for the Armenian context.

Student and staff exchange was another theme that was seen important for further cooperation by the interviewees in ASPU and CEP. A few interviewees specified that the cooperation should be taken closer to the faculties so that there could be direct faculty-level cooperation between the organisations. As pointed out by these interviewees, it would make it possible to widen the participation of staff and students, and it would also promote the gaining of mutual benefits as both parties could teach and learn. One interviewee emphasized the importance of student participation in cross-cultural cooperation projects by stating that the projects should include a much more direct and active participation of students right from the start of the project; ranging from online participation and student feedback development to student exchange and joint study programmes.

Returning back to the challenging start of the project, one interviewee also pointed out that before the actual project work starts, there could be a basic preparatory training workshop for cross-cultural cooperation projects once the project participants have been chosen. As suggested by this interviewee, preparatory workshop(s) could be arranged just to understand each other and then begin to work on the issues
stated in the contract; otherwise time is likely to be lost in understanding the basic practicalities of working together.

The idea of organising a basic preparatory training workshop prior to starting actual project was also shared by many interviewees from Oulu FE. In general these interviewees commented that more focus and effort should have been given to learning and discussing the expectations, context, culture and history of the participants, after which they could have jointly clarified the goals and targets of the project in more detail. One Oulu FE interviewee actually suggested that the building of mutual understanding and sharing of ideas should start already during the application phase; those applying for the project should have more knowledge about the context when applying, and there should be joint involvement in the preparation phase in every possible way. Another interviewee elaborated on the same theme stating that face to face meetings should be arranged as soon as possible, possibly already in the application phase (provided that the tender rules allow them). The same interviewee noted that in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project communication started via email, which was not a good way to start as it left too much room for misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

And like the Armenian interviewees, many Oulu FE interviewees discussed the sustainability of the project results and the continuation of the cooperation. Some interviewees noted that it would first be very important to have a follow-up/audit project in which the Oulu FE participants could join their Armenian colleagues to estimate the development, and then help them to steer the next development steps. The Oulu FE interviewees commented that the time frame of the project was enough to initiate the changes process, but that support would still be needed in implementing the new framework (disseminating information, educating the teachers in the field etc.). One interviewee also noted that the Oulu FE could encourage the cooperation between the different pedagogical institutions in Armenia:
It would create a healthy network and a stronger basis for international cooperation. It would make the cooperation a lot more effective as many things are now centralized in Yerevan.

In general these interviewees were also looking forward to continuing and widening the cooperation, finding the areas of mutual interest and benefit from teacher and student exchange, research cooperation, PhD degrees, and writing articles – elements to which one interviewee referred to as establishing a normal partnership.

As regards developing the concept of educational export in the Finnish context, one interviewee suggested that to begin with, the concept would need a lot of discussion in Finland; discussion on what terms and on whose terms it is done. Discussion on what are the main assumptions, attitudes and values that would be needed on the national level, in Finnish universities, and in faculties. The same interviewee continued that the external goals (outside the project contracts) of educational export and international cooperation projects should be considered and planned more carefully for projects like the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation; there should be a policy which would discuss how the projects can benefit the whole community: Finland as a country, its educational institutions and the faculties/departments within those institutions.

Moving from the level of concept to the realisation of educational export in educational institutions another interviewee commented that Finland should aim to join forces to utilize the expertise that is available in different educational institutions. The same interviewee noted that the volumes in the Asian market, for example, are so big that they cannot be managed by individual departments/faculties within educational institutions. As suggested by this interviewee, there should be alliances of educational institutions in Finland which would aim for bigger projects, and could, as alliances, coordinate the projects, divide assignments, and allocate resources to those assignments on a national level using teams/consultant pairs in each project. Furthermore, as suggested by this interviewee, each project should have a follow-up
sequence some time after the ending of the actual project to evaluate the progress and sustainability of the project.

Reflecting on educational export at the University of Oulu, one interviewee noted that the university should make a separate strategy to consider more carefully all the benefits to be gained from educational export projects and not to focus solely on the economical benefits. Many Oulu FE interviewees also suggested that the University of Oulu should establish a dedicated unit or a team to initiate, apply, coordinate, manage, implement and develop similar cross-cultural development projects. In addition this unit could organise training for those participating in cross-cultural projects, and seminars/staff meetings to discuss the relevant issues related to educational export. Furthermore, this unit could also maintain a university-wide database of experts who would be willing to participate in cross-cultural projects, which would make it easier to resource the projects according to project-specific needs.

Also, based on the experiences gained from the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation, the interviewees from Oulu FE also had development suggestions on running cross-cultural projects in general. Referring to the challenges of managing a cross-cultural project, one interviewee suggested that instead of nominating separate project managers on both sides, it would be more beneficial to establish a joint management team with representatives from both (all) locations to coordinate and manage the project. Another interviewee also suggested that in addition to having a joint preparatory workshop, each project should have a proper kick-off meeting locally to place everybody on the same map, and then, in addition to project status meetings, there should be reflective meetings in which the participants could discuss the happenings of the project on a regular basis. And like the Armenian interviewees, many Oulu FE interviewees noted that the projects should have more student involvement. A few interviewees also noted that it would be beneficial for the projects to have a wide age range among the participants, utilising also the senior expertise that the departments and faculties have in them.
The final major development theme discussed by many Oulu FE interviewees was the collection and dissemination of the “lessons learned” from the project. The interviewees described that the need to document the “lessons learned” was acknowledged and discussed during the project, but it had not been carried out formally and systematically. Yet its importance as an essential part of a successful project was recognised, bearing in mind that the next time around it would probably not be the same team starting a new project. As commented by one interviewee:

*The “lessons learned” should be recorded both during and after the project, for example in a reflective diary.*

Many of the interviewees commented that the learning experiences of the project should be recorded throughout the project; it would enable the recording of topics while the happenings were still fresh in people’s memories, and it would make the entire process easier as the material would accumulate gradually over time. In addition to using reflective diaries, it was suggested that a suitable checklist/evaluation tool could be used to predict possible challenges, monitor the progress, and record the “lessons learned” of the project.

The interviewees also emphasised the need to disseminate the “lessons learned”. One interviewee noted that they could have been disseminated more effectively already while the project was underway. However, it was challenging to disseminate the information as all the project participants were under a heavy workload during the project, and there were no specific forums available for disseminating the project experiences within the University of Oulu. As one interviewee noted, during the project the dissemination of the “lessons learned” was carried out mainly by those Oulu FE team members who could distribute their experiences unofficially via the various roles that they have at the university. However, now initiatives have been taken to enable the distribution of the lessons learned within the university, and some strategic decisions have also been made to guarantee the continuity of the experiences received during the project.
In general the development ideas and suggestions were characterized by the understanding that the original cooperation project was a successful start for a cooperation that has the potential to offer substantial benefits for a wider network of participants. The comments given by both Armenian and Finnish interviewees also suggest that even though significant results were achieved during the original project, there is still plenty of room for improvement on both sides of the table. As summarized by one Armenian interview:

*This cooperation has showed that there is still a lot to be learned.*
8 DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will discuss my findings through the theoretical lenses introduced in Chapter 4. I will begin by examining the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project as a transnational learning experience, in which the primary learning goals and learning outcomes varied between the respective organisations.

After elaborating on the upper level transnational learning context of the project, I will move on to discuss the organisational learning of the respective organisations with a special emphasis on the social perspective of organisational learning. From there I will shift my focus to the level of individuals, and discuss the learning of the project participants as academics learning at boundaries.

In the latter part of this chapter I will link the organisational learning to individual learning, and discuss that intersection by examining how the two teams negotiated interculturality as academic communities of practise. And finally, based on my research findings, I will briefly summarise the key “lessons learned” from the cooperation project.

8.1 Transnational learning experience

In this study I have examined the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project primarily as a transnational learning experience. That is, as a learning experience which “concerns the movement of people’s ideas, technologies and institutions across national boundaries” (Tyrrell 2007, 2nd paragraph), and in which the project participants purposefully look for ideas, knowledge and innovations that have been successful in other nations, and then assess whether or not they can be applied in their own environment to gain positive results (George & Svels 2013, pp. 327-328).

For ASPU the project was defined as a transnational learning experience already in the project contract. The purpose of the project was to raise the professional quality of teacher preparation in Armenia in the context of the Bologna Process, and the
primary goal of the contract was to align the teacher training education in ASPU, and the university in general, to the European standards. To achieve the primary goal of the project, CEP and ASPU selected the Oulu FE as a source for ideas, knowledge and innovations as regards the implementation of the Bologna Process in teacher preparation.

When thinking of the initial role of the Oulu FE as a consultant, it may seem that the project was not necessarily a transnational learning experience for the faculty as defined by George & Svels above. However, the importance of cooperation and the possibility for a two-way collaborative learning process was emphasized already in the agreement as both parties understood that the development of sustainable practices requires a high level of participation from both institutions. Also, as described in the research findings chapter earlier, the initial consultant - customer setup changed during the project into two organisations working cooperatively towards a common goal. Thus it can be said that in this cooperation project both parties were ultimately teachers and learners in a transnational context.

For the Oulu FE (and the University of Oulu) there was also an additional learning agenda in which the central learning goal was to gain specific organisational experience and ideas that could be utilised to further develop their own approach to cross-cultural collaboration and educational export. For this learning goal the Oulu FE was not looking for specific ideas from ASPU, but the cooperation with ASPU provided an excellent transnational learning context. It enabled Oulu FE to evaluate what kind of approach and attitudes work in cross-cultural collaboration projects, and to understand the minimum requirements and basic framework required to fully participate in cross-cultural projects as a consultant.

During the project both organisations became aware that knowledge is not an asset that can simply be accessed and transferred. That is, the interviews clearly indicated that during the project both ASPU and Oulu FE gained a more thorough understanding of the context dependent nature of knowledge, while also recognising
that transnational learning requires what Mariussen & Virkkala. (2013a, pp. 2-3) refer
to as the *localised conversion of new ideas and knowledge*. Also, both organisations
gained more insight on the importance of building the transnational cooperation on
the existing preconditions, resources and strengths of the two organisations. By
committing themselves to the mentor-like consulting approach, the Oulu FE not only
recognised that they are not experts when it comes to issues related to Armenia, but
they also learned that their consulting approach would support the active participation
of their Armenian colleagues. In ASPU the interviewees' initial approach on the
cooperation varied considerably, but as the project went on they became more active
in combining the ‘best of both worlds’ and steering the change process based on their
own strengths and vision.

However, the two organisations were not fully successful, especially at the beginning
of the project, in paying enough attention to what Mariussen & Virkkala. (2013b,
pp.157-159) refer to as the *fragile nature of knowledge in transnational learning*.
Mariussen & Virkkala (2013b, pp.157-159) note that as transnational learning requires
the exposing of existing (tacit) knowledge for analysis and other forms of external
evaluation, the balance between knowledge protection and learning is fragile, and
thus the process of creating new knowledge should start with the sharing of the
existing knowledge in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

In the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project the communication between the
organisations started via email, and the first seminar in Yerevan was restless with
some degree of antagonism as well, mainly due to the lack of knowledge regarding
the rationale, goals and the expected benefits of the project. As described in my
research findings, the initial turbulent situation did improve considerably once the
rationale of the project had been explained to everyone, and the two organisations
gradually moved towards the “we are in this together” understanding.

There were differences between individuals and working groups however; some
individuals and some working groups were able to find common understanding and
even friendship fairly quickly, whereas for other individuals and working groups the sharing of knowledge remained more fragile and challenging throughout the project. Many of those who had been able to reach common understanding in a relatively short period of time described that it was largely due to having a *shared professional language and a shared personal understanding of their respective field*. For many of those who experienced challenges in the sharing of knowledge commented that it was due to *differences in understanding power hierarchies, as well as differences in personalities and personal perspectives regarding the essence of their field of study*.

### 8.2 Socially constructed organisational learning

In the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project the *affordances* (conditions) of the workplace, defined by Billett (2008, p. 232) as *factors that invite workers in particular ways to participate, and access both support and reward*, can be examined by looking at both *the affordances of the respective key organisations and the affordances of the project itself as a workplace*. When examined from the perspective of organisational and professional learning, the affordances for organisational learning were not optimal for either of the two key organisations, but both organisations were also able to offer affordances which promoted organisational learning.

As regards the affordances of ASPU as an organisation, the key hindrances and challenges for organisational learning were related to the overall Armenian context (financial scarcity, political and geographical difficulties, social problems and youth migration) and the initial resistance and pessimism that some of the project participants had towards the change process. On the other hand however, organisational learning at ASPU was promoted by the strong determination within ASPU to succeed, which was supported by the success of the initial results and the pro-European attitude of the young lecturers.

As with ASPU, the affordances of Oulu FE included both hindrances and promoting factors for organisational and professional learning. The key hindrances were related to the fact that the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project was the first large-scale
cross-cultural cooperation project for the University of Oulu and Oulu FE, and thus the organisational readiness for carrying out the project was inadequate. There were missing conventions and structures for this type of project work inside the organisation, which generated various challenges such as the necessity to overlap the resourcing and work allocation of the university and project work for the project participants. However, the support received from the University of Oulu and Oulu FE management, other University of Oulu faculties, and the Oulu FE team itself provided vital workplace affordances that promoted the organisational learning of the University of Oulu and Oulu FE.

In addition to the lack of initial information on the rationale, goals and the expected benefits of the project, there were other challenges to organisational learning in the workplace affordances of the project as well. Cultural differences manifested on different project levels, including the level of shared language, generated challenges for the organisational learning of both organisations. These challenges were emphasized by the lack of solid project management as noted by many interviewees. However, with the help of the gradual development of mutual understanding and joint determination to succeed, the two organisations were able to mitigate and overcome many of the initial cultural differences, and thus create project-specific workplace affordances that promoted their organisational learning.

But what did the organisations learn during the cooperation project? The table below provides a summary of the key organisational learning outcomes for both ASPU and Oulu FE:

**Table 2. Key organisational learning outcomes for ASPU and Oulu FE.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPU</th>
<th>Oulu FE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information on alternative management practices (e.g. wide staff inclusion).</td>
<td>A more profound understanding on what kind of approach and attitudes work in cross-cultural collaboration projects (e.g. mentor-like consulting approach).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on alternative student assessment methods.</td>
<td>More knowledge about the minimum requirements and basic framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASPU</td>
<td>Oulu FE</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>required from consultants in cross-cultural projects.</td>
<td>More knowledge about how to combine project work with the everyday work at the university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on alternative working culture/working procedures.</td>
<td>More organisational know-how about the possibilities of staff and student development as a part of cross-cultural projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on alternative educational methods (e.g. student centeredness, internship development).</td>
<td>More organisational know-how about how to work as a team of experts in cross-cultural projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More knowledge about the organisational standards required by the European HE context.</td>
<td>More organisational know-how about how to document and disseminate the &quot;lessons learned&quot; in cross-cultural projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More organisational know-how about how to implement reforms and innovations in the European HE context.</td>
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</table>

Based on the research findings the organisational learning outcomes were significant for both organisations. For ASPU the learning process itself was more coordinated with planned tasks and predefined phases, as the primary focus of the project and the working groups was to align the teacher training education in ASPU to the European standards. For Oulu FE the project was recognised as a fine learning opportunity right from the start, but partly due to the “unofficial” learning agenda, the learning itself took place more through finding solutions to the internal and external challenges that the project presented.

The key learning outcomes listed above clearly reflect the different learning agendas of the two organisations, but they also reflect the notion that different organisations can value different aspects of the same learning experience. The research findings also indicate that in general the majority of organisational learning during the project took place among the project participants as a group. Both of these findings support the premise of *socially constructed organisational learning*, which according to Easterby-Smith & Araujo (1999, p.5) stems from the recognition that data have no
significance as such until people determine their meaning and worth, and that much of the crucial organisational information actually exist within the ‘community’ as a whole.

When viewed from a social perspective, organisational learning is seen as emerging from social interactions in the natural work setting, and the focus is on the way people make sense of their experiences at work. In addition to being socially constructed, Nicolini & Meznar (1995, p. 732) note that organisational learning is also a political process, which refers to the closely interconnected cycles of unlearning and learning. In the political process of unlearning and learning the challenge comes from the organisational and personal reluctance to leave old ways of thinking and acting even if they would be recognised as ineffective or no longer functional when compared to the organisational goals.

The research findings indicate that the political process of unlearning and learning was fragmented within ASPU on the level of organisational actors. Based on previous experiences and personal standpoints, some people in ASPU had a fairly neutral approach to the renewal, but there were also people representing two extremes; some enthusiastic to abandon the Soviet academic heritage at ASPU, and others determined to resist changes to the existing way of working. However, more organisational actors started to support the renewal process as the cooperation project went forward.

For Oulu FE the political process of unlearning and learning did not appear to be very fragmented on the level of organisational actors, but there was considerable structural inflexibility within the University of Oulu as regards the implementation of an educational export project. That is, on a level of idea the different organisational actors were very flexible towards the project, but there was structural inflexibility, which hindered the implementation of a commercial project within a public organisation.
According to Easterby-Smith & Araujo (1999, p.5) the socially constructed, political process of organisational learning ultimately occurs or manifests in the culture of an organisation. As Kalliola & Nakari (2007, pp. 191-192) note, the shared working environment, involving values, norms, identities and shared meanings, bonds professional communities together and generates organisational cultures. Kalliola & Nakari (2007, pp. 191-192) elaborate further by stating that an organisational culture typically consists of different, interconnected levels, of which basic or core assumptions form the essence of the culture, while other levels, such as values and artefacts, can be regarded as manifestations of the core assumptions.

The organisational culture in both ASPU and Oulu FE was in favour of the cooperation project, and both organisations were determined to go ahead with the process and succeed with their learning agendas. Based on the research findings the core assumptions of the organisational culture in ASPU were tightly integrated to the goals of the project and the renewal of the Armenian education system, and the social learning and professional bonding during the project seemed to take place more in the interaction with the colleagues from Oulu FE than in the interaction within the ASPU project team.

In general the project participants from Oulu FE described experiencing social learning and professional bonding with their colleagues both in ASPU and Oulu FE, although there were differences between the individual interviewees. For Oulu FE the core assumption of their organisational culture was manifested in the mentor-like consulting approach according which the Oulu FE team set out to share their experiences as partners to find solutions for the Armenian needs together with their Armenian colleagues.

8.3 Academics learning at boundaries

The learning of the individuals in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project can be characterised as the learning of academics at boundaries. That is, the project participants themselves were academics, and the majority of individual learning
during the project took place at various boundaries, which Akkerman & Bakker (2011, p. 1) define as “socio-cultural differences leading to discontinuity in action or interaction”. Based on the research findings the project participants crossed various different types of boundaries (personal, social, historical) while learning during the project, and thus were able to follow Wenger’s (1998) notion according which professionals need to challenge themselves and cross the boundaries of their immediate communities to get new input from outside and to learn.

There were certain key factors which promoted the professional learning of these academics learning at boundaries – factors which Wenger (1998, pp. 105-110) calls boundary objects and boundary brokers. By boundary objects Wenger (1998, pp. 105-110) refers to abstract or concrete objects, which may have different meanings (or interpretations) in different social worlds, but their structure is common enough so that they can be recognised and used as a means of mediation and translation in these different worlds. In the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project one obvious boundary object was the shared HE context of the project, which provided the overall framework for the interaction between the two teams. Another, a more specific boundary object, was the Bologna Process itself, which provided the conceptual framework and guidelines for the project.

For Wenger (1998, pp. 105-110) boundary brokers are people who can, often with the help of boundary objects, introduce elements of one practice into another and who are thus members of multiple communities. In the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project there were boundary brokers in both teams, people who already had experience of cross-cultural projects, both the Armenian and Finnish culture, and the implementation of the Bologna Process itself. Some of these people were especially important during the initial phase of the project as they were able to clarify misunderstandings, mitigate antagonism and promote the “we are in this together” understanding among both teams.
The table below provides a summary of the key individual learning outcomes of the project participants from both ASPU and Oulu FE:

**Table 3. Key individual learning outcomes of the project participants from ASPU and Oulu FE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ASPU</th>
<th>Oulu FE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of the</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding of the</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding of the characteristic of teamwork and team</td>
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<tr>
<td>importance of wide</td>
<td>enhanced understanding of the</td>
<td>leadership in cross-cultural projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>staff inclusion when</td>
<td>enhanced understanding of the</td>
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<tr>
<td>introducing new</td>
<td>enhanced understanding of the</td>
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<tr>
<td>educational ideas and</td>
<td>requirements required from consultants in</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>methods in the</td>
<td>requirements required from consultants in</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>organisation.</td>
<td>cross-cultural projects.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of the</td>
<td>Information on alternative methodological approaches to teaching</td>
<td>Recognition of the significance of context in cross-cultural projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>benefits of working in</td>
<td>and learning (e.g. student centeredness, learning by doing).</td>
<td>(similarities, differences, localised conversion of knowledge).</td>
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<tr>
<td>phases and smaller</td>
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<td>groups in bigger</td>
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<tr>
<td>cross-cultural projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhanced understanding</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding and acceptance of the cultural differences</td>
<td>Recognition of the importance of professional and cultural sensitivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>and acceptance of the</td>
<td>between the Finnish and Armenian way of working.</td>
<td>as well as communication and negotiation skills in achieving mutual</td>
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<td>cultural differences</td>
<td></td>
<td>understanding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>between the Finnish and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Armenian way of working.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhanced understanding</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding of the</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding of the</td>
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<td>of the learning</td>
<td>enhanced understanding of the</td>
<td>learning potential offered by cross-cultural projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>potential offered by</td>
<td>enhanced understanding of the</td>
<td>(learning about one’s own expertise).</td>
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<tr>
<td>cross-cultural projects.</td>
<td>enhanced understanding of the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition of the</td>
<td>Recognition of the importance</td>
<td>Recognition of the importance</td>
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<tr>
<td>importance of</td>
<td>of investing enough time and resources when preparing for cross-</td>
<td>of investing enough time and resources when preparing for cross-cultural</td>
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<tr>
<td>allocating enough time</td>
<td>cultural projects.</td>
<td>cultural projects.</td>
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<td>for cooperation</td>
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<td>projects between</td>
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<tr>
<td>different cultures and</td>
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<td>nations.</td>
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What was characteristic of the interviews with the project participants from ASPU was that many of them were more eager to discuss the organisational learning than their professional learning, and very few of them connected their professional learning with personal learning or personal growth. This was a contrasting finding when compared to the interviewees from Oulu FE, majority of who saw the project primarily as a unique opportunity for both personal and professional growth. However, with the interviewees from Oulu FE there was a clear two-fold undertone in the comments regarding their professional learning: On the one hand they saw the project as an
intellectually inspiring opportunity for learning, but on the other hand many of them also noted that it was a very demanding, at times even an anxiety-generating experience due to the conflicting and overlapping work allocation between their university role and project role.

When examining the learning of the academics in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project, the research results indicate that the experiences of the Oulu FE interviewees resonated more with Clegg’s (2008, p. 334) suggestion that academic identities are often understood as being interwoven, joining the personal and intellectual identities, and are thus experienced as being deeply personal. However, there were more shared characteristics between the two groups when examining the research results against the knowledge-creation metaphor learning approach introduced by Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen (2002). From the six key characteristics listed by them, my research findings highlighted the following three: Tacit knowledge (life experience) is an essential resource of creative experts, innovative learning requires mediating elements (e.g. theories, questions) to instigate cycles of innovation, and learning is fundamentally social with ideas growing primarily between individuals.

8.4 Intercultural academic communities of practise

As George & Svels (2013, p. 328) note, learning at boundaries (including transnational learning) occurs through different structures and social collectives: communities of practice, of interest and of networks. In a community of practice, as understood by Wenger (1998), learning takes place as people participate and engage in actions and interactions that transform the social and cultural structure. The community is the social arena for understanding cultural meanings and developing identities, which are manifested in practices. And meanings are negotiated through the two continually converging and complementary processes of participation and reification, in which the participants give form to their experiences and understandings by producing objects and shared concepts.
In this study I have used Wenger’s understanding of a community of practice to examine the building of a shared understanding (the negotiation of interculturality) that gradually took place in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project. And more specifically, I have used Otten’s (2009) concept of intercultural academic community of practice for analysing the intersection of the organisational and individual learning process within the cooperation project. To examine the project participants from ASPU and Oulu FE as an intercultural academic community of practice at the intersection of the organisational and individual level, I have used Otten’s (2009, pp. 411-413) intercultural orientation model including two main dimensions: The organisational level of structures and formal belonging and the personal level of attitudes and practices. And to analyse the combined effect of these two dimensions, I have used Otten’s (2009, p. 411) concepts of closure and opening, which he sees as two distinct gravity poles that continuously exert push and pull effects on the process of negotiating cultural adaptation.

My research findings suggest that in general both ASPU and Oulu FE operated in the mode of opening as regards their willingness and determination to enable organisational and individual learning, and to seek shared understanding as a part of the cooperation project. That is, during the cooperation project both institutions have made a determined effort to explore new areas of unknown cultural and intellectual knowledge via actively participating in intercultural encounters with each other. However, the exploration into new areas of unknown cultural and intellectual knowledge has been done bearing in mind the existing characteristics and strengths of both cultures and organisations; instead of forcing ideas and concepts on each other, the two organisations have based their cooperation on the idea of combining the “best of both worlds”.

When examining my research findings from the perspective of personal attitudes and practices of the project participants, it can be stated that there have been stronger push and pull effects between the gravity poles of closure and opening, with fluctuation between individuals and their reactions towards the project in specific
moments of time. Even though the majority of the project participants operated from the mode of opening throughout the project, there were participants, especially in ASPU at the beginning of the project, who operated from the *mode of closure* as regards their willingness to accept all aspects of the renewal process. These individuals, partly due to the lack of initial information on the rationale of the project, wanted to protect the existing values and ways of working against the external influences that the renewal process incorporated. However, towards the end of the project the number of project participants operating from a mode of opening grew, which also supported the organisational determination of turning ‘problems of unsolved action’ into ‘challenges of learning’.

Related to the challenges of learning, my research findings also support the notions by Akkerman (2011, p. 21) and Edwards (2011, pp. 36-39), who point out that despite the potential, learning does not evolve naturally or automatically from a co-location of diverse practices and perspectives. Akkerman (2011, p. 21) states that as the boundaries that people encounter can easily remain implicit or hidden during interaction, they need to be identified and explicated, after which they can be discussed, mediated and processed collectively to promote the learning of all those involved. Akkerman’s view is shared by Edwards (2011, pp. 36-39), who emphasises that to generate common knowledge and shared understanding, boundary spaces need managing and meetings, which give time to examine the ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘where to’ of shared practices.

According to my interviewees there could and should have been more meetings in which the project participants would have been able to explicate the implicit boundaries and discuss the ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘where to’ questions related to the shared practices. This need was evident especially in the comments of many Oulu FE interviewees, who were of the opinion that there was not enough time and not enough managed opportunities to discuss the hidden boundaries within the Oulu FE team or within the project as a whole. For these interviewees many things related to communication patterns, information flow and decision making remained somewhat
unclear during the project because the two teams did not have enough managed opportunities to discuss and decide on shared practices on the project level.

Otten (2009, pp. 411-413) sees the organisational level of structures and formal belonging and the personal level of attitudes and practices as interconnected aspects of every social change process. In that process change can take place on different levels (conscious/unconscious) and with different magnitude ranging from slow and subtle shifts of values to various explicit transitions such as planned processes and actions initiated to achieve a certain goal.

When examining my research findings as the learning outcomes of an academic community of practise learning at boundaries, it can be stated that the project generated both reflective and transformative learning outcomes, as defined by Akkerman & Bakker (2011, p. 3). There were reflective learning outcomes which enabled the project organisations and project participants to look differently at their current ways of working by learning from another type of practice. And there were transformative learning outcomes which lead to changes in the existing practices and thought patterns as a result of embracing and applying the ideas of another type of practice.

8.5 Lessons learned

The vital importance of organising a well-planned preparatory training workshop in cross-cultural cooperation projects was one key lesson that was learned during the ASPU – Oulu FE project. As pointed out in the development suggestions collected from my interviewees, many of the initial challenges experienced at the beginning of the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project could be avoided by organising a jointly planned face-to-face preparatory training workshop before beginning the actual work.

In an ideal situation, the project organisations and all project participants would be required to prepare for the training workshop, after which the learning agenda for the workshop could be made jointly based on the questions, comments and suggestions
received in the preparation phase. The learning agenda for the preparatory training workshop should include presentations and discussions, at least on the following themes:

- **Rationale** of the project (e.g. purpose, goals, contents, roles, expected benefits and outcomes)
- **Practicalities** of the project (e.g. communication conventions, cooperation methods, meetings, reporting, schedules)
- **Cultural characteristics** of the project organisations (e.g. project context, working culture, history, mentality).

Organising this type of workshop would help to clarify and unify the starting point for all project participants; it would create a solid basis for developing mutual understanding, and it would reduce the time needed to understand the basic framework of working together.

Another key lesson that was learned during the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project was that large cross-cultural projects require more resources and time to be allocated to project management. That is, in large cross-cultural projects the project management needs to be able to focus on leading the project, and thus their simultaneous resourcing in various other roles in their respective organisation should be reduced while the project is running. My research results indicate *that a joint leadership model of the management team* could offer a good basis for managing and leading large cross-cultural projects. Furthermore, a joint leadership model could also promote the establishing of shared common knowledge, as it would enable the management team to discuss the project boundaries from a wider perspective to find project-level solutions to different challenges.

Also, as pointed out especially by the interviewees from Oulu FE, it would be very important to avoid the overlapping resourcing between the project work and the day-to-day work at the respective organisations. However, it needs to be noted that at least in the context of Finnish HE it may be very difficult for HEIs to free their resources for longer projects, and thus one possibility could be to free the HEI
resources for shorter periods at a time, during which the subject experts could focus on the project work while a substitute could take care of their day-to-day responsibilities at the university.

Finally, an important lesson learned during the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project was the need to document the key challenges, discoveries and breakthroughs in a systematic manner right from the start of the project. By documenting the “lessons learned” continuously throughout the project, they can be recorded while the events are still fresh in people’s memories, while also making the entire process easier as the documentation can be done gradually over time. Furthermore, in a longer project also the dissemination of the “lessons learned” becomes more effective when it can be planned in advance, and initiated while the project is still running.
9 ETHICS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

In this chapter I will discuss the ethics and trustworthiness of my thesis. As a starting point for this chapter, I will position myself as an educational researcher. From there, I will move on to examine my study from an ethical perspective, discussing ethics both as a practical set of guidelines for conducting research and as an undercurrent which eventually flows through all phases of a qualitative study.

In the latter part of this chapter, I will discuss the trustworthiness of my work. In addition to introducing some viewpoints on the universal challenges of evaluating qualitative research, I will assess the merits of my work as regards its trustworthiness.

9.1 Positioning myself as a researcher

No matter what kind of topic a researcher is studying, s/he always has some kind of effect on the research itself; the choice of topic, the selection of theories, the utilisation of research methodology, the collection and analysis of the data, and the presentation of the results. It is also vital to recognise, as Shah (2004, p.552) and Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 20) point out, that objectivity, when used to imply total neutrality and detachment in research, is never really possible. In certain fields of research, and with certain types of research, it is possible to be more objective than in other fields and types of research, but absolute objectivity is not possible.

Edwards (2002, p. 157) maintains that the field of education sets special requirements for a researcher:

*Being an educational researcher demands a very different set of relationships with the field and with other researchers. The relationships have at their core a set of value-laden concerns about individual, community and societal well-being.*

Shah (2004, p.552) continues that this is precisely why educational researchers bear a great responsibility while doing research and interpreting research findings, as they can have far-reaching consequences regarding social stability and development.
Thus, as Shah (2004, p.569) argues, it is crucial that (an educational) researcher is knowingly aware of the nature of his/her research context, is able to place himself/herself in the text, and is explicit about the limitations that s/he has in relation to his/her research context.

When positioning myself as an educational researcher in relation to my thesis, I was aware of the fact that I am still more a student of qualitative research than an established researcher. I have done one master’s level thesis before (Törmänen, 1999), but in that study I used both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and with that study the focus was not on learning the details of research methodologies. In this thesis, my inexperience as a researcher is likely to show in the lack of subtlety for conducting qualitative research; subtlety which a more experienced researcher could have incorporated to the exploration of my topic.

In this particular study my role as a student was also visible in the fact that three of my interviewees, namely Gordon Roberts, Rauni Räsänen and Kristina Tsaturyan, also acted as my thesis supervisors. The double role that Gordon, Rauni, and Kristina had in my study was challenging in the way that it could have, for example, created a bias in me to favour their comments over the comments of other interviewees. However, after recognising this apparent danger and after discussing it with them, it was easier for me to consciously avoid any possible bias towards favouring the comments of my thesis supervisors.

While conducting my research, I also recognised that I had gathered the majority of my data via interviews in a mixed mono-cultural/cross-cultural setting. Even though I have gained experience of conducting interviews while working as an information architect, the context of my previous interviews has been the field of technical communication instead of higher education. Furthermore, the interviews that I have conducted earlier have taken place in a mono-cultural rather than a cross-cultural setting. As Shah (2004, p.552) points out, in qualitative research interviewing is considered as a shared activity to generate knowledge, a two-way learning
experience in which the subjective understandings of the research participants influence the data collection process as well as the process of ‘making meaning’. And, as she (2004, p.552) continues, cultural differences have significance for both processes.

Despite the obvious differences related to factors such as age, gender and academic status, the majority of the interviews (with the exception of Gordon Roberts and Hasmik Minasyan) that I conducted with the project team in Oulu FE can be categorised as being more mono-cultural or 'similarity-based' communication, in which “common language, behaviour patterns, and values form the base upon which members of the culture exchange meaning with one another in conducting their daily affairs” (Bennett 1998, p.2). So when viewed from the viewpoint of what Jenks (1993, pp. 11-12) defines as a social category of culture, a category in which culture is understood as the whole way of life of a people, I regard myself as having an insider’s perspective on the shared cultural and communicative conventions used by the project team in Oulu FE. However, as I was not an actual member of the Oulu FE project team, I did not regard myself as an ‘insider’ when it comes to the working culture of the Oulu team.

According to Shah (2004, p. 553), the complexity of communication increases in cross-cultural contexts as the various interacting factors are perceived and experienced differently in diverse cultures. In fact, she (pp. 552-556) argues that the absence of a ‘shared cultural experience’ in cross-cultural interviews generates a risk which “may lead researchers to make false assumptions or perceive difference as an oddity, both of which can misdirect the research interview, the nature of the data, and the interpretations”. Prior to starting the preparations for the internship and my thesis work, I knew very little about Armenia, Yerevan and the Armenian educational system. Though I did gain more knowledge about the Armenian context through my internship and my research, it is obvious that during the interviews held in Yerevan, my interaction with my interviewees was based on what Bennett (1998, p.3) defines as cross-cultural, ‘difference-based’ communication. That is, while conducting the
interviews in Yerevan I was not aware of the Armenian interactional codes and patterns of behaviour. Thus, when positioning myself as a novice researcher (with a western academic background) in relation to the project team in Yerevan, it was clear to me that I was an ‘outsider’, and therefore needed to bear in mind the possibility of making false assumptions and misguided interpretations.

To overcome the context- and culture-bound challenges related to my data collection and analysis, and to foster rapport and understanding between myself and my interviewees, I made certain decisions already when planning my research. I decided that I need to be as direct, open and honest about my research as I possibly can, and that I need to explain what my goals and intentions as a researcher are (e.g. sending the questionnaire to the interviewees in advance). I also made a conscious effort from the very beginning to avoid preconceptions, stereotypes, and unrealistic assumptions of similarities, while allowing my interviewees to speak freely within my research framework. Also, while interviewing and analysing the data I focused on what my interviewees were saying without trying to detect additional meanings from how they were expressing themselves (non-verbal communication).

But even though my research setting was not the easiest for a novice researcher, I felt that I was not a ‘social intruder’. On the contrary, as a researcher I felt that I was an exceptionally welcome ‘learner’ by both project teams. While in Yerevan, I understood that this was partly due to the good reputation that Finland and Finns enjoyed in Armenia, but more importantly it was due to the trust and appreciation that had already been established between the two teams. As a result, I felt that I was able to gain not only physical access, but also social access to my interviewees, which meant that I was able to conduct the interviews in a trusting, comfortable and secure climate (Basch 1987, p. 433). So, even though I felt somewhat uncertain as a novice researcher and recognised the possibilities of misunderstandings throughout the research process, I also felt restful and secure about gaining a better understanding of my cross-cultural research setting.
9.2 Ethical considerations

Heading into the research process my perspective on the ethics of making a qualitative research was tied to what Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 128) refer to as the “technical norms” of research ethics. That is, I recognised the importance of ethical considerations right from the start, but I imagined that they were primarily a matter of applying ethically sound research conventions: informing the interviewees what the research was about, safeguarding the anonymity of the interviewees, using reliable and well-established data collection and analysis methods, giving credit to original information sources, and presenting the findings in a coherent and understandable format. In general, I believe I was successful in following the “technical norms” of research ethics in my work, although I discovered that safeguarding the anonymity of the interviewees can be a far more delicate endeavour that I originally imagined it to be.

In my study, the challenge of safeguarding the anonymity of the interviewees was related to the interviewees’ comments and quotations that I used both to increase the authenticity of my research findings and to exhibit the voices of my interviewees. I recognised that to safeguard the anonymity of my interviewees, I needed to omit all references to gender, status etc. when introducing their comments and quotations, but I was not aware how easy it would be for the project members to identify other project members based merely on the contents of the comments and quotations that I had used in my study. As regards this challenge, I was very fortunate to have thesis supervisors who were also project members, and who were thus able to instruct me to rephrase those comments and quotations that could have compromised the anonymity of my interviewees.

During the research process, I also learned that there is a lot more to research ethics than just following the “technical norms”. In fact, as Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 129) point out, ethics is present already when a researcher selects a research topic and formulates the research questions. For with these choices the researcher in question (and researchers in general) indicates which phenomenon, and which aspects of that
particular phenomenon, s/he considers important enough to be studied. Also, the further I got with my research the more I realised how ethics is a theme which is actually present in all phases of the research process - irrespective of whether the researcher recognises its presence or not. According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 125) the connection between research and ethics is bidirectional: on the one hand the ethical principles of the researcher have an effect on the decisions that the researcher makes in his/her work, while on the other hand the research findings have an effect on the ethical choices that a researcher ultimately makes.

From the outset, I thought that my research topic, *professional and organisational learning in a cross-cultural higher education context*, was not a particularly sensitive topic to study. However, while proceeding with my research I became aware how even a seemingly 'neutral' research topic (as I considered my research topic to be) can include ethically very sensitive aspects, and how certain trademarks of ethically sound qualitative research can in some cases actually contradict each other.

In my study, one of the research questions (*What kinds of conditions promote/hinder learning in a transnational learning community according to the project participants?*) generated some research findings that were potentially adverse to some of my interviewees. Thus, I was faced with a challenge of being able to present all of my research findings so that none of them would be unfavourable to any of my interviewees. Rephrasing and reorganising the potentially adverse research findings ended up being the most challenging (and most instructive) part of the entire thesis process. I was struggling to find a balance between allowing different (even contradictory) voices to be heard on the one hand, and protecting all of my interviewees from potentially unfavourable research findings on the other hand. With this challenge, I followed my thesis supervisors’ advice, and tried to present the essence of all research findings while prioritising the well-being of my interviewees. After all, as noted by Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 131), the well-being of all the research participants must always be the primary research goal above all other goals.
9.3 Trustworthiness of my research

Over the years, qualitative research has been criticised for its inability to provide solid accounts as regards the validity and reliability of the research findings in the traditional (positivist) sense. As a reply to the criticism, many qualitative researchers (e.g. Lincoln & Guba 1985; Eisner 1991; Wolcott 1994; Angen 2000; Whittemore, Chase & Mandle 2001) have argued that the traditional concepts of internal/external validity and reliability (as they are used in quantitative research) do not fit qualitative research very well as qualitative research is more about interpretive understanding than about objective ‘objective’ reality. So rather than examining the internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity of the research findings according to the positivist tradition, the qualitative researchers listed above suggest that qualitative research should be evaluated based on its trustworthiness using concepts such as credibility, authenticity and integrity.

How does one evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative research? Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 127) note that in general research ethics is closely tied to the trustworthiness and ultimately to the quality of a research, and that all good research is guided by ethical soundness. This view is supported by Angen (2000), who notes that to be ethically sound, all interpretive research agendas need to question their underlying moral assumptions, political and ethical implications, and the equitable treatment of diverse voices. She (2000, p. 388-390) continues that the ethical soundness of qualitative research also requires that it provides “practical, generative, and possibly transformative” answers to research questions, and that it “raises new possibilities, opens up new questions and stimulates new dialogue”. Although fairly limited in questioning the political implications of the research findings, in general I feel that when evaluated against the criteria suggested by Angen above, my study can be categorised as being ethically trustworthy.

Another key evaluation criteria suggested by Angen (2000, pp. 390-391) is substantive trustworthiness. She (2000, pp. 390-391) notes that the process of achieving substantive trustworthiness “includes a consideration of one’s own
understandings of the topic, understandings derived from other sources, and an accounting of this process in the written record of the study”. Creswell (2007, p. 206) elaborates on the same theme by stating that the “understandings derived from the previous research give substance to the inquiry” and as a sociohistorical interpreter the qualitative researcher then “interacts with the subject matter to co-create the interpretations”. With the help of a contextual overview and a diverse theoretical framework, I have aimed at providing a solid background for my study. I have strived to provide as honest, thorough and structured description of the entire research process as possible, and throughout the writing process I have paid special attention to describing and justifying the decisions that I have made. Also, I have pursued a self-reflective approach in my writing to promote my own learning process and to contribute to the substantive trustworthiness of my research.

However, the role of a sociohistorical interpreter is by no means unambiguous, and neither is the process of interpreting the research findings. In fact, as Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, p. 143) point out, the different approaches, methodologies and methods used by different researchers can lead to situations in which the examination of the same research topic results in different, even contradictory, research outcomes that are in force simultaneously. There are, however, ways to reduce the level of ambiguity in the interpretive process. Triangulation - the process of combining different research approaches and methodologies to the investigation of research questions in a given research – provides tools to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Following the categorisation originally formulated by Denzin (1970), Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, pp. 144-145) list the following four triangulation categories:

1. Data triangulation, which refers to gathering data using different sampling strategies (e.g. from a variety of people representing different roles).
2. Investigator triangulation, which refers to the use of more than one researcher when gathering and interpreting data.
3. Theoretical triangulation, which refers to the use of more than one theoretical framework when interpreting data.
4. *Method triangulation*, which refers to the use of more than one research method for data collection and interpretation.

In my study I used data triangulation by interviewing a total of 23 people from ASPU/CEP and University of Oulu. Interviewing a bigger group of people was definitely worth it, as it provided both depth and breadth to my research findings. I was also able to use theoretical triangulation by discussing my research findings through four different theoretical lenses, all of which helped me to examine my topic holistically from different angles. As regards method triangulation, I applied research methods from both qualitative case study and theory-guided content analysis, which helped me to narrow my focus to a specific instance of an interesting phenomenon, and to examine that instance with suitable tools. But with investigator triangulation, I often felt that I was missing a co-researcher with whom I could have shared views and ideas. Due to the nature of my research, it would have been an ideal situation if I could have shared this experience with an Armenian co-researcher, and it is obvious that an Armenian colleague could have both opened entirely new dimensions to the research process, and increased the trustworthiness of this study.

Finally, as Creswell (2007, p. 206) argues:

*To make sure that the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied, thick description is necessary. Rather than reliability, one seeks dependability that the results will be subject to change and instability. The naturalistic researcher looks for conformability rather than objectivity in establishing the value of the data. Both dependability and conformability are established through an auditing of the research process.*

In my study, I have done my best to provide as thick a research description as possible. Also, the dependability and conformability of my entire research process has been audited by my thesis supervisors in several face-to-face discussions throughout the process, enabling me to sharpen my description via each round of required modifications.
10 CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project from a specific learning-oriented perspective to understand and describe the different aspects and processes of professional and organisational learning in the Armenian-Finnish transnational HE context. I used the following research questions to seek answers to the challenges and problems that I had also personally experienced as a member of various geographically and culturally fragmented professional teams:

- What have the project participants and their respective organisations learned during the cooperation project? (central research question)
- What kinds of conditions promote/hinder learning in a transnational learning community according to the project participants? (central research question)
- What are the key benefits and challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context according to the project participants? (sub-question)
- What kind of development ideas accumulated during the cooperation project? (sub-question)

Although the primary learning goals and learning outcomes varied between the organisations, it was obvious that in the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project both parties were ultimately teachers and learners in a transnational context. An important learning outcome for both organisations was the realisation that knowledge is not a standalone asset that can be accessed at any given time and transferred to any given place. Instead, the project demonstrated the strong context-dependent nature of knowledge, which ultimately means that a localised conversion is required for new transnational knowledge to be internalised in another geographical and cultural context. Also, during the project both organisations recognised the vital importance of building transnational cooperation on the existing preconditions, resources and strengths of the respective organisations.

As regards organisational learning, the majority of the learning outcomes for ASPU were closely tied to the project objectives. That is, as a result of the cooperation
project ASPU gained new insights on alternative HE management practises, educational methods, student assessment methods, and working procedures. In addition, ASPU gained more organisational know-how about how to implement HE reforms and innovations, and learned more about the organisational standards required by the European HE context.

For Oulu FE, the project-specific organisational learning outcomes were derived from the "unofficial" learning agenda according which Oulu FE and the University of Oulu wanted to gain more organisational experience and ideas to further develop their own approach to cross-cultural collaboration and educational export. In general, Oulu FE (and the University of Oulu) acquired a more profound understanding on what kind of approach and attitudes work in cross-cultural collaboration projects, including the minimum requirements and basic framework required from consultants. In addition, Oulu FE gained more organisational know-how on how to work as a team of experts, how to document and disseminate the "lessons learned", and how to utilise cross-cultural projects as opportunities for staff and student development.

At the beginning of the project, organisational learning was challenged mainly by the lack of information on the project rationale and the inadequate recognition of the fragile balance between knowledge protection and learning, but towards the end the factors which hindered organisational learning became diluted. According to the research findings, the mentor-like consulting approach applied by the Oulu FE was the key factor promoting organisational learning during the cooperation project. It invited both parties into a two-way collaborative learning process, promoting the gradual development of mutual trust, understanding and joint determination to succeed. It also enabled the two organisations to mitigate and overcome many of the initial cultural differences and thus made it possible to create project-specific workplace affordances that promoted organisational learning on both sides.

When examined from the viewpoint of individual academics learning at boundaries, the project participants represented a wide variety of expectations, desires and
learning objectives. Despite the varying initial starting points, the majority of the project participants crossed various different types of boundaries (personal, social, historical) while learning during the project, and thus were able to follow Wenger's (1998) notion according which professionals need to cross the boundaries of their immediate communities to get new input from outside and to learn.

The recognition of the professional learning potential offered by cross-cultural projects, as well as the need to invest enough time and resources to cross-cultural projects were described as key learning outcomes by professionals in ASPU and Oulu FE alike. For the academics in ASPU, the professional learning outcomes also included the recognition of the importance of wide staff inclusion when introducing new ideas and methods in the organisation. Furthermore, the project enhanced their understanding and acceptance of the cultural differences between the Finnish and Armenian way of working.

In addition to the shared professional learning outcomes, the academics in Oulu FE highlighted the significance of understanding the role of context and face-to-face communication in cross-cultural projects, bearing in mind the importance of fostering professional and cultural sensitivity as a means to achieve mutual understanding. As a reflection on their own, as well as their team’s performance, many Oulu FE interviewees also stressed the enhanced understanding that they had gained both on the transnational consultant requirements and on the characteristics of teamwork and team leadership in cross-cultural projects.

As with organisational learning, the challenges of professional learning were more prominent at the beginning of the project, and largely due to the initial obscurity of the project rationale. Also, there were notable differences in professional approaches, customs and culture, and for some interviewees these interaction-related challenges hampered their professional learning throughout the project. However, for the vast majority of the interviewees professional learning became easier and more rewarding as the project went forward. On the one hand, professional learning was promoted by
the shared HE context and the Bologna Process guidelines, which served as boundary objects common enough to be used by both parties as means of mediation and translation between the different professional and cultural worlds. And on the other hand it was promoted by boundary brokers; project participants who already had experience of cross-cultural projects, both the Armenian and Finnish culture, and the implementation of the Bologna Process itself.

The sub-questions of my research were closely tied to the secondary purpose of this study, which was to utilise an uncommon learning-oriented perspective to discuss the cooperation project as one unique manifestation of a phenomenon known as the internationalisation of HE. That is, as a part of this study, I also wanted to discuss the under-researched relationship between professional and organisational learning, as well as the infrequently examined concepts of academic professionalism and academic communities of practise.

As regards the sub-questions and the secondary purpose of this study, the key research finding is that when enough time and resources are combined with organisational and professional openness, willingness and determination, cross-cultural cooperation projects based on the Bologna Process framework can offer unique learning opportunities for the academics and their respective organisations. During the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project, both organisations made a determined effort to explore unknown areas of knowledge via actively participating in intercultural encounters with each other. The exploration into new areas of cultural and intellectual knowledge was done bearing in mind the existing characteristics and strengths of both cultures and organisations; instead of forcing ideas and concepts on each other, the two organisations based their cooperation on the idea of combining the “best of both worlds”.

One of the essential discoveries of my study is that combining the “best of both worlds” requires a structured, planned and democratic project approach, which also includes flexibility to cater for the needs of professionals and organisations with
different starting points and learning styles. To establish the project rationale and to agree on the shared goals, it is absolutely vital to organise basic project orientation for all project participants at the very beginning of the project. And to reach the shared goals, the project orientation needs continuous maintenance throughout the project in the form of mutual dialogue, cooperation and interaction. In the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project the mutual learning opportunities were fully recognised after overcoming the challenges of the initial consultant - customer setup, and thus both organisations were able to learn and benefit from the project.

My study also verifies the notion of the knowledge-creation metaphor learning approach according which expert-level learning is fundamentally social, with ideas growing primarily between individuals. In fact, my study indicated that also in a HE context a lot of vital organisational information actually exists within the community as a whole, and that the majority of organisational learning during the ASPU – Oulu FE cooperation project actually took place among the project participants as a group.

All in all, when examining my research findings as the learning outcomes of an academic community of practise learning at boundaries, it can be stated that the project generated a significant amount of both reflective and transformative learning outcomes. There were reflective learning outcomes which enabled the project organisations and project participants to look differently at their current ways of working by learning from another type of practice. There were also transformative learning outcomes which lead to changes in the existing practices and thought patterns as a result of embracing and applying the ideas of another type of practice.

Finally, this study bears obvious limitations which are due to the fact that the research findings are based on the examination of one cross-cultural cooperation project from a very specific perspective. However, I believe that my uncommon research perspective has enabled me to produce relevant information on an under-researched aspect of a very topical phenomenon; information that is beneficial and at least partly transferrable when planning transnational cooperation projects in the HE context.
Also, when combined with the development ideas suggested by the ASPU – Oulu FE project participants, the limitations of this study can be seen as intriguing openings for further research. How could the project participants and their respective organisations be prepared to meet the challenges of transnational cooperation projects? Could a joint leadership model for a management team be applied to transnational cooperation projects? Reflecting on these questions I hope that this study can also function as an inspiration for further research on learning at boundaries. As Shah (2004, p. 551) points out:

* A way forward in the emerging societal structures is to engage in cross-cultural research for enhanced understanding of multi-ethnic and cross-cultural educational sites in national and international contexts. *
REFERENCES


Master’s Thesis Research Questionnaire

Introduction
This questionnaire is part of a master's thesis research in which my intent is to discover the possibilities and challenges of professional learning in a transnational learning community. My research examines professional transnational learning in higher education context, and in addition to the theoretical background it includes a case study that focuses on the cooperation project between the Armenia State Pedagogical University (ASPU) and University of Oulu Faculty of Education. In my research I aim to study both the learning of the project participants as well as the learning of the two key organisations (ASPU/University of Oulu) involved in the project.

However, my research is not a part of the actual cooperation project between ASPU and University of Oulu, and it is not a part of the official evaluation of the current project. Instead it aims to discover practises that can be used to develop transnational learning communities in general, and the future cooperation between ASPU and University of Oulu in particular

Thank you for your participation,

Esa Törmänen

Confidentiality
The interviews will be recorded to enable a more detailed analysis of the data. However, the confidentiality of the interviewees will be protected throughout the research. The comments of individual interviewees will not be used as such, and the thesis will be written so that it is not possible to detect the answers given by any individual interviewee.
Questions

a) Learning of the project participants
1. What is your role in the cooperation project (has it changed during the project)?
2. What kind of expectations did you have before the project?
   • What were your personal expectations?
   • Did you receive any other (external) expectations in addition to your own?
3. How would you describe your own professional learning as a member of a transnational community?
   • What have you learned during the cooperation project?
   • What has helped you in your learning?
   • What has hindered your learning?
   • Have you learned something that you did not expect to learn during the project?
   • What could professional learning in a transnational learning community be at its best (what would you like to learn during these types of projects)?

b) Learning of the organisations
4. What is the role of your organisation in the cooperation project (has it changed during the project)?
5. How would you describe the learning of your respective organisation during the project?
   • What has your organisation learned during the cooperation project?
   • What has helped your organisation in its learning?
   • What has hindered your organisation in its learning?
   • What could the learning of organisations in a transnational project be at its best (what would you like your organisation to learn during projects like this)?

c) Cross-cultural context of learning
6. What do you see as the key benefits of learning in a cross-cultural context?
7. What do you see as the key challenges of learning in a cross-cultural context?
8. In your opinion, do these kinds of projects contribute the factual implementation and establishment of wider transnational learning communities (e.g. European Higher Education Area)?
**d) Future development**

9. Do you have any additional development suggestions that could enhance the professional and organisational learning in transnational leaning communities in general and/or the future cooperation between ASPU and University of Oulu in particular?