

# It takes two to tango: Examining productive interactions in urban research collaboration

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## Abstract

The science–society relations of social sciences and humanities have been increasingly discussed under the concept of productive interactions, which refers to the mutual learning processes between researchers and stakeholders for the benefit of societal development. While most studies have analysed the societal impact from the research performers' perspective, in this article, we examine the practitioners' side. We contribute to the evaluation theory by offering a new perspective to examine the emergence of productive interactions. Based on an empirical analysis of collaborative practices in two Finnish urban research programmes and how the practitioners reflected on them, we argue that practitioners' competencies are essential in leveraging societal impact. The improvement of these 'pracademic competencies' need to be raised as an issue in research policy and evaluation promoting responsible research and innovation.

**Key words:** productive interactions; collaborative research; pracademic competencies; societal impact; responsible research and innovation; social sciences and humanities

## 1. Introduction

The efforts to demonstrate the value for society of the academic community's work, in other words, 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2014), have led to rich discussions on how such value is created and how it can be supported. The applied research policy measures include increased collaboration between the scientific world and other stakeholders, emphasis on transdisciplinarity and 'real-world problems' in research funding, and the involvement of expert users of the research (Bornmann 2013). Expectations of how research is organized (de Jong, Wardenaar and Horlings 2016a) and how its impacts are evaluated (see Bornmann 2013; Greenhalgh et al. 2016; Hill 2016; Cruz Rivera et al. 2017; Sivertsen and Meijer 2020) have transformed accordingly. With emphasis on interaction with stakeholders, traditional assumptions of a linear process between a study, applications, and impacts (e.g. Wooding et al. 2007) have been replaced with an understanding of diverse processes of how benefits may emerge (e.g. Ozanne et al. 2017; Annemans and Heylighen 2020; Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela 2020; Sivertsen and Meijer 2020).

In a seminal project, Spaapen and van Drooge (2011, p. 212) defined 'productive interactions' as 'exchanges between researchers and stakeholders in which knowledge is produced and valued that is both scientifically robust and socially relevant'. Productiveness was considered to be fulfilled 'when it leads to efforts by stakeholders to apply research results to social goals, i.e. when it induces behavioural change' (Spaapen et al. 2012, p. 2). While the main idea of productive interactions is easy to agree with, it is disappointing how superficial the original model (Spaapen and van Drooge 2011) has remained, separating only direct or personal interaction between humans (e.g. meetings), indirect interaction through a medium or a 'carrier' (e.g. a research report), and financial and/or material exchanges (essentially, funding collaboration). Operationalized this way, the evaluation focus might be limited to 'counting interactions', as Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela (2020) put it.

Nevertheless, recent discussions on science–society relations and the societal impact of research have indicated continuing interest in the idea's further potential, delving into how productiveness unfolds within direct or personal interaction especially (e.g. Laing and Wallis 2016; Annemans and Heylighen 2020; Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela 2020; Sivertsen and Meijer 2020). However, a common feature is their major focus on the research



the organizations involved. The collaboration between practitioners and academics is not necessarily easy (Weiss 1979; Macduff and Netting 2000; Boswell and Smith 2017), given the tensions rooted in different ways of perceiving knowledge and learning (Posner 2009, p. 22; de Jong, Smit, and van Drooge 2016b). Yet, in a dialogue, the imagined boundaries can at best be spanned or reinterpreted, resulting in diffuse and shared understanding (e.g. Gorman 2010; Alvesson and Sandberg 2011).

‘Competencies’ refers to a set of skills and abilities required from the participants to succeed in the boundary work. In the complex, reciprocal process of knowledge production, a set of different, complementary skills is required. Hoysä (2013, p. 63) differentiates between analytical skills (e.g. framing problems and formulating questions), methodological skills (e.g. selecting suitable scientific methods), inventive skills (e.g. using new methods and approaches), and application skills (e.g. applying research skills to explain a social phenomenon and its conditions). In addition, communicating skills to explain the contexts, questions, and results in multiple ways must be noted (see Gorman 2010). While research evaluation literature is not short of suggestions on how academics could perform better, the collaboration perspective also requires examining practitioners’ competencies. This includes, for instance, whether they understand the basics of knowledge formation (e.g. what can be expected from a single study) or are able to identify the results and their potential relevance (Iorio, Labory and Rentocchini 2017; Rau, Goggins and Fahy 2018). Adding to the complicated nature of the situation, the practitioners are a diverse bunch in terms of having a background with scientific knowledge utilization. Some are highly skilled, well-educated, autonomous professionals (e.g. teachers, medical doctors, or social workers), whereas others are less rooted in one profession (e.g. project managers, program coordinators) (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007; Leino, Santaoja and Laine 2018, p. 10). Moreover, their knowledge interest varies. A professionally oriented practitioner might seek quite particular knowledge, while a topics-based team might look for different perspectives. Some working with a locally motivated question could seek contextualized research, and another with a pragmatic outlook might want answers to specific, practical questions (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007, pp. 186, 239). Some may need to expand their understanding of alternatives, while others look for clarification of choices in formulating policies (Macduff and Netting 2000; Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007; McNie, Parris and Sarewitz 2016, p. 884).

The oft-heard, broad criticism of academic research being too general, time-consuming, complex, and giving too contingent results to serve policy makers’ practical needs (e.g. Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007, p. 239; McNie, Parris and Sarewitz 2016, p. 884) have also invited organizational solutions, such as the emergence of a collaboration professional, the ‘knowledge broker’ (Meyer 2010; Joas and Theobald 2013; Bornbaum et al. 2015; Leino, Santaoja and Laine 2018). This title refers to people or organizations facilitating connections, mutual understanding, and knowledge transfer (i.e. the boundary work between the researchers and the practitioners). Brokering involves dialogical processes of explaining, coordinating, and aligning between different knowledge interests. It also includes gathering, summarizing, and synthesizing research results into an easily understandable form, as well as translating policy problems into researchable questions. Brokers can also support collaboration by identifying opportunities for practitioners to get involved in a suitable and rewarding way (e.g. having some ownership of the collaboration). (Joas and Theobald 2013; Bornbaum et al. 2015.)

We suggest reserving the title of ‘knowledge broker’ for professionals, while using the term ‘pracademic competencies’ for the specific learned skills—as well as abilities, knowledge, and behaviours—required from a broad spectrum of actors to contribute in research collaboration (cf. Bird 1995). Previously, the term ‘pracademic’ has mostly been used about practitioners who have become academics—or the other way round—and are active in connecting scientific evidence to solving practical challenges, drawing on practical experience to strengthen theory building, or otherwise bridging theory and practice in education or professions (Posner 2009). Concerning research collaboration, the question is rather about suitable competencies to succeed in boundary work between science and practice (Rosbach 2012). At the individual level, this refers to the complementary set of skills discussed above. They all contribute to operating in the nexus between research and practice in a supportive, collegial partnership (Macduff and Netting 2000). The organizational competency, in turn, refers to ‘repeatable, learning-based and therefore non-random ability to sustain the coordinated deployment of assets and resources’ (Freiling 2004, p. 30). In this case, it means the institutionalized practices that enable organizations to utilize research collaboration in achieving their goals.

### 3. Two urban research programmes

The theoretical framework is applied in an empirical analysis of collaboration between academic researchers and municipal practitioners in two Finnish research programmes focusing on urban issues: the Helsinki Metropolitan Region Urban Research Programme (henceforth HMR programme), active in 2009–2018, and the Turku Urban Research Programme (henceforth Turku programme), active from 2009 onwards. In both cases, the programme themes were drawn from the municipalities’ strategic aims and thematically covered all kinds of local development topics, ranging from economic development policy to social well-being, and from sustainable development to good governance. Both mainly involved researchers from social sciences and the humanities. Studies were expected to be based on theoretical frameworks and leading to both academically relevant results and applicable information to the municipalities. Efforts were made to elicit policy advice through collaborative practices, which we will analyse in detail here. Both programmes stand out internationally as ambitious research-based city-university initiatives grounded in systemic knowledge sharing and collaboration in multi-actor networks.

The Finnish municipalities, especially the large cities, are strong actors in all kinds of local development issues. Their position is based on self-government with democratic decision-making and the right to levy taxes, but also broad responsibilities, including providing statutory basic services to their residents. The municipal management is divided into political and professional sides. The political decision-makers consider important that the preparatory texts are based on trustworthy information (Niiranen, Joensuu and Martikainen 2013, p. 58). Most municipal officials consider researched information as relevant and factual, although their following of research is usually sporadic. In the decision-making process, the key persons are those who prepare the proposal texts for the decision-makers. Ideally, these key persons can form a functioning link to support the knowledge flow from the academic world and back—if they are willing to do so. Hence, a pracademic in this position can increase research impact considerably, whereas a

practitioner with a hostile attitude to academic work or lacking competencies may block it (Askim 2007; Niiranen, Joensuu and Martikainen 2013). Policy makers and practitioners with a high level of education or personal experience in research work are generally the ones most willing to apply research results, but overall willingness and attitudes vary between sectors and individuals (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007, pp. 72–73).

In Helsinki Metropolitan Region, urban research collaboration has a long tradition. The City of Helsinki has had its own urban research unit since the 1980s, and pronounced university collaboration since the early 1990s. Helsinki and other municipalities involved in the initiative—Espoo, Vantaa, and Lahti—have collaborated in funding academic urban research from 1999, when 15 new co-funded professorships specializing in urban research in various disciplines were established at the University of Helsinki and the Helsinki University of Technology (now Aalto University). The professorships had a coordinating office, held first by the research director of urban studies (resembling the knowledge brokerage idea), but later downgraded into a less demanding coordinator position. By the end of the 2000s, most professorships were converted into permanent positions funded by the universities themselves, and the municipal co-funding was shifted to research projects. This marked the start of the HMR programme in 2009 (Jaakola and Majander 2009). In addition to the HMR programme, the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa also had their own urban research and statistics offices all along. The HMR programme lasted until 2018, when it was replaced by the Helsinki Institute of Urban Studies established at the University of Helsinki (in co-operation with Aalto University) with collaborative funding from the same HMR municipalities.

In Turku, certain professors who had followed the developments of the HMR programme proposed a similar collaboration with the municipality. In 2008, the then-mayor acknowledged the opportunity and preparations began. The first programme document, which reported what sort of co-operation the municipality and the local universities had had and might have, was accepted in 2009, and a jointly appointed research director was recruited to lead and develop the programme. Turku had a small statistics office but, unlike the HMR municipalities, no in-house researchers. Urban research was quite widely represented at two local universities, yet in a marginal position within most disciplines aside from the geography and history departments. The new research programme marked a considerable shift in recognition of this specialization and led to Turku being another multidisciplinary centre of urban research in Finland during the 2010s. The programme is currently in its third period (2019–2023).

The partners of the HMR programme were the University of Helsinki, Aalto University (2009–2014) and Hanken the Swedish Business School, together with eight universities of applied sciences, four municipalities (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, and Lahti), and two ministries (Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Finance). Each partner was represented in the programme steering group, which made all the principal and operative decisions. The universities were represented by professors and the applied universities by leading teachers from the relevant fields, the municipalities by the heads of their research units or other people experienced in university collaboration, and the ministries by senior specialists in urban and regional policy. The programme had a full-time coordinator responsible for practical matters. Each funded research project had a steering group consisting of selected experts from each participating municipality. The HMR programme's annual budget was 850,000€,

funded by the municipalities (50%) and the universities and applied universities (50%), each relative to their size. The ministries' role was limited to raising the status of the collaboration and improving uptake of the results in national urban policy.

The partners of the Turku programme were the City of Turku (municipality), the University of Turku, and Åbo Akademi University. In addition, the West-Finland Housing Association of Public Utility partnered in research funding competitions, supporting housing research. The programme had a high-profile steering group, including the mayor, the rectors of both universities, some leading officials from the municipality, and four university professors representing relevant fields. The research director assigned by the universities and the municipality together acted as the operational manager, whose tasks included those of a knowledge broker. Each funded project had either a steering group, consisting of select experts from the central and sector administrations, or an expert contact person in the case of small projects. The annual programme funding was 750,000€ in 2017 (the City of Turku's share being 67%) and 830,000€ in 2018 (the City of Turku's share being 58%).

#### 4. Materials and methods

The research material was collected in external evaluations of the two urban research programmes, which were conducted by the authors of this article in two separate evaluation processes (Ruoppila and Kalliomäki 2017; Airaksinen 2018). In both cases, these analyses focused on the functioning of the collaboration between researchers and practitioners, with the views of both sides being considered, yet emphasizing knowledge transfer to the municipal side as crucial for the programmes' perceived benefit. The decision to analytically concentrate even more on the practitioners' side was made later for research purposes in response to the gap identified in the literature. The overall productivity of the programmes, including academic publications produced, was not analysed.

The HMR data were collected in 2017 (concerning the years 2015–2017) and the Turku data in 2018 (concerning the years 2015–2018). The latter Turku data collection was able to apply the HMR evaluation's framework and interview questions, which enabled the combination of anonymized materials later for research purposes. The core materials include interviews of academics and practitioners (10 in the HMR and 21 in Turku). In the HMR, data were also collected with open-ended questions sent by e-mail to all principal investigators (11 of 14 responded) and all research project steering group members (11 of 48 responded) of the projects running in 2015–2016. The already completed projects were chosen in order to reflect the experiences during all phases. The interviews, as well as the e-mailed questionnaires (in a limited manner), dealt with the parties and recurrence of interaction; practitioners' participation and roles in different phases of research projects; possibilities to influence the direction of research; the nature and scope of collaboration; and the type of knowledge exchanged and co-produced, as well as ways of disseminating research results. Furthermore, the benefits, challenges, and experienced value of research collaboration (at both the project and programme levels) were elaborated on, along with the relevance and applicability of research results in relation to practitioners' daily work. The secondary data included the programme documents, research project reports, short research communications or briefings of the results, and other relevant policy documents.







translators' had some background in research work. With their will and skills, the chances increased for the insights to travel to decision-making, while participating in the same steering groups could be an essential learning experience for their peers. Overall, the experiences certainly varied in both programmes, but if 'just somebody' was nominated, the odds were not good. An interesting detail was that those interviewees who were critical of the limited applicability of the results seemed to expect readily formulated solutions or straightforward policy recommendations from researchers. In other words, they did not acknowledge their own part in the collaborative process. In Turku, where it was carried out, knowledge-brokering was highlighted as an additional supportive factor in collaboratively elaborating the practical significance of the results.

## 6. Discussion

This article contributes to the ongoing debate on productive interactions in collaborative research by addressing especially the research users' side, drawing the attention to the pracademic competencies required, and elaborating on the 'blind spot' that these two imply in evaluation theory and practice. This stands in contrast with the majority of prior studies, which adapt to the prevailing evaluation methodologies' relatively one-sided approach to societal impact evaluation and focus on the researchers. The article develops the recent suggestion by [Sivertsen and Meijer \(2020\)](#) that societal impact should rather be considered as 'normal' interactive processes between researchers and practitioners, preferably rooted in organizational practices. This means actions aimed at creating, exchanging, and making use of new knowledge according to the purposes of those organizations, learning together from this process and improving it ([Sivertsen and Meijer 2020](#), p. 68). Productive interactions are a two-way street, not only providing benefit to researchers from a contextual understanding, but also allowing practitioners to feed insights into theory-building or analytical choices ([Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela 2020](#)).

To analyse (in-person, primary) productive interactions in two research programmes and the projects they comprise, we applied [Mauser et al.'s \(2013\)](#) phasing that differentiates between co-design, co-production, and co-dissemination. While the efforts in evaluating the societal impact of research are moving away from the linear presentations and models, the differentiation was utilized as an analytical tool to scrutinize the different phase-based practices along collaborative research processes. In reality, these phase-based practices are intertwined and fluctuate depending on the nature of individual research projects.

Instead of analysing who is more or less involved in each phase, or in what role, we contributed by identifying the boundary work—as we call the tackling of the demarcation between academic research and applying its results or insights in each phase—as well as iteration on its societal relevance. In co-design, there is concentration on joint framing of research themes and collaborative processes, in co-production sparring of a research project vis-à-vis its possible practical relevance, and in co-dissemination joint recognition of and reflection on the applicability of the results and identifying further impact pathways (see [Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela 2020](#)) as well as research topics. Altogether, a key constituent of boundary work is mutual sparring throughout the research programme and its discrete research projects.

The scientific community should certainly remain responsible for the academic research, yet an iterative and reflective learning process is needed to consider the implications of research on practice—or the other way round. We agree with [Morton \(2015a, b\)](#) on the important role of research users in creating an impact, but unlike her we underline the significance of what she calls 'research uptake' already when the research process is ongoing. We argue that in the context of strategic research programmes and the like, the phases of co-design, co-production, and co-dissemination should be understood as a continuum of involvement, which may contribute to an understanding of the research utilization possibilities and ways to leverage societal impact. This finding has, in our view, to date lacked the attention it deserves in the discussion on productive interactions. Unsurprisingly, the opportunity to engage in boundary work enabling enlightening discussions on ideas and results was also considered valuable by researchers (see also [Gorman 2010](#); [Alvesson and Sandberg 2011](#)).

To be sure, the above standpoint requires considering societal actor involvement as a substantial component, not a token activity in research collaboration ([de Jong, Wardenaar, and Horlings 2016a](#)). It also presumes practitioners' favourable attitudes, which cannot be taken for granted ([Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007](#); [Fobé and Brans 2013](#)), as seen in the troubles of the HMR programme revealed in this study. It also requires competencies to collaborate and the ability to anticipate or even imagine possible benefits, which, in turn, can influence the co-dissemination efforts. The introduced concept 'pracademic competencies' refers to the needed skills and abilities of practitioners to successfully operate in the science-society interface. The empirical analyses of the two urban research programmes showed how during the co-design phase such competencies involved recognition and communication of knowledge interests, and during the co-production phase understanding of knowledge formation and recognition of the relevancy and applicability of insights, with the latter also being emphasized during the co-dissemination phase.

Importantly, our analysis—especially regarding the Turku programme—highlights perceived learning of pracademic competencies not only at the individual level but also organizationally as a result of staff participation in systemized collaborative research processes. The results show how the top management thought that Turku had significantly developed the municipal organization's capacity to utilize research collaboration in knowledge-based management and decision-making. It is an example of how iterative boundary work between academics and practitioners has increased the societal relevance of research. While the HMR programme had similar effects on individual practitioners' competences, the organizational-level effects were not emphasized, presumably because of the programme's detached position from the individual municipalities but also because most of the municipalities already had some practices of research collaboration in place. Under these circumstances, the programme steering board's grip became overwhelming. In the Turku programme, not only co-production but also co-dissemination was taken care of by the project steering groups in a more decentralized manner. Another major factor was the organizational difference that the Turku programme applied the knowledge brokerage model ([Meyer 2010](#); [Joas and Theobald 2013](#)) while the HMR programme did not. The results emphasize the importance of the knowledge broker in planning, establishing, negotiating, and strengthening collaboration, including establishing a system regarding organizational responsibilities (e.g. the roles of the programme

steering board and the project steering groups), especially on the municipal side. The knowledge broker also acted as a programme level representative in the project steering groups, whose members were generally not connected to programme level activities. The main differences of the programmes are shown in Figure 1. The difference in their perceived success is reflected in the cancelling of the HMR programme after two terms (and replacing it with another kind of collaborative practice) and the continuation of the Turku one, now in its third term.

As to the research policy and evaluation implications, coming back to Sivertsen and Meijer’s (2020) recommendation to improve regular interaction, these results draw attention to the required efforts of the organizations on the practitioners’ side, alongside those of the research organizations. We suggest employing funding and organizational models requiring regular interaction between the researchers and the practitioners. Neither of these are new measures, as they are regularly applied in strategic research programmes (e.g. Gross and Stauffacher 2014). The blind spot, however, concerns the competencies of the practitioners involved, that is, the pracademic competencies. While most of these people have academic degrees, it is not necessarily enough for succeeding in roles that are crucial for research impact. There, additional measures are needed.

Active collaboration can be steered through research funding that accompanies set goals and evaluation requirements for interaction and learning between the researchers and the practitioners. The project steering groups are a common tool to address this matter, but there is great variety in their perceived role or functionality, both of which can be revised. Of the two programmes analysed, both applied steering group requirements, but the Turku practice also involved distributed instructions about the steering group work goals at different phases of a research project. This practice might be extended to include the evaluation of learning and competence development along the collaborative research process. Another possible organizational measure is implementation of the knowledge brokerage model, whether as an individual professional employed by the programme (as was the case in the Turku programme) or as an agency hired to carry out specific tasks. Respectively, evaluation

of the results of the brokerage tasks and practices may follow. Our results confirm that knowledge brokerage may contribute significantly in supporting collaboration across two or more institutions with different purposes and also (at least partially) different knowledge interests. As to their implementation, we do not recommend full outsourcing, as the organizational pracademic competencies are gained only through commitment (i.e. the practitioners’ involvement in all phases of the collaboration, even if facilitated by the broker).

Our research suggests that the research results are generally more likely to get applied if the practitioners have been involved early on in the collaborative process in iterative discussions regarding their relevance and applicability. However, this also requires their own further consideration of the implications and referring to the results within (and beyond) their organizations. This is a crucial matter for the productiveness of the interaction becoming fulfilled (Spaapen et al. 2012). Hence, the research policy question is how the practitioners can be supported in collaboration, and how their learning, enforcing the impact, can be evaluated ex-ante or ex-post. Most important is how their pracademic competencies can be strengthened in dealing with the research projects. Should it be, for instance, voluntary continuing education provided by the research funders, the universities, or the research programmes for those involved, impact analysis included.

### 7. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to contribute to the ongoing debates on societal impact by further developing both conceptual and operational analysis of productive interactions, scrutinizing especially the practitioners’ side in collaborative research settings. The full potential of the productive interactions concept has not been made use of, due to the prevailing impact evaluation perspective overemphasizing the role of researchers in collaboration. We contribute to the debate by offering nuanced qualitative understanding through a theoretical framework focusing on phases, boundary work, and pracademic competencies related to productive interactions. Based on an empirical examination of two Finnish urban research programmes, we highlight the important role of research users for productive interactions, and argue that practitioners’ competencies in leveraging societal impact—the pracademic competencies—need to be better addressed by policies seeking to support and evaluate the societal impact of research.

The results offer interesting insights for the wider international responsible research and innovation community on institutionalized collaboration to support and ‘normalise’ (see Sivertsen and Meijer, 2020) productive interactions as part of everyday organizational processes, thus expanding the scope of competence building from research to the public policy domain. Sivertsen and Meijer (2020, p. 68) call for pronounced emphasis ‘on the real and normal organizational level interaction according to the aims and purposes on both sides’. Our article has taken a step in this direction by broadening understanding of the practitioners’ role in the process and showing the value of institutionalized collaboration and organizational measures that contribute to the strengthening of pracademic competencies, leading to more efficient research utilization. Future research should seek to obtain detailed understanding of the pracademic competencies needed and the appropriate research policy and evaluation measures to address them.

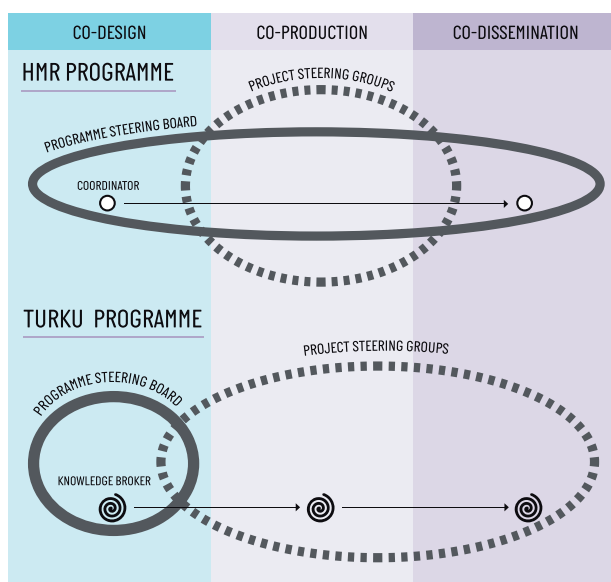


Figure 1. The main differences between the HMR and the Turku programmes.

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