

SLU Partnership Alnarp: connecting academia, industry and society

LISA BLIX GERMUNDSSON, DEPARTMENT OF WORK SCIENCE, BUSINESS ECONOMICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, SWEDISH UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES, BOX 88, 250 53 ALNARP, SWEDEN. LISA.GERMUNDSSON@SLU.SE, +4640415253

The intermediary organisation SLU Partnership Alnarp started in 2004 as a collaborative platform at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). The aim was to strengthen the competitiveness of Swedish agriculture and contribute to excellent research and education at the university. Currently, the intermediary organisation has around 90 partner organisations, ranging from small firms to large businesses and authorities, including those in the forestry industry. The activities carried out are R&D projects that are funded together by the university and partner organisations; meeting places such as seminars, workshops, and field excursions; student thesis projects; and mentorship programmes. The main role is to broker networks, connect people with various backgrounds, and initiate collaborations between SLU, industry, and society.

In an increasingly complex world, ensuring access to knowledge, networks, and collaborations is a strategy for survival and success [1, 2]. SLU Partnership Alnarp (hereafter referred to as “the intermediary organisation”) connects researchers, teachers, and students at SLU with industry and society. It provides several benefits for its owners (SLU), its partners, and the individuals who engage in its activities. For example, the information flow in and around the intermediary organisation allows both researchers and partners to gain and provide information regarding their areas of interest, which increases the understanding and knowledge of other actors. The various meeting activities allow for networking and individual contact making, sometimes with the specific support of the intermediary organisation’s staff for matchmaking purposes. This

gives rise to new ideas and opens new research areas, and the possibility to fund early steps is particularly valuable. Such activities also enhance the connection between education and work life through the creation of meaningful collaborations between teachers, students, industry, and society. The activities of the intermediary organisation have contributed to strengthening SLU’s position and its connection to its societal context, along with increasing its presence in the trade media. For industry and society, the intermediary organisation enables access to scientific knowledge and individual researchers, as well as to students who are their future colleagues, suppliers, and customers.

Network brokering and invitation to collaboration

The main function of the intermediary organisation is to broker networks, connect people with various backgrounds, and initiate collaborations between SLU, industry, and society. The first evaluation of the intermediary organisation, conducted by former SLU vice chancellor Mårten Carlsson, stated that it was “a success story, with things to improve” [3]. Carlsson highlighted that the intermediary organisation as a meeting place is a great asset for the region. The view of the intermediary organisation from Alnarp’s perspective, i.e. department heads, researchers, and teachers, was reported to be positive, and the benefit of the inter-

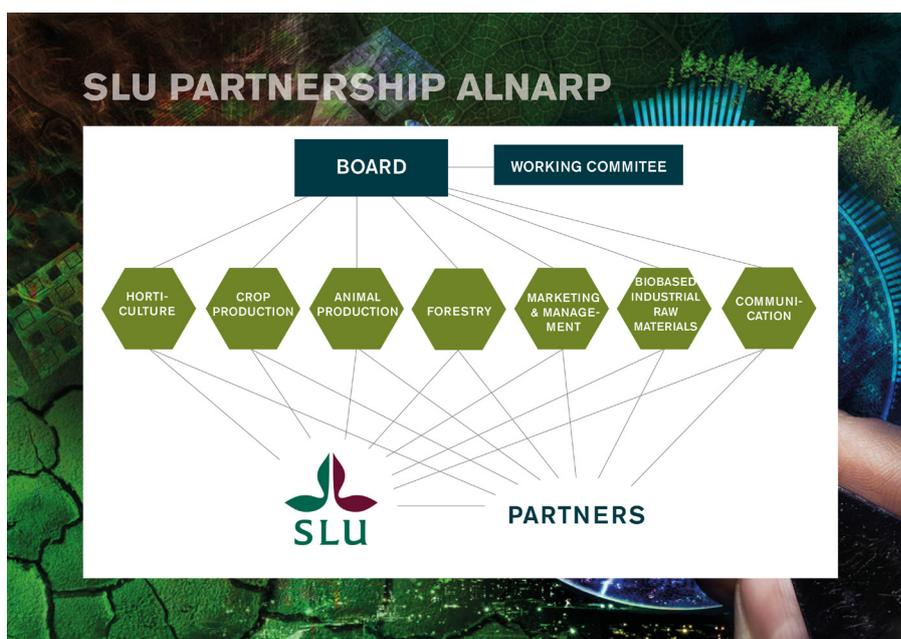


Fig. 1. The structure of the intermediary organisation between the university and its partners, with the board, working committee, and subject groups.



Students day, Alnarp. Photo: Annamia Olvmyr

SLU Partnership Alnarp and undergraduate courses

In 2008, “Project course horticulture” was started with the help of the intermediary organisation. The aim was to strengthen the connection between the horticultural education at SLU and industry. The students undertake a project study in close cooperation with a company concerning a particular problem the company is faced with.

In other undergraduate courses, such as economics and marketing, the intermediary organisation’s partners are invited to contribute with business cases and other kinds of cases for the students to sink their teeth into. This has aided the university in offering an education that is in touch with future work life situations, and it allows teachers to keep up with trends in industry. Partners also welcome the opportunity to get a specific question investigated and to get to know students.

mediary organisation was viewed most of all as a way of making SLU more widely known. However, Carlsson emphasised that the intermediary organisation’s management cannot settle on the positive reviews; rather, collaboration in the intermediary organisation is like love, and it must be continuously maintained and renewed [3]. A recent evaluation stated likewise that reciprocity cannot simply be taken for granted, and there is a need to work continuously with both sides, for example, through enhanced matchmaking between researchers and partners [4]. The evaluators concluded the intermediary organisation had an impressive track record of over time and recommended careful development with a gentle hand [4].

Subject groups, the board, and the working committee

The intermediary organisation consists of a board, a working committee with an operating manager, and subject groups, see Figure 1. The aim of the subject groups is to constitute a meeting place and a discussion forum between the intermediary organisation’s partners and researchers at SLU. The 90 partners of the intermediary organisation are divided into subject groups based on their own interests, namely Animal Production,

Crop Production, Horticulture, Biobased Industrial Raw Materials, Marketing & Management, Forestry, and Communication. The subject groups’ chairpersons represent partner organisations, while the subject groups’ secretaries are university researchers.

The task of the subject groups is to initiate activities such as seminars, workshops, and excursions and to prioritise project applications. The goal of the subject groups is to initiate collaboration between academia and the intermediary organisation’s partners. Each subject group has its own focus areas and activity goals. The communication group is tasked with highlighting and clarifying the intermediary organisation’s basic message, goals, and activities along with supporting the subject groups and individual project managers and researchers in their communication of projects and results.

The board of the intermediary organisation consists of all subject group chairpersons, plus the two faculty deans as chairperson and vice chairperson. The Faculty of Landscape Architecture, Horticulture, and Crop Production Science founded the intermediary organisation in 2004 and was joined by the Faculty of Forestry in 2015. The faculties contribute with funds for R&D projects, operating

manager, and administrative staff.

The working committee meets every month to discuss the operations of the intermediary organisation.

Evaluations show that the partner organisations highly value the opportunity to participate in the subject groups [4, 5]. However, the number and heterogeneity of the partners provides a dynamism that could be even better accounted for in the subject groups, perhaps through new arrangements and meeting forms [4].

SLU Partnership Alnarp laid the foundation for “Expansion of Horticulture” and “Swedish Centre for Agricultural Business Management”

The early years of the intermediary organisation also included a dialogue about the development of the domestic horticulture industry. Together with a number of stakeholders, the project “Expansion of horticulture” was started with the aim to sustainably double the turnover in the Swedish horticultural industry. From 2008 through 2017, a large number of projects focusing on sustainable growth were funded and carried out.

The dialogue with the partners of the intermediary organisation also resulted in the creation of the Swedish Centre for Agricultural Business Management in 2015, with the aim to develop business management research and practice and to contribute to successful, profitable, and sustainable companies in the sector.

Research and development projects

Researchers at SLU, together with the partners of the intermediary organisation, can apply for funding for R&D projects. The applications are first prioritised in a subject group meeting, and then a decision is made by the board about 6–8 weeks after the application date. Half of the project costs can be applied for from the intermediary organisation, and the other half is contributed by partners. The partners state that the research projects are valuable to them and answer questions that are important to them [3, 4]. However, there is the potential to engage partners even more with researchers, and vice versa, by,



Apple Orchard in the Garden Laboratory at SLU in Alnarp. Photo: Jenny Svernås-Gillner.

for example, initiating follow-ups of the research projects over time involving both partners and researchers [4].

Seminars, workshops, and excursions

The intermediary organisation arranges a large number of seminars, workshops, and excursions every year. These events are vital meeting places between academia, industry, and society, and they provide opportunities to discuss and deliberate on current topics across organisational borders. On many occasions, thoughts of cross-border collaborations have been furthered and concretised as a result of these meetings. Evaluations show that partners find these meeting places very valuable [5].

Undergraduate education, student thesis projects, and mentorship programmes

The establishment of the intermediary organisation has increased contacts with external organisations for undergraduate teachers and course leaders through, for example, access to guest lecturers, study visit sites, and case study material from partners. The intermediary organisation provides funding for SLU students’ thesis projects, which are carried out in collaboration with partners under the supervision of teachers at SLU Alnarp. A yearly mentorship programme is arranged for students at SLU Alnarp, where the mentors come from the partners of the intermediary organisation.

Students appreciate the intermediary

organisation as an opportunity to make contact with industry and society, and partners welcome the possibility of student contacts [3, 4]. Evaluators have recommended pathways for increasing the involvement of undergraduate course coordinators and students with the intermediary organisations’ partners, along with SLU’s external collaboration specialists (samverkanslektorer) [4].

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