

“There is no one jacket which can fit all”

Managing institutional challenges in higher education development cooperation projects in East Africa

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Abstract

Recognizing that societies are increasingly knowledge-intensive, development cooperation funds are increasingly being directed towards higher education development cooperation (HEDC) projects. Because these projects involve countries with diverse institutional environments, challenges often arise. Yet, and despite the increased importance of HEDC projects, there currently is little knowledge of how institutional differences lead to challenges, and how these challenges can be managed. I therefore aim to contribute to bridging this gap.

To do this, I study the institutional challenges inherent to HEDC projects between Finnish and East African HEIs, and the management practices for overcoming these challenges. Additionally, this thesis seeks to uncover whether management practices evolve over the life of a project, and if so, how. To broadly frame this pressing practical problem, an institutional theory lens is used. Importantly though, extant institutional perspectives are of little applicability to HEDC projects.

I conducted the empirical part of this study as a qualitative multiple case study, which uses the semi-structured interview as its primary method of inquiry. This thesis examines four different HEDC projects administrated by the Finnish Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) programme. By comparing and contrasting across these cases, consistent findings and actionable insights were induced.

As the main findings, I identified six main institutional challenge areas affecting HEDC cooperation between Finnish and East African partner HEIs. The identified institutional challenges and associated management practice themes are the following: i) communicative disconnects, ii) bureaucratic and hierarchical hurdles, iii) unexpected shifts in institutional environments, iv) differences in practices, v) lack of accounting for context, and vi) resource constraints. Based on these empirical findings, this study gives actionable strategies to Finnish HEIs and to HEI ICI.

The findings have practical relevance for future HEDC projects looking to operate in East African contexts. This thesis sheds light on what kind of institutional challenges HEDC projects may meet when working in the region as well as suggest effective management practices to overcome them. Based on the findings, future HEDC projects can have increased preparedness to cope with the emerging challenges in practice. The findings also expand the extant theory to novel research settings.

Keywords higher education, development cooperation, institutional theory

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Nykypäivän tietoyhteiskunnassa kehitysyhteistyömäärärahoja ohjataan enenevässä määrin korkeakoulujen välisiin kehitysyhteistyöprojekteihin. Koska tällaiset projektit usein toteutetaan moninaisista institutionaalisista ympäristöistä tulevien maiden välillä, haasteita usein ilmenee. Siitä huolimatta, että kyseiset projektit ovat merkittäviä, tiedämme tällä hetkellä hyvin vähän millaisia haasteita projektit voivat toiminnassaan kohdata ja kuinka näitä haasteita voidaan hallita. Tutkimuksellani pyrin omalta osaltani vastaamaan näihin kysymyksiin.

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia suomalaisten ja itäafrikkalaisten korkeakoulujen välisille kehitysyhteistyöprojekteille ominaisia institutionaalisia haasteita ja miten näitä haasteita voidaan hallita. Näiden lisäksi pyrin selvittämään, mikäli haasteiden hallintatavat kehittyvät projektien aikana, ja jos ne kehittyvät, pyrin selvittämään miten ne kehittyvät. Tarkastelen tutkimuskysymyksiäni institutionaalisen kirjallisuuden näkökulmasta. On kuitenkin tärkeää huomata, että olemassa olevan kirjallisuuden tarjoamat vastaukset eivät täysin sovellu kehitysyhteistyöprojektien asetelmaan, joten kenttätutkimusta tarvittiin.

Suoritin kenttätutkimuksen laadullisena monitapaustutkimuksena, joka perustuu pääasiallisesti puolistrukturoituihin haastatteluihin. Tutkimuksen kohteena ovat neljä eri korkeakoulujen kehitysyhteistyöprojektia, joita hallinnoi suomalainen *Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument* (HEI ICI) –ohjelma. Eri projektien välinen vertailu ja rinnastaminen tuotti yhtenäisiä sekä käytännönläheisiä löydöksiä.

Empiirisien löydöksiä pohjalta tämä tutkimus tunnisti kuusi pääasiallista teemaa, jotka vaikuttavat suomalaisten ja itäafrikkalaisten korkeakoulujen välisien kehitysyhteistyöprojektien toimintaan. Tunnistetut teemat ovat seuraavat: i) viestinnälliset katkokset, ii) byrokraattiset ja hierarkkiset aidat, iii) yllättävät muutokset institutionaalisessa ympäristössä, iv) erilaiset toimintatavat, v) riittämätön kontekstuaalisten seikkojen huomiointi, sekä vi) rajoitetut resurssit. Näiden teemojen pohjalta tutkimus esittää toimintavalmiita kehitysehdotuksia suomalaisille korkeakouluille ja HEI ICI –ohjelmalle.

Tutkimuslöydöksillä on käytännönläheisiä käyttökohteita korkeakoulujen kehitysyhteistyöprojekteille. Tutkimus valottaa millaisia institutionaalisia haasteita projektit voivat kohdata toimiessaan Itä-Afrikan alueella sekä tarjoaa konkreettisia hallintamenetelmiä niihin vastaamiseksi. Näin ollen tulevilla korkeakoulujen kehitysyhteistyöprojekteilla voi olla paremmat valmiudet toimia Itä-Afrikan kontekstissa. Tutkimus myös laajentaa teoreettisia näkökulmia uusiin tutkimusasetelmiin.

Avainsanat korkeakoulutus, kehitysyhteistyö, institutionaalinen teoria

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TABLE OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Meaning
EARLI	Promoting Education and Research on Energy Efficient Lighting and Renewable Energy for Sustainable Development project
Geo-ICT	Geospatial and ICT capacities in Tanzanian Higher Education Institutions project
HEDC	Higher education development cooperation
HEI	Higher education institution
HEI ICI	Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument
IB	International business
MFA	Ministry for Foreign Affairs
PBL	Strengthening Problem-Based Education in East African Universities project
SHUREA	Strengthening Human Rights Research and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa project
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa

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1 INTRODUCTION

Education plays an essential part in the socio-economic development of all countries (World Economic Forum, 2015). Speaking specifically about the world's developing countries, the World Bank (2017: 1) emphasizes that education contributes "to building a stronger society, ending extreme poverty, and boosting shared prosperity". Education also improves economic productivity, promotes democracy, and boosts diversity (Marginson, 2010). Furthermore, the role of higher education for development is especially crucial in the increasingly knowledge-driven societies in which we live (World Economic Forum, 2015). It is for this reason that both the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2015) have an emphasis on developing higher education.

With the importance of higher education being so clear, official development aid is increasingly directed towards higher education development cooperation (HEDC) projects. HEDC can be defined as cooperative efforts to develop the capabilities of higher education institutions (HEIs). HEDC projects involve activities such as training partner HEI staff, curricula development, and improving research capacity. The projects often take place between at least one HEI or some other development agency from the developed world, and one or more partner HEI in the developing world. For instance, Finnish HEDC projects have often been managed by a single Finnish HEI while having multiple partner HEIs in the developing world. However, there are as many approaches to HEDC projects as there are stakeholders involved in them.

Given the involvement of HEIs from diverse institutional backgrounds, one of the core challenges of HEDC projects is managing the oft-divergent norms of project home and partner country HEIs. The HEIs involved in the projects often are at different stages of development, come from geographically and culturally distant origins, and have different customs and practices, which can all cause challenges to the projects. The challenges can incur, for example, added costs to the HEDC projects (Zaheer, 1995), which deplete project resources and thus constrain project implementation. For this reason, understanding the challenges has dominated the field of international business

(IB) studies for long. For instance, Hofstede's (2001) work on understanding cultural differences forms the very cornerstone of the field.

Despite recognition about the potential institutional mismatches between home and partner country HEIs, few guidelines exist for managing these differences in HEDC settings. As such, project funders, HEIs in the developing world, and HEIs in the developed world are left to 'figure out' how to manage these partnerships on a *de novo* basis each time they are undertaken. This means that resources are used sub-optimally, which in turn can hinder the projects from achieving their goals. Given this gap in understanding, I undertook a study of four different HEDC projects between Finnish and East African HEIs that are administrated by the Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI). Overall, I conducted nine interviews and five days of field observation, for a total of six and a half hours of empirical data. This empirical work was followed by extensive qualitative analysis.

To situate my data and analysis, I employed an institutional theory lens because it suits IB study settings. IB scholars have long considered institutions an important part of the discipline (Tihanyi, Deviney & Pedersen, 2012). This is a natural extension of IB's international focus; institutions vary between countries, which have profound managerial implications. Institutions set "the rules of the game", which managers have to account for (North, 1991). In practice, institutions can prompt strategic responses from multinational enterprises (Jackson & Deeg, 2008) and affect the approaches firms take to international expansion (Kostova, 1999).

Despite the history of institutions in IB research, institutional views in the field remain narrow (Saka-Helmhout & Geppert, 2011). When discussing institutions, IB research has focused on the multinational enterprise and institutions generally viewed as cost-incurring, in terms of resources, or through institutional differences (Jackson & Deeg, 2008). Moreover, the geographical scope has been limited: institutional studies have usually been conducted in contexts other than Africa (Hansen et al., 2017; Van Hoorn & Maseland, 2016). As such, extant literature does not necessarily answer what challenges non-commercial HEDC projects can face in the context of East Africa, and

how the challenges could be managed. Therefore, further studies outside commercial settings and in the East African context are needed.

Using this institutional theory lens, I have identified six main institutional challenges face by HEDC projects in East Africa. The challenges range from resource constraints to difficulties in communication, which in practice are managed through various means by the HEDC projects. A prerequisite for managing these institutional challenges is understanding the partner country's institutional environment so that the management practices suit the context. Based on the findings, I suggest a variety of ways how the HEI ICI programme could take a more active role in supporting individual HEDC projects.

This thesis is laid out as follows. First, I will review extant literature and delve deeper into the practical problem in this study's focus. Second, I will discuss the method choices made, accompanied by data collection and analysis practices employed. Third, I will present my empirical findings and discuss practical implications in light of the literature review. Fourth and finally, I conclude this thesis with a summary of key findings, an evaluation of the research process, and suggest avenues for future researchers to take.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Given this study's practical orientation, this literature review is structured in an unorthodox manner, as I first discuss the study context and the practical problems embedded therein. Second, I will move on to briefly discussing the foundational institutional literature, which is followed by a review on the concept of institutional distance. This literature review concludes with a discussion on existing theoretical frameworks revolving around how institutional differences could be managed from the theory's point of view.

2.1 Introduction to study setting

This introductory section of the literature review has three parts. First, I outline the institutional environment of East Africa. Second, I discuss Finnish HEDC programmes and their guiding principles. Third and last, I will briefly introduce the four HEDC projects the thesis studies.

2.1.1 Institutional environment of East Africa

This thesis focuses on examining HEDC projects in Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan institutional environments. Institutional environments, which depict the overall characteristics of institutions in an area, are unique (Kostova & Roth, 2002) and vary from context to context (Webb et al., 2010). For example, the institutional environments in Finland and the selected East African countries are different. In this section, I will discuss general institutional characteristics not only of the individual countries in focus but also the region and continent. I do this as specific literature focusing on Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda is limited, and research points to broad similarities amongst sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries along several important criteria (Abraham, 2015; Wanasika et al., 2011).

Langevang, Hansen & Rutashobya (2018) and Zoogah, Peng & Woldu (2015) describe institutional environments in SSA as complex, uncertain, and ambiguous. This ambiguity can result in institutional settings to be challenging to navigate. Adding to this,

institutional environments in Africa can change swiftly (Barnard, Cuervo-Cazurra & Manning, 2017; Langevang et al., 2018), further increasing the complexity and uncertainties organizations must manage. For instance, in case of new political appointments, political landscapes can take unexpected turns. As a result, Sriram & Mersha (2010) add that regulatory or political climates in SSA are generally not business-friendly. This also reflects in the low rankings of many SSA countries in the World Bank's (2019) Ease of Doing Business report.

Formal institutional environments in SSA can overall be considered weak (Chikalipah, 2017) and underdeveloped (Manda & Mwakumbo, 2013). In such regions, institutional weaknesses can primarily be found in regulatory aspects (Webb et al., 2010). Indeed, the weak rule of law and extensive government bureaucracy constrain conducting business in SSA (Chikalipah, 2017). In the absence of strong formal institutions, the role of informal ones is likely to be emphasized (Barnard et al., 2017). This means that organizations can use, for example, relationships to compensate for the weak, complex, and uncertain institutional environments characteristic to the region (Batjargal et al., 2013; Ionascu et al., 2004). Therefore, it may be useful for HEDC projects working in East Africa to have access to and relationships with prominent people for being able to achieve project aims instead of entirely relying on formal institutional structures.

This formal institutional weakness also extends to higher education institutions in SSA. For instance, Kruss, Adeoti & Nabudere (2012) state that local universities in SSA can generally be perceived institutionally weak and lacking in university capabilities. While this can be accredited to multiple factors, Banya & Elu (2001) name scarcity of material and human resources as the primary obstacles HEIs in SSA must overcome. These factors contribute to increased uncertainty and complexity, which in turn hinder activities involving SSA universities, including HEDC project implementation.

2.1.2 Finland's development cooperation activities

International higher education cooperation is not a new phenomenon globally (Chan, 2004), and such activities lie at the heart of Finnish foreign policy too. In general, Finnish development cooperation activities are guided by four priorities the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) has set for all official development cooperation activities to

address (Um.fi, 2019). The priorities highlight for instance the socioeconomic impacts investing into education can have for developing countries, as discussed earlier. The four priorities are:

- I. The rights and status of women and girls
- II. The growth of developing countries' economies to generate more jobs, livelihoods, and well-being
- III. Democratic and better-functioning societies
- IV. Food security, access to water and energy, and sustainable use of natural resources

Following these guidelines, Finnish HEDC activities currently revolve around the Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) programme. HEI ICI aims to enhance higher education provision in the developing world through HEDC projects between Finnish and developing country HEIs (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019a), and to "strengthen higher education institutions in developing countries by enhancing administrative, field-specific, methodological and pedagogical capacity" (Reinikka, Niemi & Tulivuori, 2018: 39).

The vague HEI ICI programme objectives leave room for individual HEDC projects to maneuver. This has reflected on the number of approaches HEDC projects have decided to employ; the approaches include establishing new master's programmes, curriculum design and reform, introducing active and interactive teaching methods, enhancing the capacity of existing academics, and developing university-industry linkages (Salmi et al., 2014), to name a few. This wide array of different approaches necessitates examining projects on a practical level, because institutional challenges vary between the projects. For example, if one HEDC project tries to establish new master's programmes, and another seeks to cooperate with industry stakeholders, the institutional challenges they face are likely to be different.

2.1.3 Introduction to HEDC projects in focus

This thesis studies four different Finnish HEDC projects. The projects are called PBL East Africa, EARLI, SHUREA, and Geo-ICT. The studied projects are summarized in Table 1 below, which is followed by a more thorough introduction of the individual projects.

Table 1: Summary of the HEDC projects studied.

Project name	Project lead	Project partners	Project goal(s)
PBL East Africa	Aalto University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University of Nairobi (Kenya) Makarere University (Uganda) University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) 	Develop best practices in problem-based learning
EARLI	Aalto University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) Eduardo Mondlane University (Mozambique) Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia) 	Develop technical expertise on energy-efficient lighting
SHUREA	Åbo Akademi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University of Nairobi (Kenya) Makarere University (Uganda) Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia) University of Pretoria (South Africa) 	Improve capacity to conduct human rights research
Geo-ICT	University of Turku	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) Ardhi University (Tanzania) State University of Zanzibar (Tanzania) Sokoine University of Agriculture (Tanzania) 	Improve the quality of higher education and research environment on geospatial-ICT

First, PBL East Africa, or The Strengthening Problem-Based Education in East African Universities, is a project led by Aalto University. The project seeks to develop best practices in problem-based learning as a joint initiative between partner universities: the University of Nairobi in Kenya, Makerere University in Uganda, and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019b). Through the implementation of problem-based education, PBL East Africa looks to build local capacity to address societal challenges. In practice, the project organizes training sessions for staff at partner HEIs. It also brings together Finnish and East African students and faculty to work on societal challenges identified by the partners, for example.

Second, Promoting Education and Research on Energy Efficient Lighting and Renewable Energy for Sustainable Development (EARLI) is another project managed by Aalto University. The project partners are the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique, and Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. EARLI is based on developing technical expertise on energy-efficient lighting at the partner universities (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019b). The project activities include setting up facilities at partner HEIs for energy-efficient lighting development, building partner HEI capacity and expertise on the subject, as well as connecting partner HEIs with non-academic actors, for instance.

Third, Strengthening Human Rights Research and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, or SHUREA in short, is a project led by Åbo Akademi. SHUREA aims to improve the capacity to conduct human rights research and teaching in partner universities (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019b). In practice, the project organizes events that reach beyond academic circles and supports the dissemination of human rights research, among other things. The partner universities include the University of Pretoria in South Africa, the University of Nairobi in Kenya, Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, and Makerere University in Uganda.

Fourth, the Geo-ICT project run by the University of Turku aims to improve higher education and research environment quality in the field of geospatial-ICT (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019b). The project reviews partner HEI curricula and organizes workshops for its partners, for instance, to fulfill its goals. Unlike other projects

studied in this thesis, Geospatial and ICT capacities in Tanzanian Higher Education Institutions project runs only in one country. The project cooperates with four local universities in Tanzania: University of Dar es Salaam, Ardhi University, State University of Zanzibar, and the Sokoine University of Agriculture.

2.2 Institutional theory

Institutions can be defined as the rules of the game (North, 1991). North (1991: 97) describes institutions in more detail as “humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction”. Indeed, institutions are inherently social structures formed through social understandings and interpretations (Suddaby et al., 2010). Complementing these views, Scott (2001: 49) defines institutions as “multifaceted, durable social structures, made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources”. Institutions set the socially acceptable boundaries within which we operate and to which we must adhere.

These definitions highlight the multidimensionality of institutions and institutional issues, which is critical considering the phenomenon under study in this thesis (Sutton et al., 2015). Moreover, since this thesis is practically oriented and exploratory in nature, the broad content of institutional theory (Ionascu, Meyer & Erstin, 2004) is a generative starting point. The theory is covered from two primary angles: from those of informal and formal institutions (North, 1991), and the three pillar framework (Scott, 2001), which I introduce next in respective order.

2.2.1 Formal and informal institutions

Institutions can be divided into two categories: formal and informal ones (North, 1991). The informal constraints, as North (1991) puts it, encompass sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct. Similarly, DiMaggio & Powell (1983) see the informal institutions to refer to the beliefs and value systems in a society. Informal institutions can, therefore, be considered implicit and intangible. Contrastingly, formal institutions comprise explicit institutions one can see and interact with, such as the judicial system or

laws and regulations (North, 1991). Organizations must play by the rules informal and formal institutions set or else repercussions are likely to follow (Scott, 2001), which can manifest as losing organizational legitimacy in the eyes of others, for example.

While North (1991) divides institutions into two categories, institutional issues are interrelated and interdependent of each other (Jackson & Deeg, 2008). For instance, the implicit thought processes people have can influence the cooperation between HEDC project parties. If the project parties have vastly divergent views on higher education provision, for example, disputes are likely to follow, which in turn can affect HEDC project practicalities.

2.2.2 Three pillars of institutions

The three pillar framework consists of three pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive ones (Scott, 2001), of which every institution consists (Scott, 2005). First, the regulative pillar refers to rule-setting, monitoring conformance, and enforcing order by either rewarding or punishing certain behaviors (Scott, 2001). The regulative pillar, therefore, sets the explicit legal and regulatory frames within which organizations must operate. In this study's setting, the regulative pillar can manifest as university-level guidelines, for example. Being aware of these explicit structures is relatively easy for their precise nature (Scott, 2001), and hence regulative pillar usually poses few difficulties for organizations (Sutton et al., 2015); one either follows regulations or does not. This, however, does not mean that challenges cannot spring from regulative issues (Shams & Huisman, 2012). For instance, challenges can arise if the rules and regulations partner HEIs have a conflict with each other. In more detail, misalignment of partner HEI and HEI ICI programme financial regulations in obtaining project resources, for example, can cause friction between project parties.

Second, normative pillar comprises norms defined as the “legitimate means to pursue valued ends”, and values, which determine what outcomes are regarded desirable (Scott, 2001: 55). In other words, the normative pillar sets the means to pursue valued ends. The pillar has clear implications for organizations and HEDC projects since it determines organizational goals and objectives and the ways through which to achieve them (Xu & Shenkar, 2002). In practice, if these goals and objectives between

organizations are misaligned, conflicts are likely to ensue. If, for example, an HEDC project was aiming to introduce new courses on a subject, but the East African partner HEI did not see any value in such courses in the first place, the aim is likely not adequately achieved.

Third, the cultural-cognitive (or just cognitive) pillar refers to the “shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made”, and is based on shared understanding, common beliefs, and shared logics that all influence one’s behaviour (Scott, 2001: 57). To illustrate, time conceptions between Finnish and East African people may differ, which may pose challenges for HEDC projects. The different time conceptions between project parties may cause delays or lead to scheduling issues due to prioritizing it in varied ways; while the other side might consider a task needing immediate action, the other might perceive it differently. Since the cultural-cognitive and normative pillars are based on such deeply ingrained and taken for granted assumptions, these informal institutional pillars are complicated to coordinate and manage (Peng, 2003), if compared to the explicit and formal regulative pillar. To illustrate, changing deeply ingrained habits can be slow compared to introducing a new course at an East African partner HEI.

Managing institutions can overall be difficult. The pillars are interrelated, may not be aligned with each other, and so undermine each other (Scott, 2005). As an everyday example, walking across a street on red lights is generally not perceived as normatively wrong, while it still is prohibited regulatory-wise. Institutional management practices are also sensitive to the context and institutional environment. For example, according to Sutton et al. (2015) and Kostova & Zaheer (1999), challenges related to formal institutions (i.e., the regulatory pillar) are often less likely to emerge than to informal institutions (i.e., the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars). Moreover, not every institution affects each organization similarly (Sutton et al., 2015), which highlights the need to examine HEDC projects in a hands-on fashion.

2.3 Institutional distance

In essence, institutional friction arises when an organization operates in a foreign setting, and the organization is unfamiliar with the target country's institutional environment, and the target country organizations unacquainted with the organization's institutional conceptions in turn (Webb et al., 2010). Because the practices of an organization are influenced by the institutional environment in which they operate (Kostova, 1999) and institutions are organization- and context-sensitive (Scott, 2001; Jackson & Deeg, 2008; Mair, Martí & Ventresca 2012; Sutton et al., 2015), understanding the institutional environments organizations operate in is crucial.

This thesis approaches understanding different institutional environments from the point of view of the institutional distance. Institutional distance refers to the differences between institutional environments of two areas, and it measures the differences in terms of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive aspects (Kostova 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2002). The bigger the differences are in terms of the three pillars, the bigger the institutional distance (Kostova, 1999). Institutional environments differ regarding their laws, language, and what kind of behaviours are seen proper in what kind of instances (Sutton et al., 2015), for example. In HEDC settings in particular, institutional distance can have far-reaching implications ranging from differences in regulatory requirements to communication practices. For its general applicability, institutional distance is a useful tool for approaching such settings (Ionascu et al., 2004).

Kostova's (1999) main argument is that the bigger the institutional distance, the more issues are likely to appear. In HEDC project settings, challenges may arise when the projects have to balance between the regulative institutions of their home and host countries and HEIs (Shams & Huisman, 2012). The further apart from each other and the deeper the differences are (Phillips, Tracey & Karra, 2009), the more issues have to be addressed. Indeed, as the distance grows, the more one must manage regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive variables (Ionascu et al., 2004). This, in turn, discourages organizations from engaging in activities in institutionally distant environments (Phillips et al., 2009). Operating in institutionally remote environments can incur added costs for organizations or deplete their resources (Jackson & Deeg, 2008),

which in for-profit settings understandably discourage organizations from investing in such activities. However, this does not apply straight to the context of HEDC projects; in its nature, development cooperation aims at different goals than mere profit generation.

Indeed, these conceptualizations do not fully explain how and why HEDC projects are undertaken. The public sector nature of HEDC projects, as well as the fact that development cooperation usually takes place between more and less developed countries, does not wholly sit well with the conceptualization of institutional distance. In practical terms, what extant theory would suggest is that HEDC projects would take place between Finland and Sweden rather than between Finland and Tanzania, for example, which does not make sense from a developmental standpoint. Next, how institutional distance could be managed is discussed.

2.4 Managing institutional distance

Organizations have to be aware of and address their surrounding institutional environments (Oliver, 1991), which is especially important in East African settings. The swiftly changing, uncertain, and complex institutional environments characteristic to East Africa necessitate organizations to have the ability to respond to their institutional contexts. Not only are the institutional environments in East Africa rapidly changing, but HEDC projects must balance multiple demands and interests. The projects have to make sure that the funder's criteria are met, home HEI's guidelines adhered to, partner HEI's policies followed, and host institutional environments accounted for, to name a few. These factors necessitate organizations and HEDC projects to consider and manage institutional differences.

Essentially, there are two different approaches that organizations can take to managing institutional distance. One approach views organizations as active actors able to influence their institutional environments and transfer practices from home to host country. At the same time, the other suggests organizations to adapt to host country institutional environments at least to some extent. The active approach is often referred to as institutional entrepreneurship (Phillips et al., 2009), which assumes that

organizations can shape their surrounding institutions (Sutter, Bruton & Chen, 2019) to fit their organizational needs and interests (Ferner, Edwards & Tempel, 2011). However, Suddaby et al. (2010) contest this view by questioning the extent to which organizations can influence their surrounding environments. Furthermore, institutions are slow to change (Langevang et al., 2018), which has implications for HEDC projects. The short three to four-year-long projects do not have much time at their disposal, which hints towards other approaches than institutionally entrepreneurial ones.

The other approach is adapting to the host institutional environment. According to Oliver (1991), having multiple conflicting demands from different constituents, such as HEDC projects do, often nudges organizations to adopt a compromising mindset and balance between the manifold institutional pressures they face. These circumstantial factors would hint towards taking an adapting approach to HEDC project work. Nevertheless, these two different overarching approaches are expanded further in the institutional management framework adapted from Phillips et al. (2009: 341). The framework is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: *A typology of multinational organization host country strategies (adapted from Phillips et al. 2009)*

		Host country institutional uncertainty	
		Low	High
Host country institutional difference	High	<p>Adapt Moderate risk, complexity, effort</p>	<p>Avoid High risk, complexity, effort</p>
	Low	<p>Transfer Low risk, complexity, effort</p>	<p>Hedge Moderate risk, complexity, effort</p>

According to Phillips et al. (2009), there are four distinct approaches to managing institutional distance. The methods are dependent on two variables, namely host country institutional difference, and institutional uncertainty. While the first variable measures what the institutional differences between an organization's home and host countries are, the second one also accounts for how substantial the differences are (Phillips et al., 2009). Because institutional uncertainty positively correlates with institutional distance (Phillips et al., 2009), the two variables combined increase the institutional distance between home and host countries (Kostova, 1999). Therefore, in the settings of HEDC projects, the framework would suggest that institutional distances between Finnish and East African HEIs are high.

Based on this, neither transferring, adapting, nor hedging approaches seem suitable for HEDC projects to take from the theory's point of view. First, according to Phillips et al. (2009), transferring organizational practices can be done when institutional differences and uncertainties are low. These criteria are not satisfied in the context of HEDC projects. The second possibility for organizations to pursue is to adapt their practices to the host country's institutional environment. This option is the most viable in instances of high institutional difference and low uncertainty, which does not suit HEDC settings either. The third alternative, hedging, refers to approaches in which the host country's institutional uncertainty is high, but the difference low. Yet again, this approach does not suit the institutionally distant settings HEDC projects operate in. However, through theoretical lenses, the fourth option of avoiding (Phillips et al., 2009) seems the most suitable approach for HEDC projects to take. In scenarios of avoiding, Phillips et al. (2009) recommend organizations to avoid entering environments with high institutional uncertainties and distance.

Theory and practice can be seen to be misaligned. Looking at the four management approaches from a practical standpoint, adapting to host country environments seem the most promising one for HEDC projects to take. Firstly, transferring practices from a vastly different setting to another can have detrimental effects for organizations (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1998) and lead to putting institutional legitimacy into jeopardy (Shams & Huisman, 2012). Secondly, hedging is not a viable choice either because the institutional differences between Finnish and East African

partner HEIs and countries are high, which conflicts with the foundational assumptions of the typology. Third, Phillips et al. (2009) suggest that HEDC projects should avoid cooperation with Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan partners entirely due to substantial institutional differences and uncertainties. This is not true in HEDC project settings because development projects' purpose is to work in such environments. A stark conflict between theory and practice indeed remains as extant frameworks cannot fully explain how HEDC projects should approach the management of institutional distance.

Another possible institutional distance management mechanism for HEDC projects to use is to set up entirely new institutional logics (Newenkham-Kahindi & Stevens, 2018). Newenkham-Kahindi & Stevens (2018) examine how organizations entering institutionally significantly different countries could overcome associated institutional differences, which would suit HEDC project settings. However, like institutional entrepreneurial activities, this approach is a time-consuming process to undertake (Newenkham-Kahindi & Stevens, 2018; Langevang et al., 2018), especially in instances of introducing new normative or cultural-cognitive institutions. This time factor can limit the viability of taking such an approach in HEDC settings due to the inherently time-constrained nature of the projects.

Nevertheless, the theoretical viewpoints on how to manage institutional distance in HEDC settings do not carry much practical relevance. For example, if HEDC projects were to adapt to host country institutional environments, the theory does not readily answer how the projects should do that in East African institutional settings in practice. There are no single fixes to complex institutional issues (London, 2007), for they do not only vary on country-level (Xu & Shenkar, 2002; Jackson & Deeg, 2008) but also among and within countries too (Kistruck et al., 2011; Zoogah et al., 2015). Moreover, transferring Western-based theories into African contexts can be brought into question because of contextual differences (Barnard et al., 2017; London & Hart, 2004). Therefore, the need for exploratory inquiries such as this thesis exist. Next, the methods choices made in this thesis are discussed.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

In this section of the thesis, I will introduce the methods used for the empirical part of this study. First, I will discuss how the research process was designed and how the process was undertaken. Second, I will expand on my data collection process. Third and final, I will discuss the data analysis practices I adopted.

3.1 Research design

In this thesis, I explore the institutional challenges faced by Finnish HEIs in their development cooperation activities with East African partner HEIs, and how the challenges could be managed in practice. The focus of this study is to provide practical recommendations for HEDC projects. By its nature, this study is exploratory rather than theory testing, which is reflected in the research design choices made.

Research design refers to the process of getting from the initial research questions to determining answers to them (Yin, 2003). In between the start and endpoints, there are numerous steps like data collection and analysis that are dictated by research question formulation, for example (Yin, 2003). This process is best summarized in the below table adapted from Eisenhardt (1989), which describes how I approached the research process.

Table 2: Adaptation of Eisenhardt's (1989: 533) theory-building process

Process step	Application to this thesis
Getting started	Formulating research questions, and covering institutional theory and study setting
Selecting cases	Selecting HEDC projects (cases) within HEI ICI programme (population)
Crafting instruments and protocols	Utilizing multiple sources of data, namely interviews, documentation, and observation
Entering the field	Taking field notes and adjusting methods on the fly as emerging themes and opportunities present themselves
Analyzing data	Analyzing data according to Gioia methodology

Shaping hypotheses	Aggregating across cases and comparing theory with the results of the data analysis
Enfolding literature	Comparing the results with the theory discussed in the literature review
Reaching closure	Theoretical saturation not possible

3.1.1 Adopting qualitative methods

Institutional issues are contextually sensitive, which must be accounted for in the research methodology. Plakoyiannaki et al. (2019) position qualitative research as being sensitive to contextual matters, and thus, I adopted qualitative methods to answer the initial research questions. Besides, Plakoyiannaki et al. (2019) suggest that qualitative research has the potential to have exceptionally high practical relevance in emerging market settings, which also suits the setting of this thesis.

Given the characteristics of East African institutional environments discussed earlier and the exploratory nature of this thesis, flexible research methods are needed to react to unexpectedly emerging themes. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), qualitative methods are purposeful for fulfilling such needs, especially when prior knowledge of the phenomenon under study is modest. This further supports adopting the qualitative tradition for this thesis. Moreover, Gioia, Corley & Hamilton (2012) suggest that qualitative methods are useful for uncovering new concepts, which fits the exploratory orientation of this thesis. Overall, it is no surprise that qualitative research methods have been predominant in institutional studies (Suddaby et al., 2019).

Despite all the positives, qualitative research methods have also been subject to criticism. For one, qualitative research has often been criticized for lacking rigour compared to quantitative tradition (see e.g., Gioia et al., 2012; Yin, 2003; Zalan & Lewis, 2004). Zalan & Lewis (2004) accredit this to poor transparency of the research process. To remedy this, I aim to discuss my research methods and means as transparently and openly as possible.

3.1.2 Adopting multiple case study approach

Within the qualitative tradition, I adopted the multiple case study as the method of inquiry. Yin (2003: 13) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”, which suits the context-sensitivity of institutional issues as well as the exploratory nature of this thesis.

Eisenhardt (1989) and Gibbert, Ruigrok & Wicki (2008) state that case studies can produce novel theoretical contributions, especially in the initial stages of theory development. Case studies also suit examining phenomena in their contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), and therefore often have empirically valid implications (Eisenhardt, 1989). Due to these reasons, case studies often have practical relevance for managers (Gibbert et al., 2008). Having this relevance suit this study’s practical orientation and aims particularly well, which further justifies adopting the approach.

According to Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg (1991: 2), the case study approach can be characterized as “in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon”, a view which is echoed by Eisenhardt (1989). In this thesis, the single setting is understanding the institutional challenges HEDC projects running under the HEI ICI programme face and how the challenges could be managed. Within the single settings using multiple cases is preferable over one (Yin, 2003). This thesis uses four HEDC projects as its cases, which have similar backgrounds yet have different project aims and approaches. The projects are introduced more thoroughly in section 2.1.3. According to Yin (2003), having two or three cases are sufficient, while Eisenhardt (1989) suggests four to ten cases to be enough for having a convincing amount of data. Either way, examining four cases can be seen justifiable.

A common pitfall for case studies is to base research too heavily on empirical evidence leading to overly-complex theories or building too narrow an argument on a single phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). Admittedly, this thesis is heavily based on empirical evidence given its exploratory nature, but at the same time, theory-building is not one of this study’s primary goals. Instead, this thesis is practically oriented and aims

at providing practical recommendations for HEDC projects, which can be reached by adopting the multiple case study approach.

3.2 Data collection

As the starting point for the empirical part of this thesis, I formulated the three following research questions to guide the data collection process:

- I. What are the primary institutional challenges Finnish higher education institutions face in their higher education development cooperation projects in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda?
- II. How can these institutional challenges be managed?
- III. Do these management practices approach over time? If so, how?

Yin (2003) highlights three factors increasing the quality of case study research, which are closely related to the data collection process. The three factors are use of multiple sources of data, creating a case study database, and maintaining chain of evidence. This thesis uses semi-structured interviews as its primary data collection method, which are supplemented with secondary data sources thus satisfying the first criterium. Database for the collected data as well as data analysis purposes was set up, and chain of evidence secured by downloading and saving all documents used in this thesis. Ensuring credible chain of evidence is especially important because a part of the data used in this thesis is from internet sources, which can unexpectedly change or be deleted.

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

In this thesis, the data collection process is based on semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview can be defined as a descriptive interview approach, that “employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” (Adams, 2015: 496, emphasis in original). According to Adams (2015), adopting the semi-structured interview approach is particularly purposeful when follow-up questions are expected to be asked. This corresponds with the view that taking a case

study approach is especially fitting when how and why questions are expected to be asked (Yin, 2003), as well as being able to reach to possibly emerging unexpected themes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, the approach fits the needs of this thesis.

The semi-structured interview can be used to “obtain both retrospective and real-time accounts by those people experiencing the phenomenon” (Gioia et al., 2012: 19), which fits the exploratory nature and practical orientation of this thesis. In such exploratory study settings, Eisenhardt (1989) calls for flexibility in study design for researchers to be able to react to emerging themes. The semi-structured interview method fulfills this need; being semi-structured, the interview approach is flexible by its nature. In practice, the technique allows the researcher to use judgement and go off the interview guide to follow the leads informants give. An illustration of the general interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

In total, nine semi-structured interviews with a total of twelve people were conducted between October 2019 and December 2019. I conducted the interviews both in East Africa and Finland, to gain a more holistic and well-rounded understanding of how the focal issues are perceived at both ends of the HEDC projects. In East Africa, I interviewed five project staff members from partner HEIs in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, and one high ranking administration member from one of the partner HEIs. In Finland, I interviewed four project staff members, each of which represents either PBL East Africa, EARLI, SHUREA, or Geo-ICT, and two HEI ICI programme staff members. This variety in informant background was not planned for per se as the primary logic behind informant selection was access. Hence, the sampling was not optimal but more an outcome of circumstances. Despite the suboptimal sampling, all informants were familiar with the studied projects.

The names and exact roles of the individual informants had to be anonymized amidst concerns of competitive skewing. Finnish HEDC projects compete for the same limited HEI ICI funds, which are granted for three to four years at once. The aim of this thesis is not to skew the competition, favour any individual projects, or make project-specific recommendations for any specific HEDC project. Instead, this thesis aims at building knowledge for all present and future HEDC projects situated in East Africa to

use. The anonymization was done to prevent anyone from discerning which quotes are attached to which informant. The process might lead to a loss in meaning and nuance, but it had to be done to ensure a level playing field for all.

3.2.2 Documentation and observation

This thesis also used other data sources to supplement the interviews because the triangulation of data is a fundamental concern for case studies (Ghauri, 2004). According to Ghauri (2004), triangulation of data refers to using different methods to collect data. The initial idea for carrying out the triangulation in this thesis was to draw on interviews, documentation, and observation as the data collection methods. Of these methods, interviewing was considered the primary data collection method and the two other supplementary. Above all, the supplementary data sources were supposed to be used to verify and validate the primary interview data.

The data triangulation did not go quite as initially planned. While documentation was gathered in the form of governmental, HEI ICI programme, and project-specific documents freely available on the internet, not many were perceived as relevant or applicable for this thesis. Documentation focusing on the institutional challenges HEDC projects face and the associated management practices are, to the best of my knowledge, nonexistent. Inferring meaning from vaguely related documents was not regarded as purposeful for this thesis, given the study's objectives. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the documentation was not undertaken. However, the collected documentation was used the factcheck and support the interview data when applicable.

Observation and informal conversations are the other supplementary data source for this thesis. I was presented the opportunity to travel to East Africa to conduct empirical research. While in the region, I conducted interviews, produced written as well as spoken field notes on what I observed, and kept a daily journal. I also had numerous informal discussions to deepen my understanding of the environment. However, these discussions and field notes are not by any means sufficient to profoundly understand the local institutional intricacies. The exact impact observation had for this thesis is challenging to quantify, but the impact is still recognized.

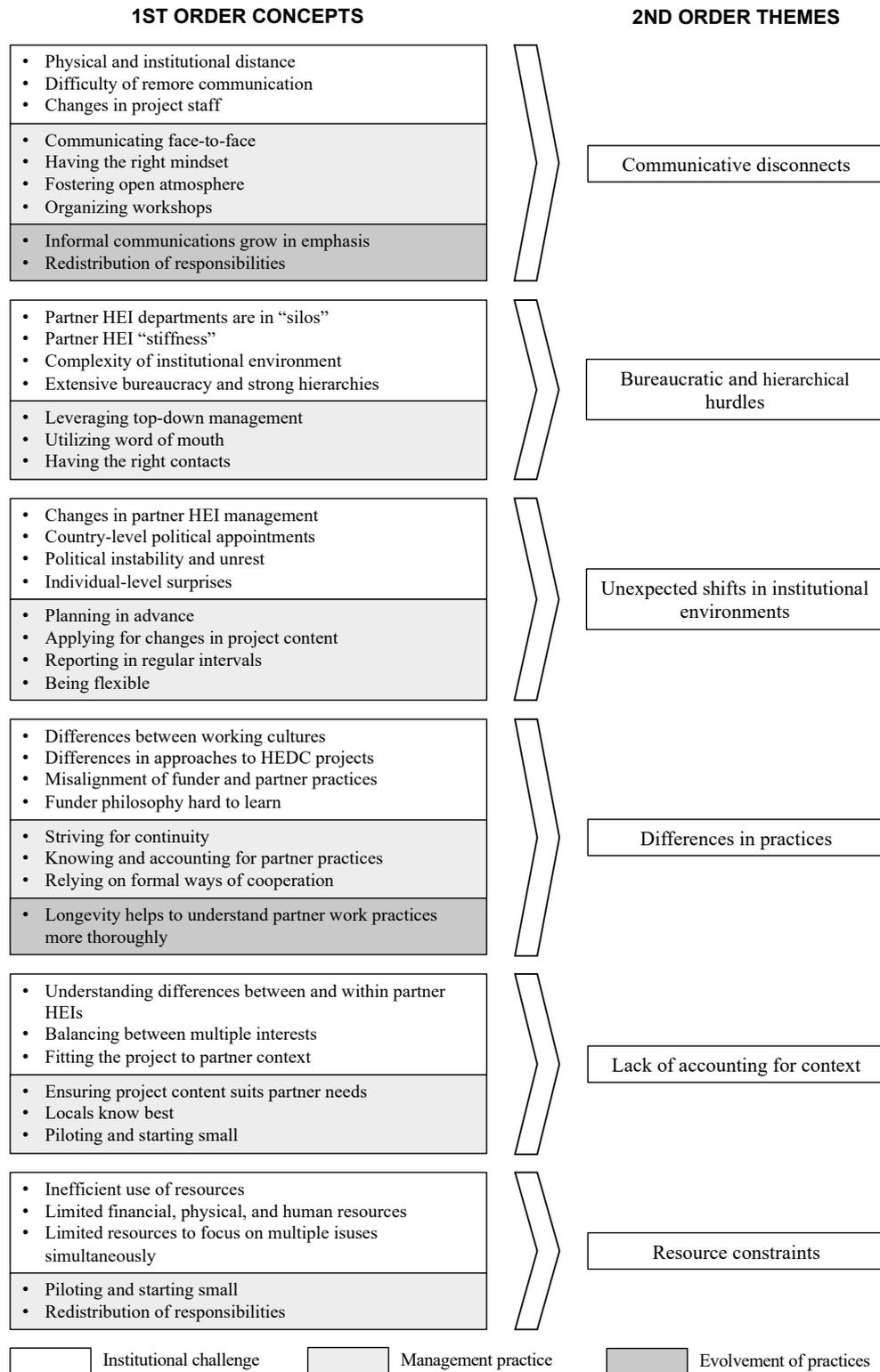
3.3 Data analysis

Before starting the data analysis process, the interviews had to be transcribed. The transcription was done from audio recordings. All nine interviews were transcribed on a word-by-word basis and in their original languages, because language considerations are especially crucial in international business settings in which interviews are often conducted in a language other than one's mother tongue (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019). This consideration applies to this thesis too, and thus the transcribing was done with precision to preserve meaning. Once all interviews were fully transcribed, I browsed through the transcripts separately and made rough notes on my first impressions. Then, I read the transcripts more carefully to have a better overall grasp of the content. After this, the data analysis process started.

I decided to utilize the three-step Gioia methodology to analyze the interview data (Gioia et al., 2012). According to Gioia et al. (2012), the first step of the process is to code the interviews in interviewee-centric terms. Within this frame, I initially coded the interviews according to thematic repetition, surprisingness, correspondence to extant literature, or some other reason that sparked my interest. This first coding round yields "first order concepts" (Gioia et al., 2012).

The second step in Gioia methodology is to organize the first order concepts into "second order themes" according to the similarities and differences between the concepts (Gioia et al., 2012). At this stage, some first order concepts were left out of the analysis as I perceived some irrelevant or unfitting to any thematic area. How the data analysis process was conducted is visualized in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Visualization of the data analysis process (adapted from Gioia et al., 2012)



The six primary themes presented on the right are i) communicative disconnects, ii) bureaucratic and hierarchical hurdles, iii) unexpected shifts in institutional environments, iv) differences in practices, v) lack of accounting for context, and vi) resource constraints. On the left side of the illustration are the colour-coded first order concepts that encompass institutional challenges, associated management practices, as well as the evolution of management practices. What the different first order concepts and second order themes mean are discussed in more detail in the upcoming section 4.

The third step in the Gioia methodology is to produce “aggregate dimensions” (Gioia et al., 2012). However, according to Gioia et al. (2012), this step is optional, depending on study characteristics and objectives. I decided against taking the third step; conceptualizing the institutional challenges faced by the HEDC projects in more abstract terms than the second order themes was not perceived purposeful. The practical relevance might have suffered from further abstraction, bearing in mind the practical orientation of this thesis. In the next section of the thesis, the more empirical findings are discussed.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is laid out to reflect the data visualization presented in section 3.3., with the section structured around the identified second order themes. When each topic is discussed, the institutional challenges related to the theme are identified first, which is then followed by a discussion on the associated management practices. The evolution of the management practices is discussed when applicable. Each theme concludes with a brief discussion on what the practical implications each topic has for the HEI ICI programme are.

Despite the section being structured according to the second order themes, it is essential to bear in mind that the division lines between the different topics fluid. This is due to the inherently complex and interrelated nature of institutions. To make the line of thought more absorbable, I have summarized the main empirical findings and managerial implications in Table 3 below. The summary resembles the data visualization presented in Table 2, but this one also includes suggestions for HEI ICI.

When discussing each of the challenge areas, I will try to communicate the meanings and portray a vivid and transparent (Zalan & Lewis, 2004) picture to the reader of how the informants experienced the phenomena under study. To achieve this, I use quotes. The quotes are not always in their original formats for increased readability and clarity. The editing is done with extreme caution and only to present the quotes in a more digestible form.

Table 3: Summary of main findings and implications for HEI ICI

Challenge area	Challenge	Solution	Implications for HEI ICI
Communicative disconnects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical distance • The difficulty of remote communication • Changes in project staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It all starts with having the “right” mindset • Face-to-face communication helps clarify things • Fostering an open atmosphere encourages communication • Workshops are useful tools for spreading knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because time spent face-to-face is limited, focus on improving remote communications • Should project staff change, compile a starter pack including useful information for the inexperienced staff member to get off to speed faster
Bureaucratic and hierarchical hurdles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner HEI departments are in “silos” • Partner HEI “stiffness” • The complexity of the institutional environments • Extensive bureaucracy and strong hierarchies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In highly hierarchical and bureaucratic environments, leverage top-down management • Utilizing word of mouth helps to spread information across the “silos” • Knowing the right people and having the right contacts help projects maneuver the different environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly build on existing relationships and hence advance continuity • Use the programme’s role to support the projects, e.g., in conflict solving • Engage with partner HEI management on a deeper level
Unexpected shifts in institutional environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in partner HEI management • Country-level political appointments • Political instability and unrest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning helps to prepare for unexpected turns of events • Applying for changes in project content when an unexpected event occurs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess whether the current risk analysis practices meet actual needs • Find reporting synergies across different HEDC programmes for

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual-level surprises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demanding reporting on regular intervals helps keep track of projects • Being flexible is a crucial attribute for any project to have 	<p>a lighter administrative burden for projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work towards increased flexibility to meet project needs
Differences in practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences between working cultures • Differences in approaches to the HEDC projects • Misalignment of funder and partner practices • Funder philosophy hard to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging and adapting to the different partner country and HEI practices, e.g., in financial issues • Striving for continuity, so that the project parties are already familiar with each other's ways of working • Relying on formally agreed-upon ways of cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore what universal HEDC project practices there are, and determine if the programme could align its practices with others to a further extent • Organize a project administration and management training for partners • Ensure formal ways of cooperation
Lack of accounting for context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences between and within partner HEIs • Balancing between multiple interests • Fitting the project to partner contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing project content from a partner-oriented view to meet partners' needs • Utilizing locals' knowledge to follow the local "rules of the game" • Piloting and starting small can be used to probe suitable approaches to each context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with and include partners more closely to project design • Seek ways to increase flexibility for the projects to be able to account for contextual needs more thoroughly • Link HEDC projects with suitable partner contacts to increase continuity

Resource constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inefficient use of resources • Limited financial, material, and human resources • Insufficient resources to focus on multiple projects simultaneously 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloting and starting small can be used to try out different approaches before entirely investing in one approach • Giving project staff more responsibility to determine how resources are used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise how resources are currently being used and who are included in the decision-making • Encourage projects to adopt piloting approaches to use resources more efficiently
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4.1 Communicative disconnects

Communication was seen a challenge in every single interview. The challenges related to communication were named “to likely be the most challenging aspect of cooperation, which definitely has lived up to project expectations”. Informants found communication challenges between Finland and East African partners, but also within partners. The communicative disconnects therefore are manifold.

4.1.1 The challenging remote communications

A core issue causing communicative disconnects is the physical distance. Physical distance sets limitations for communication by limiting the possibilities for in-person contact. As a result of this, projects have had to rely on online communications instead. According to the informants, the online communication methods HEDC projects most often use are email and video calls. These methods, in general, have proven to be challenging due to a plethora of reasons. Regardless of the exact reasons, HEDC projects have fielded various management methods to address the challenges.

The management practices informants have fielded to improve the efficacy and efficiency of remote communications are many. The methods include constantly reminding partners, sending follow-ups on previously discussed, and agreed on issues, and in some instances, even applying pressure was considered a suitable management practice by informants. As an example of these management practices, one informant has used reminders after organizing workshops and sends all material to all workshop participants afterward to ensure the message has been received. Another informant offers another example of follow-upping: “Because emails are not being replied to immediately, sometimes I have to call ‘okay, can you reply to this email’, ‘can you write this report’, or something”. Follow-upping and using different communication channels are considered a practical management tool for ensuring proper information flows by the informants.

The remote communication challenges can also be accredited to limitations in infrastructural capabilities. When remote cooperation was discussed, the discussions were often accompanied by notions such as “I still regard remote cooperation terribly big a

challenge despite us having the technology and all”, or “because computer communications constantly crumble, remote cooperation still remains the biggest challenge”, or “there definitely are technical challenges as a lot of cooperation is conducted online – and some countries’ infrastructure just cannot bear such loads”. One East African HEDC project staff member further illustrates:

On a few occasions, we have had challenges in organizing Skype communications, where the bandwidth and networks sometimes are not very good and it has been difficult to connect with different parties, you know.

The informants stand in unison that the lack of structure and changes in project staff also act as obstacles for communication. Structure, in this instance, refers to agreed-upon and well-established practices and rules on how communication is to be conducted, which, according to informants, should be clarified. Related to structural considerations are changes in project staff. Informants experienced the changes in project staff to cause disruptions in information flows, which can lead to the newly stepped in project staff members to have limited knowledge of project-related practices. In some instances, this has had severe effects for projects if “people that have been on board from the very beginning, you know, and then a sudden change in personnel comes, and we have had to start from the very beginning again”. Having a high project staff turnover is a challenge for HEDC projects, especially given the physical distance and issues related to remote communications. Therefore, the projects need to have protocols in place to manage communication challenges, should the project staff change.

4.1.2 Fostering open atmosphere

Remote communications are still challenging, and effective management practices to overcome these limitations for HEDC projects to use are hard, if not wholly impossible, to come by. The tools at HEDC projects’ disposal can be used in other instances, however. The overarching management practices boil down to the following quote, which compactly summarizes managing the communication challenges:

You will succeed if you have the stamina to negotiate, discuss, wait, and understand cultural differences. You have to understand why something is not going smoothly. There almost always is a rational reason for it, which is not completely understood from either side or can even be fully explained to the other side because of cultural matters.

Having the stamina to delve deep enough into the issues and to determine the root causes of why something is happening lies in the very heart of overcoming communication hurdles - and institutional challenges alike. The informants have consciously tried to foster an open atmosphere in which free communication is being encouraged to advance the achievement of this:

What we have done from the very beginning of the project is that we have tried very actively to create an atmosphere in which everyone would have a low barrier to contact each other and tell about one's challenges and difficulties. It also allows for a very informal and free yet direct exchange of opinions and thoughts on how the project is going.

In practice, an effective way of advancing the achievement of this is in workshop settings. Organizing workshops was highlighted in multiple interviews as an impactful and useful method to foster the open environment. In workshop situations, “you can show concrete examples of how to bring down hierarchical boundaries and express oneself, emotions, and reactions freely”, and effectively spread knowledge on project-related issues: “Of course people are now understanding, they are beginning to understand better as we have had number of workshops and discussions”. Workshops also enable project staff members to stay connected with each other and share what has been happening in their contexts. Finnish informants regarded this improved connection as the “biggest takeaway” workshops have to offer for HEDC projects. The informants continued to credit workshops for advancing the achievement of project goals, thus being of value for everyone involved.

4.1.3 Informal communications

Workshops require participants to be physically present, but the possibilities to do so in HEDC settings are limited. Luckily, open communications can be advanced from afar too. According to the informants, many projects have introduced informal communication channels to lower the barriers to communicate and to foster the open environment. In practice, an often-used method is to communicate via WhatsApp:

At project coordination level, I have tried to set up a low barrier communication channel on WhatsApp which has enabled us to be in constant dialogue with all partners. Using WhatsApp has made it possible for us to speak directly and keep track of what has been happening everywhere.

Interestingly, the use of more informal communication channels like WhatsApp has only become more viable as the projects have progressed. Therefore, adopting WhatsApp as a communication tool can be seen to be a product of evolving management practices, thus contributing to the third research question. The prerequisites to utilize such informal communication channels are for the project parties to be familiar with each other and to “speak the same language”, which as per informants, only comes with time. The following quotes convey the image of informal communication’s usefulness:

As things have progressed, we have been able to find mechanisms through which communication works better. But it has also required people to get familiar with each other. This has enabled us to use WhatsApp messages and engage in more informal communication in general with each other.

When you know the people well enough, you can use WhatsApp, for example, to communicate and keep in touch with partners. There is always a hullabaloo going on. We have groups, photos are being sent, and calls going back and forth all the time. The amount of interaction is simply amazing.

Even though remote communications are challenging, the above accounts present informal interactions and the use of WhatsApp in a positive light. And why should it not: according to informants, communicating openly through informal channels can support learning between partner partners both in Finland and abroad, and so advance the achievement of project objectives. As a result of this peer learning taking place, the division of responsibilities between Finnish project lead and partners can be reconsidered, and often partners are given more responsibility as projects advance, according to the informants.

4.1.4 Importance of face-to-face communication

According to informants, the most critical management practice to overcome communication challenges was to have face-to-face communication. The role face-to-face contact plays for communication, and its multiple use cases were stressed across all interviews. Informants regarded in-person interaction as a foundational piece for successful project implementation because it can be used to resolve conflict and to build mutual understandings between HEDC project parties, for instance. It also effectively clarifies misconceptions and reduces uncertainties associated with project work. The importance and implications of in-person communication are best broken down by the informants themselves:

Even though we are currently having in the middle of climate change discourse, I really regard meeting each other and physical presence highly. It just is so unbelievably important.

So I think before signing the memorandum of understanding, in another project if there would be an opportunity, you'd have to sit down with them: university management, the potential coordinators of the project, and make sure that we have inception meetings which will allow the smooth implementation of the project.

That was a very successful meeting. It enabled us to understand the system and to realize that this people are just playing around with us and it is not that the [project lead and funder] want things to be like this. We managed to clarify everything in the short meeting.

Last year we paid a visit to one of our partners. They had this [event] coming up and I was a bit uncertain of the progress and how things are going. So, we ended up deciding to do a partner visit. -- We had really good discussions while I was there and maybe my visit had some significance in the success of the event.

I have done a couple of additional trips to Africa that were originally not planned for, simply because meeting partners, personally sitting down with them is so important. -- There usually always is some form of misunderstandings behind the challenges, that can only be uncovered when sitting down together at the same table and going through the stuff.

As the above quotes propose, the role of face-to-face communications and the reliance on personal relationships when working in East Africa are in line with extant theoretical perspectives. Barnard et al. (2017) argue that in the absence of strong formal institutions, informal ones are likely to emerge. Similarly, Ionascu et al. (2004) stress the importance of having networks and personal relationships in institutionally uncertain environments (see Phillips et al., 2009) supports the view. To manage institutional challenges, informants were clear that sitting down with partners and having face-to-face discussions is a powerful tool. Therefore, it is recommended for any future project to prepare for having to organize not-planned-for visits to partners, because, in the absence of effective remote communication methods, the importance of in-person communication is emphasized.

4.1.5 Implications for HEI ICI

While the informant regarded being physically present highly, the available time for HEDC projects during which that is possible is limited. For this reason, HEDC projects and HEI ICI programme alike should move their sights away from relying on face-to-face communications to improving remote communication practices instead. Moreover, the on-going climate change discourse gives organizations another rationale for improving remote communications. As organizations are increasingly demanded climate actions from, embracing a proactive stance on the issue is worth considering. Nevertheless, how advancing remote communications should be approached in practice depend on the individual projects.

To illustrate the need for assessing remote communication practices in project-specific terms, let me elaborate. One East African informant said that the remote communication challenges stem from the project's communication practices being too formal. By formality, the informant referred to how communication was conducted: in face-to-face events and workshops. But outside such instances, the informant had noticed communication to be nonexistent. In contrast, another informant working on the same project told me that the current practices suit the project needs fine. This example depicts the intra-project differences that require attention. As a remedy, engaging with project partner staff members and together producing functional remote communication practices should be explored.

Changes in project staff are another communication-related challenge HEI ICI could have a more substantial role to play in solving. The informants acknowledged that changes in project staff were an obstacle for communications because it can lead to project-specific expertise to be lost at partner HEIs. The lost knowledge can force the projects to go back to the beginning to get everyone on the same page again. To prevent this from happening, HEI ICI could introduce an information package readily available for fresh project staff members. This information package could include, for example, general information about HEI ICI's core processes and project management practices. Providing such an information package, in instances of project staff members changing, could help the newly stepped in members get off to speed with less effort.

4.2 Bureaucratic and hierarchical hurdles

Most informants surfaced partner country bureaucracy and hierarchies as an obstacle. Bureaucratic and hierarchical hurdles refer to challenges emerging from institutional distance (Kostova, 1999) between Finnish and East African bureaucratic and hierarchical environments. In this section, bureaucracy and hierarchies are viewed from a structural standpoint. Therefore, section 4.1. falls within the category of formal institutions (North, 1991).

4.2.1 HEI structures and country regulations

Informants were clear that high bureaucracy and current HEI structures caused many delays in project work among the East African informants. As one East African informant described, university departments in East African universities are currently in “silos”. The same informant continued: “[the] most feasible way of introducing [project name redacted] in universities, for now, is to break the silos”. The situation left a Finnish HEDC project staff member wondering: “The challenge is that everyone is just sitting in their rooms, so how can we make the cooperation work?”.

Both accounts acknowledged the issues stemming from how partner HEIs are structured, which was the primary source for delays. According to an East African informant, HEI departments are “highly specialized” and consequently like to “do stuff on their own”. The boundaries and how to overcome them left yet another East African partner wondering:

How can we mainstream [project objective redacted] across very diversified units, when we have some ... of them without practical training sessions? Some of the units without practical training in two years, some in final year? We know there is no one jacket which can fit all.

The first part of the quote highlights that the “siloesd” structure results in differences between the highly specialized units, so obstructing project aims within partner HEIs. This became especially clear when time was discussed. Given the delays stemming from the partner HEI structures and the limited timeframes HEDC projects have, lengthy delays

can have devastating effects on the projects. The impacts are magnified in the multi-stakeholder settings, the studied HEDC projects find themselves in; if delays coincide at each partner HEI, managing the associated challenges can become a strenuous task for the projects to handle.

There is “no one jacket which can fit all” HEIs, HEI departments, or HEDC projects to solve these challenges. According to informants, one aspect contributing to the difficulty of “finding the jacket”, is the complexity of partner HEI and country regulations. In general, East African HEI rules are perceived as “very difficult and complex and so on”, mainly because “there is a lot of bureaucracy in the [partner HEI name redacted] universities that you have to deal with”, as two Finnish informants describe the situation. The universities were also perceived very hierarchical, which increases the institutional distance compared to Finland’s low levels of hierarchy.

Regulatory challenges were not limited to the confines of the partner HEIs. Country-level regulations contribute to the total tally of institutional challenges, as was expected based on the literature review due to institutional environments in East Africa is difficult to navigate (see e.g., Langevang et al., 2018; Zoogah et al., 2015). According to informants, national regulations can be even more severe than university-level rules. As one Finnish informant illustrated: “there are challenges also within the countries, because there are some rules and regulations that you cannot do anything about.” When asking the same informant why, the informant replied, “because all the systems are like this”. This does not portray a very hopeful image of managing the bureaucratic and hierarchical challenges.

4.2.2 Playing by the local rules of the game

Interestingly, starting to manage and overcome the challenges required projects to use the strengths of the partner country and HEI systems into their favour, and play by the rules of the game (North, 1991). In practice, this can mean using the hierarchy and relying on top-down management schemes because “nothing happens until there is someone from the top telling”. In other words, one needs to get top management at partner universities on board with the project. Including senior managers to project work can be done via organizing workshops, for example, as an East African informant illuminates:

So we did reach the highest level, the vice chancellor's office, the deputy vice chancellor for research, ..., so we are kind of all the way to the heads of departments. We organized a workshop when we made the heads of departments and explained to them what this is about and why they should support it. And they actually appreciate it. That is the second thing [for ensuring project implementation], is like the institutional support from different levels.

Ensuring successful HEDC project implementation does not only require engaging partner HEI top management in the projects, but also managers at various levels of the hierarchy. In practice, workshops can be a useful tool for spreading knowledge across the “silos” in partner HEIs and also to different levels of the hierarchy, as the above quote illustrates. This should also reflect on the people invited to the workshops: HEDC projects should ask people relevant to the project from all levels and roles to take part in the workshops. This can help to ensure a sufficient spread of information and thus advance achieving the project goals. Another practical way of engaging with managers at various levels and roles in partner HEIs is to use word of mouth, as described in the following quotes:

The other thing that I think also helped is that when we first picked the cohort of faculty ..., we picked them from different departments. So, when they go back to their departments, they become agents of influence in their own departments.

So, we do have pockets of people in departments that now feel more comfortable and little more authoritative [in implementing the project]. We still have a lot of ground to cover, but through these pockets there are some results you can see in certain departments - including the strategy document of the institution. The information is diffusing and slowly having impact.

The “agents of influence” and “pockets of people” are powerful tools in advancing project objectives. The informants found using relationships and networks a key for spreading knowledge across partner HEI structure. Thus, this factor should be considered

when designing projects. Adopting such a management approach corresponds with extant theory, too. In the absence of strong formal institutions, the role of informal ones is likely emphasized (Barnard et al., 2017), which in practice can manifest as trust in personal networks and relationships (Ionascu et al., 2004). Moreover, the word of mouth approach reflects the mindset of playing by the rules, using structural attributes to one's advantage, and overall taking an adaptive approach (Phillips et al., 2009) to managing institutional challenges in HEDC projects.

Hierarchies can be used to a project's advantage in other ways, such as resolving conflicts. A Finnish informant said that when the project coordinator faced a dispute with a partner HEI colleague, the situation was only resolved after the Finnish project coordinator visited a person "sufficiently high" in the hierarchy and discussed the issue. Similarly, another Finnish project coordinator had difficulties obtaining resources for the project. The situation was overcome after people high in the hierarchy, who have the means to work around the challenges and use regulatory "loopholes", were contacted. The loopholes allowed for securing the resources even though the regulations were not allowing at first. Also, having contacts in political arenas was seen positively correlated with successful project implementation. Thus, having the right connections both inside and outside partner HEIs are an asset for HEDC projects, according to informants.

However, getting hold of suitable people can be tricky since partner HEI structures are complicated and hard to grasp. The complex structures can make it hard to know who handles what, and as a result, whom to contact and how. When asked how to ensure the right people are involved, a Finnish project coordinator suggested a straightforward management technique. As the quote depicts, it does not hurt to contact more people than necessary if it can help to advance the achievement of project goals:

Things will not always happen if you leave it up to the one you send an email to check something with someone. And it is difficult. I have found it important to send the emails to the right people and I have done it so that I simply copy all sorts of people to the email chain, so that the person feeling responsible for the issue surely gets my email.

4.2.3 Formal documentation and experience

Having formal documentation is an important management technique in the East African context. In instances of debates on how a project should be undertaken, basing arguments on agreed-upon official documents is a convincing method for resolving them. “When something is written down in a formal document, it is really, really nice that you can just point out to anyone asking that this is what has been agreed on”, as one informant exemplifies. For the formal documents to have weight in arguments, it is vital to include the partner HEI top management in the decision-making and crafting of project agreements and content. This helps ensure the project aims are formally accepted at the highest levels of HEI hierarchy. Therefore, paying attention to formulating sufficiently specific a formal agreement at the very beginning of projects is advisable. For example, issues related to intellectual property rights have been a constant challenge for projects, as per informants.

Integrally involving top management in HEDC projects helps the projects to solidify foothold at their partner HEIs. According to informants, one also needs to formalize project aims at the partner HEIs. In concrete terms, an HEDC project must work towards including its project objectives in HEI-level strategic documents or curriculum. This institutional support is achieved through utilizing word of mouth, pockets of people, or agents of influence, for instance. Experience also plays a role in managing institutional challenges. As the informants noted, time and experience enable projects to use existing relationships and continue to build on already established foundations, which could have otherwise been unattainable . Therefore, having relationships can also be at least a partial remedy for the common criticism towards HEI ICI projects, as named by informants: the lack of continuity, and the ability to have a longer-term impact..

4.2.4 Implications for HEI ICI

This section identified multiple institutional challenges that stem from the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures at East African partner HEIs and countries. For HEDC projects to start managing these challenges, they should leverage the local rules of the game to their advantage. This could increasingly reflect on the role HEI ICI plays in supporting the projects.

HEI ICI's role as the administrative organization could be increasingly used to support the projects. The informants were clear that top-down management schemes and engaging with HEI top management were beneficial for overcoming disagreements. Because the rules of the game are based on such hierarchical and bureaucratic structures in East Africa compared to Finland, HEI ICI could use its position to help projects resolve the challenges they face by taking a more active role in conflict-solving, if necessary.

Besides, the informants clearly noted the importance of having the partner HEI senior management's support. Currently, HEI ICI requires the partnering HEIs to sign the project agreements at the highest managerial levels but does not expect the top management to be otherwise involved in the projects. Therefore, HEI ICI could devise new ways to include the partner HEIs' senior management more closely in the project work. As a result, this could help the projects overcome the silo structures of the partner HEIs. In practice, HEI ICI could require partner HEI's top management to increasingly use their position in the top to disseminate project-related information across the otherwise diverse and siloed HEI units.

HEI ICI could also use its existing contacts it has formed during earlier programme rounds to connect HEDC projects with apt connections. This would help projects, whether entirely new or more experienced, to continue building upon existing relationships, which in turn would help projects to get off to speed faster. In practice, HEI ICI could support projects already in the planning phases by suggesting the projects suitable partners and people to contact from the regions in which the projects wish to work. By doing so, the projects would have a more stable ground to stand on due to having experienced people involved in the project already from the very beginning, and thus have more favourable conditions to succeed in their projects. Given the limited timeframes, the HEDC projects have, using existing contacts to a further extent would make sense.

4.3 Unexpected shifts in institutional environments

4.3.1 Political appointments at country- and HEI-levels

Institutional environments in East Africa are quickly changing (Barnard et al., 2017), and HEDC projects are not an exception to the rule. In HEDC projects, changes in institutional environments are often related to either shift in university management or rising political tensions. Indeed, political unrest and instability were found as obstacles to project implementation by many informants. The political upheaval can sometimes lead to partner HEI campuses being closed for extended periods, which has obvious implications for HEDC projects.

Sometimes political appointments can be the root cause of sudden changes in the institutional environment that affect HEDC projects. For example, when a new president took office in one of the East African partner countries, the president's new policies influenced the staff at a partner HEI, as becomes clear from the below account:

New president took office and really reformed regulations and policies, that affected universities too. For example, the work against corruption has been so fierce that it has made some of our partners very timid and cautious.

In addition to country-level changes in political climates and institutional environments, also university-level shifts in institutional settings can occur. For example, newly appointed university leaders can have detrimental effects for project implementation and even project continuity altogether, as illuminated in the quote below:

New management in a partner institution brings about new politics. During some programme rounds new management have stepped in and suddenly decided that this kind of cooperation no longer fit the institution's profile.

These issues often fall outside the projects' control, and so are hard to prepare for and address. For this reason, this thesis is unable to suggest any specific management practices

to account for these political shifts other than being aware of and closely following partner country political climate for the possibility of something of this calibre taking place.

4.3.2 Proactive and reactive mechanisms

Outside the more political realm, there can also be other issues. For instance, one of the HEDC projects worked on curriculum development. In this instance, the curriculum development was not realized through extensive planning nor familiarization to partner country and HEI institutional environments, but quite the contrary. As the informant described the situation, the development aims were achieved “not by any planning or anything that our project implementation and their curriculum revision in each country happened to be in the same exact time”. Had the project not had timing in its favour, the project would have likely faced significant challenges in achieving its goals.

The above example highlights not only the need for planning but also the interrelatedness of bureaucratic hurdles and resource constraints with the unexpected shifts in institutional environments. The bureaucracy in partner environments is high, prohibiting curricula revision outside specific points in time, which can lead to inefficient use of resources if projects are not aware of such restrictions. The slack use of resources consequently depletes already scarce resources even further. Therefore, the same informant called for projects to put in more effort before the projects commence: “It is a bit more work, but it’s better than having a project but then not being able to implement”. This would be a proactive approach.

Not everything can be accounted for in advance, and thus, reactive management practices are needed too. HEDC projects can accommodate for the unexpected shifts in institutional environments by using the in-built HEI ICI programme mechanism, which allows the projects to apply for changes in project content if something unforeseen happens. Also, partner HEIs can accommodate some funder demands:

Okay, the policy might say we do this, but maybe the project may not be in a position to do that. But we [a partner HEI] have a mechanism if you are sponsored by certain organizations and this organization does not provide what we as institution expected to be done according

to our policies. Then we have ways of handling that, we can say okay fine leave the policy.

The quote depicts an instance of using regulatory “loopholes,” like what was discussed in section 4.1.2. But for being able to use these loopholes, one must have partner HEI top management invested in the project or have the right contacts who can and know how and when such management practices can be used. The view further supports the perspective of using already established connections and relationships within partner HEIs to a further extent, as was suggested to HEI ICI earlier in section 4.1.4. But as things currently stand, capitalizing on such loopholes is a very situational management practice that the project cannot rely upon. Instead, projects should avoid finding themselves in the situations of having to use the loopholes in the first place through thorough proactive planning.

Moving from country-level to HEI-level to individual-level, unexpected events can occur because of individual actions too. Individuals not fully abiding by HEDC or partner HEI rules is not abnormal as per the informants. To address this, HEDC projects, partner HEIs, and HEI ICI as the administrative organization have traditionally relied on demanding reporting on regular intervals. For example, HEIs both in East Africa and in Finland demand reporting for their internal uses, and HEI ICI demand projects to file reports to monitor project activities as becomes clear from the interviews. This administrative burden stemming from reporting to various stakeholders can become an issue for HEDC projects, whose resources are limited. It might be reasonable to examine what kind of reports different project stakeholders currently have to produce, in what intervals, and could there be synergies found so that the reports could be integrated with one and other for a lighter total administrative burden. The benefits do not end there, as simultaneously resources would be freed to other more productive uses, and thus yield indirect benefits too.

4.3.3 Implications for HEI ICI

As discussed, it can be tough to account for all the unexpected shifts in institutional environments. However, being prepared and aware of scenarios help to manage the situations as they occur. Currently, HEDC projects prepare for the unexpected by conducting mandatory risk analyses. Given that challenges still arise, it might be worth

considering whether the current risk analysis format is sufficient. Admittedly eliminating all problems is an impossible task, but striving for fewer, however, is not. Being able to minimize challenges by conducting more thorough risk analyses requires work hours, which currently are limited. Work hours could be freed if synergies were to be found between the various reports HEDC projects now must produce. Therefore, investigating the current reporting practices and be ready to adjust them could be a beneficial course of action to take, especially if viewed from a longer-term perspective.

The third issue for HEI ICI to consider is to work towards increased flexibility. While the programme already has a change application mechanism for projects to use to address the characteristically volatile institutional environment in East Africa, programme flexibility is not considered sufficient from the projects' perspective. The institutional climate requires projects to have increased flexibility and being able to respond to issues appearing unexpectedly. This was argued for by one of the informants:

The operating environment is very dynamic and quickly changing, which requires us to adapt to its twists and turns. ... This is another thing that could be considered on the programme-level so that the programme would be more convenient and flexible for us who work in the field.

While the project staff member in the above quote does not perceive the HEI ICI programme to be flexible enough, the programme considered it to be flexible:

When something unexpected happens, they [projects] can make changes through applying for a change, they can make changes through applying for it with us. For example, one project asked if they can use leftover budget to do [a specific project activity]. So there is flexibility from our programme side of things.

There are disparities between the ways HEI ICI and the HEDC projects perceive the programme's flexibility, as conveyed in the above quotes. Perhaps some project staff is not aware of the existence of such mechanism and find it hard to use, do not perceive it

is responding to their needs, or for some other reason, do not see it worth using. The underlying reasons behind this are worth unearthing and then acted upon accordingly.

4.4 Differences in practices

“I mean, it is different. It is different: different countries and the practices are different, so you have to take that into consideration”, as one Finnish informant depicts the institutional distance (Kostova, 1999) between Finland and East African partners. Based on the interviews, the differences range from cultural-cognitive to normative to regulative pillars (Scott, 2001). The differences also include individual, HEI, and country-level dimensions, which can manifest as conflicts of regulative practices or differences in working cultures, for instance.

4.4.1 Misalignment of practices

Misalignment of HEI ICI and partner country institutional practices were noted in one form or another in most interviews. For instance, the informants found the “philosophy” and methods of how Finnish HEDC projects are run as unconventional. As one East African project staff member experienced it, “it took a long time to understand clearly your government’s or institutions’ philosophy of how to manage these projects”. Another informant reported similar experiences:

I didn't know the policies of the project, so it took me time to understand the financial policies and whatever. At the beginning I was using the internal policies of the university ... later I found that the project policy was not allowing. ... So, it was like a long journey for learning the policies of the project.

Comparable challenges were also noted from the Finnish side:

Understanding [project practices] have been really troublesome for the partners and as a result we have had to sit down with them and go

through the issues in detail. We have faced challenges due to the project practices being misaligned with partner internal practices.

This misalignment of practices and project philosophy has indeed caused friction in project implementation. Admittedly, some friction is only natural and understandable, since “projects always are very different and have different kind of rules and regulations” as one informant put it. The rules and regulations also vary between different funding organizations, and partner HEIs often have multiple projects running simultaneously. These circumstances can result in difficulties in keeping track of what requirements must be met in which projects.

It is not only the project philosophy that has caused challenges to the projects, but also the misalignment of financial practices has created hindrances. For example, partner HEIs are used to HEDC projects paying institutional fees for the partner institutions, which has been a point of frustration for project parties:

The project does not pay institutional fee. But for our university every project pays institutional fee. Why? This institutional fee caters for the directories we are using, the internet we are using for Skype, the computers we are using. For example, the project did buy one laptop.

What we are saying is that it's part of our policy that every project we are doing and I think it's common even in other universities abroad that some small percentage should be paid to the university or should be retained to cover the operations of the university.

Compared to other organizations working in the field of HEDC, the informants found the HEI ICI programme to be an anomaly for not paying institutional fees. HEI ICI does not cater to the financial practices of partner HEIs, which has, in some cases, led to frustration and resulted even in disputes. Therefore, programme-level financial practices and guidelines could be due to a reassessment for HEI ICI to address local practices more thoroughly.

Nevertheless, addressing these misalignments is critical for ensuring frictionless project implementation. For the projects being able to achieve their objectives, they need

to adapt to and align themselves with partner country and HEI institutional environments (Salmi et al., 2014), which remains in stark conflict with what Phillips et al. (2009) would suggest. Institutions cannot be exported (Reinikka et al., 2018), a sentiment that was echoed by the studied HEDC projects across the board.

4.4.2 Different working cultures

Indeed, the interviewed Finnish project staff members all stand in unison that transferring the Finnish ways of working to the East African context does not work. This stance can be accredited to multiple reasons, one of which being “differences in working cultures are very different between every partner, partly because they all have very different organizational and institutional natures”. These views are in line with those of Kistruck et al. (2011) and Zoogah et al. (2015) that institutional differences can also be found on subnational levels. In particular, informal institutional differences are highlighted as far as working cultures are concerned. The informal institutional distance can manifest as different time conceptions, for instance:

“Okay, it is eight o’clock and I am here, but they are not. I am not going to work.” This kind of attitude will not work there. For example, if we go to a meeting at eight o’clock here, we wait for maybe fifteen minutes and then we leave, right? This is the general practice and it works here, but it is not going to work there.

Here in Finland, we think ‘Okay, this is my job, I have to do this, this is my work’. But there, they think, I do not know, I have a feeling like if somebody does something in time, it is like they are doing you a favour. I do not know, maybe this is their way of working or something.

The ways of working ranging from meeting practicalities to different task prioritization can differ vastly between HEDC project parties, consequently possibly complicating the cooperation. Despite the latter quotation arguably being harsh, it still delivers a noteworthy point of differences in ways of working that require understanding from project parties. Moreover, informants considered working cultures a “foundational issue”

for project work. Hence, understanding and being aware of partner practices and ways of working is of the essence.

The approaches to projects and project work, in general, differ between the Finnish and East African sides. This can be accredited to multiple factors, one being limited resources constraining the ability to focus on various projects simultaneously. Other reasons may run more in-depth, as hinted towards by two different East African project staff members:

Internally in the university, I think inasmuch faculty do a lot in a way, they are not conscious what they really are doing. They just think they are giving students a task and the students are solving the task. But the discipline of making sure things are done properly, thoroughly, and with focus, were not very seriously taken. And so [project name redacted] was not really appreciated as much.

Some of the units have been doing this, but without knowing it is [project name redacted]. But now we know exactly. If you do something that you know the goal, the objective, the methodology and whatever, you are focused. So, in many cases, I can say we have not been focused.

Engagement with project content has, in some instances, left the projects hoping for more. This can be considered a challenge both for the East African partners pushing project objectives forwards in their respective HEIs, as well as Finnish HEDC project staff. If projects are done solely for the sake of doing the project, and with little focus, the results will likely reflect that. Therefore, knowing how to manage the issue and engage with partner HEI staff on a more profound level is essential.

4.4.3 Understanding differences takes time

Managing the challenges stemming from different practices requires HEDC project staff to understand the other side. Primarily, understanding the differences starts with having the “right mindset”:

There are challenges in the North too, in our own higher education institutions. Year by year one can see more and more clearly that the attitude of 'we have all things sorted out, others do not' is simply wrong.

Understanding and learning the institutional differences between Finnish and East African partners take time, which the studied HEDC projects have limited amounts of. Being able to fathom partner practices can take more extended periods than just one project round. A remedy for this would be to increase the longevity of projects. Having the same partners for consecutive periods can have impacts for the projects, as the below sentiments from two Finnish project staff members convey:

With them I know that if I say 'okay, by this time we have to have this', this will happen. They also know what their working culture is and how should we work together and what should happen, because we have been working together since [year] with the same people. -- Because you know better, you know what they are thinking, and what they are thinking at that time. -- If you have longer-term projects, if you have at least two continuous rounds or three, then you already know [the practices].

Of course, the institutional interaction has strengthened over time. Not only because of the project but also because you work closely for a long time, some other elements come into the mix so that you are not 'only doing research' with the partner.

The above quotes also depict the evolvement of management practices. The first quote reflects achieving a state in project work where deep mutual understanding allows for looser management practices as both sides know what they are expected from. The latter quote similarly depicts the strengthened institutional interaction and how it can take new forms as the project progresses, and the sides get more familiar with the other. Informants were clear that the experience of working with the same partners is a valuable asset. This asset of experience can also prepare project staff to conduct HEDC projects regardless of the exact institutional environment:

Another perspective I would like to mention on the depth is that the experience and knowledge is generalizable across countries. If I was to go to any other country, I think our way of working would have refined to a level that we would know how to go about things. But it requires you to know and understand the host society.

As the last sentence exhibits, understanding partner contexts must become above all else. However, comprehending the institutional environments on a profound level can be time-consuming, and the timeframes are limited in HEDC project settings. These circumstances further suggest the HEI ICI programme to discover ways to strive for increased continuity of the projects..

4.4.4 Implications for HEI ICI

Amidst the calls for increased flexibility, HEI ICI should explore what kind of structures and practices other international HEDC project funder organizations currently have in use. Based on such a review, HEI ICI can determine if some universal practices could be adopted for the programme. Now, partner HEIs can have multiple projects funded by various funders running at the same time, which can all have different requirements and guidelines. Keeping up with and accounting for all different projects and their practices can be a burdensome task and require much effort from the partner HEIs. To release resources to more productive uses, finding supportive means to ease the learning of project practices should be investigated.

Another solution to clarify the possible confusion in terms of project practices is to organize joint training sessions for partners aiming to introduce HEDC project practices. This solution was suggested by multiple Finnish informants when asked about how the programme could be improved moving forwards. The overarching need for the training was acknowledged by many informants, but the practical details on how to execute the training were not identical. One informant suggested organizing the joint training sessions in Finland, while another suggested organizing the workshops in East Africa. Regardless, the common denominator for all the suggestions was that the training should i) include all partners, ii) focus on financial reporting practices, and iii) include a project management training component.

Besides solving the challenges stemming from the HEDC project side, also the programme side is a source for problems, as per informants. As a partner described, funders can “take things easy”, and do not always respect the local HEI practices. The informant further illustrated that some HEDC programmes have gone about their projects solely through informal channels and not even gotten university-level support. However, HEI ICI being a national programme representing Finland abroad, following the formal ways of cooperation according to partner HEI rules should be ensured. In other words, the programme should make sure it accounts for partner HEI context, which brings us to the next theme: lack of accounting for context.

4.5 Lack of accounting for context

Lack of accounting for partner country and HEI contexts as the fifth theme discusses the differences between and within partner HEIs, and the challenges related to not accounting for those differences. Informants across the board echoed the need to contextualize the HEDC projects to individual partner HEI contexts. An East African project staff member summarizes the overarching sentiment:

Obviously in the implementation in our university, we have to be sensitive to our context. Other universities, they are in different [development] stages. So, everybody implements in different ways. And this is where the beauty is: the beauty is in the variety.

The quote recognizes the need for being contextually sensitive, not only to country-level differences but also to individual HEI-level variations in institutional environments. Because of the differences between and within partner HEIs, challenges are prone to emerge.

4.5.1 Viewing context through suitable lenses

The challenges related to accounting for context - or the lack thereof - often stem from the Finnish HEI ICI programme and HEDC project requirement side of things. The Finnish project staff members widely noted this as the following quotes by different informants illustrate:

In a way, it really was not that easy as we thought, because we have this regional project and many countries. -- We quickly concluded that the process of implementing [one project objective] was too complicated and difficult a process.

Finland plays an influential role in determining project content. Due to this and snug timetables and such, the projects often are template-like: these are the things going to be done and so on. And now, for example, [university name redacted] would have actually had different needs, but at the time we did not have enough time to think things through.

We reached the conclusion that all partner universities had very different approaches and needs, but they also have many similarities. - - Another challenge was that they seemingly had big differences between different units and contents, which brought variety to and within the project.

The first quote depicts the difficulties arising from having to implement projects in many countries and the country-level differences, which may hinder achieving HEDC project aims. The second quote echoes the limited resources view characteristic to HEDC projects, discussed further in section 4.6. The limited resources can lead to HEDC project content being “template-like”, referring to the lack of accounting for partner HEI contexts. The lack of accounting can, in turn, lead to projects not meeting partner HEI needs, which can contribute to some partner HEIs not thoroughly engaging with the projects, as discussed earlier in section 4.4.2. The third and final quote bolsters the lack of accounting view and exhibits the contextual differences not only between partner HEIs but also within them, which can complicate project implementation.

The three quotes demonstrate that institutional differences are found on smaller scales than just on the country-level, which follows extant theory (see e.g., Kistruck et al., 2011; Zoogah et al., 2015). Whereas IB literature has traditionally viewed institutions through country-level lenses (Xu & Shenkar, 2002), HEDC projects should account for institutional differences between smaller units of analysis. Therefore, the starting point for any HEDC project is to craft contextually sensitive project content. According to the informants, the most critical project attribute is to offer exciting and motivating projects to partner HEIs.

Overall, being sensitive to project context is paramount, because there is “no universal way”, as one informant described the situation. Being responsive to the project context starts with first understanding the partner country and HEI institutional environments, and partners’ needs, wants, and interests. Perhaps, for this reason, Finnish informants emphasized listening to partners and understanding the local contexts. However, this can be a demanding task given the physical distance and limited resources, but still necessary to strive for.

4.5.2 Building understanding

The circumstances have necessitated HEDC project staff to produce different methods to build the vital understanding. For instance, one informant found questionnaires a useful tool for mapping out partner HEI needs, wants, and expectations, and to give the partners a way to influence the project content. In practice, questionnaires can be sent out to partners in the initial project stages and include questions on what the project should look like from the partner perspective. The insights can then be used to design the project content. While this management practice is effective, it is not very labour-intensive, thus suiting HEDC projects.

The above example embodies Finnish project staff having a “locals know best” mindset. Locals knowing best refer to using partners’ extensive knowledge on partner country and HEI institutional environments instead of relying on their own often limited grasp. Utilizing local expertise does not only help designing projects to meet partner needs but also in resolving emerging challenges. When I asked a Finnish project staff member what the informant would have done differently in retrospect, the informant said:

I did not know it would be this difficult to [do a project activity]. If I would have to do it again in Africa, I would do it in a way that from the beginning I would ask them to make this process and also ask them if it happens automatically or not. Then if you have to go and ask the persons or the management or the other side every time, I would make a timetable that 'okay, if you don't get this file going from this office to that office by this day, you go next day' and then you know. So, more planning of this kind in [doing the project activities].

Another possible management practice to account for contextual differences is to introduce entirely new institutional logics (Newenkham-Kahindi & Stevens, 2018). This approach can be adopted, especially in instances where funder and partner practices cannot mesh with each other for one reason or another. In HEDC projects, this can manifest as abandoning earlier structures and building entirely new structures to replace them. Adopting new institutional logics can be done to avoid existing institutional biases from affecting HEDC projects and thus allow for proper contextual adaptation, as the below quote illustrates:

We decided to design our own programme within [HEI unit] that would attract different disciplines. -- So, it is like starting from scratch completely, because we do not want biases from certain departments.

4.5.3 Probing and testing

HEDC projects do not need to commit to one single approach, however. Many informants have utilized piloting and, in general, starting small to see what kind of methods suit the partner contexts and what do not. This mentality of not putting all eggs in one basket also allows for more effective resource usage: projects do not have to commit all their resources to one approach that is uncertain to be successful in the given context. Hence, piloting and starting small address resource constraints too, while addressing contextual adaptation:

This period has given us an opportunity to try out [project name redacted] on a smaller-scale and in a more focused way. And we have

step by step gone ahead to see how to contextualize it, to have our version of [the project] that can readily apply to this context.

However, for projects to be able to use piloting and probing to account for contextual specifics, the projects also need to be flexible. While the HEI ICI programme, in general, is “being more flexible than EU-funded programmes”, informants called for increased flexibility from the programme side. One informant explained: “In my opinion, the programme is not flexible. The flexibility has to come from the participant side and their processes instead.” Therefore, increasing flexibility should be considered. The above quote also illustrates that piloting reflects the HEDC projects opting to take the approach of adapting to the partner contexts (Phillips et al., 2009). This mismatch between the theory and practice further supports the view that extant institutional distance management literature does not fully explicate the HEDC project settings.

4.5.4 Balancing between multiple interests

Overall, HEDC projects are a balancing act of sorts, which should be taken into account in project management. HEDC projects are subject to multiple stakeholders vouching for their interests ranging from Finnish HEIs and HEI ICI programme requirements to partner HEI guidelines and national regulations. A Finnish project staff member explains: “Programmes obviously have to have their own rules, but then the local partner universities also have their operating mechanisms”. Being aware of the need for balancing between multiple interests is a part of accounting for context. An East African manager at a partner HEI expands the idea:

And we do all we can do to support them to make sure the projects are implemented according to the agreement, according to the project objectives, and the resources that are provided by the funder are utilized while accounting for and in line with our own regulations.

It is crucial to fit the project into the local environment. As one Finnish project coordinator perceived it, projects have to fit the institutional settings of partner countries “politically and content-wise”, so that the partners can consider the project their own. Also, having project objectives and practices specified in formal documents, that are

acknowledged by partner HEI top management, is essential for achieving local acceptance, because “if you leave it up for the people to decide, not everybody will do that”.

4.5.5 Implications for HEI ICI

Accounting for context begins in the planning phase of project work; what content should a project have and how is the content suited for East African partner HEIs. The partner HEIs should be included in the content planning for reaching the best results and meaningful project content that satisfies partner HEI needs. The HEDC project staff in Finland spoke about the time constraints on getting their funding proposals in, which limited the amount of time that could go into project planning. Therefore, HEI ICI should seek novel ways in which partner HEIs could be involved in the project content planning phase already. A central piece to this puzzle is to free up resources, which can be done through methods discussed in other sections.

Another vital issue for HEI ICI to consider is the calls for increased programme flexibility. For instance, while the informants were clear that piloting is a useful tool for accounting for context, it first requires the projects to have flexibility and preparedness to maneuver the pilots. The informants considered flexibility a central piece for accounting to context as well as preparing for the unexpected, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, flexibility was regarded as one of the critical attributes of any project to have. Therefore, the programme should reassess how well it currently meets the needs of the projects.

Understanding partner contexts play a vital role in delivering project results, which starts with engaging in dialogue with partners. HEI ICI could take a more active part in linking HEDC projects with suitable partner contacts, and therefrom advance project continuity as well. Project continuity or the lack thereof has been a common criticism towards HEDC projects and the HEI ICI programme at large. The informants also implied that this lack of continuity has also been a core reason for keeping the project impacts at bay. If HEI ICI were to use existing contacts to a further extent, some continuity could be secured, which in turn could lead to strengthened project impact.

4.6 Resource constraints

Resource constraints affecting HEDC projects was expected. As Banya & Elu (2001) state, scarcity of human and material resources are usual challenges universities in SSA wrestle with, which East Africa is a part of. The effects limited resources have are magnified in East African contexts because the baseline is at a low level (Banya & Elu, 2001) and HEIs in the region overall perceived weak institutions (Kruss et al., 2012). Therefore, it is no surprise that limited resources were often mentioned as a challenge to overcome.

4.6.1 Limited material and human resources

Both East African and Finnish informants highlighted financial constraints. For instance, one Finnish informant criticized the limited financial assets at HEDC projects' disposal to have "actual impact". In turn, a manager in an East African partner HEI regretted their financial situation: "The fees [from students] are not enough to cover the cost of a student, and the government does not give anything more than the salary and maybe for projects and capital development". These sentiments are in line with the literature that HEIs in East Africa are have limited resources. Limited resources can result in needing external support. According to informants, external support is needed "to sustain the project, to enable student travel from one point to another, to run [project activity redacted], to review curriculum", and to have purposeful facilities. The need for resources has overarching implications, which has effects for HEDC project implementation too. As a Finnish HEDC project coordinator sees it: "Partners have not been very committed due to their limited resources to be very active in multiple projects simultaneously". Another informant echoed this sentiment by saying that the available resources limit what is achievable within the project frames.

Managing resource constraints is challenging. Neither HEDC projects nor HEI ICI programme has a say when it comes to the use of politically governed Finnish development funds, and as a result, influencing the amount of funds is difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, one must find other ways to manage limited resources. One view is to use limited resources more efficiently and effectively than has historically been done. Indeed, one East African informant felt that the limited resources are not used rationally,

because HEI ICI controls the use of funds in too centralized a manner. According to the informant, the project staff should be given more responsibility and freer hands to decide how the funds are to be used to reach the best results.

Another approach to overcome resource constraints is to use piloting. Piloting would allow for testing and probing what works and what does not in such institutionally different an environment as East Africa is with little resource investments. Given the context-sensitivity of institutions, knowing what approach works and where can be complicated to determine beforehand. As a solution, piloting allows for more effective resource usage as projects do not have to fully commit their resources to a cause that is uncertain about bearing fruit.

4.6.2 Implications for HEI ICI

A starting point for overcoming the resource constraints could be to review programme finance practices. Understandably HEI ICI's financial practices must be strict, since the programme uses public funds. Still, a revision of how resources are currently being used and for what purposes could be in place. This is especially true in the absence of many other alternatives; other approaches such as lobbying political actors for more funds is not purposeful either for HEI ICI. Instead, the programme could assess how to involve partners in the decision-making of how the projects use the funds. One way to do this would be to use questionnaires to map out partner needs, as discussed earlier in section 4.5.2. Adopting such an approach would allow the partners to have their voices heard, which could convert into more efficient and effective use of resources.

However, perhaps a more practical way to approach the resource constraints is to focus efforts on how the currently available resources could be used more effectively and efficiently. For instance, HEI ICI could increasingly encourage HEDC projects to start small and pilot their approaches at partner HEIs, instead of diving in headfirst into an activity that has no guarantees of being successful. However, the limited timeframes can yet again prove to be a constraining factor. The projects cannot keep on probing and piloting different approaches for extended periods due to their timetables.

5 CONCLUSION

This closing section of the thesis first summarizes the main findings and contributions this thesis has. Second, I will evaluate my resource process and discuss the limitations of the study. Based on the identified limitations, I will propose directions for researchers to take in the future.

5.1 Main findings

This thesis explored the institutional challenges faced by HEDC projects in East Africa and how these challenges could be managed in practice. Additionally, I examined whether the management practices evolve, and if they do, how. This thesis indeed was exploratory in nature, given the limited theoretical viewpoints readily applicable to this thesis' exact research setting. I approached answering the research questions from a practically oriented stance, which is distinctive to traditional theses. I decided to follow the qualitative tradition as my primary method of inquiry. Within the qualitative tradition, I decided to utilize a multiple case study approach and semi-structured interviews to examine the research setting. Overall, I aimed to produce practically relevant insights and implications for the HEDC projects to use moving forwards.

I have identified six main challenge areas as well as multiple practical institutional management practices to address the challenges. The primary challenge areas were the following: i) communicative disconnects, ii) bureaucratic and hierarchical hurdles, iii) unexpected shifts in institutional environments, iv) differences in practices, v) lack of accounting for context, and vi) resource constraints. Based on the identified challenges and management practices, I proposed recommendations for the HEDC project administrator, HEI ICI, on how the programme could develop its practices moving forwards.

The identified challenges primarily fell within the frames of extant literature and support some of the theoretical views. Still, the currently available theoretical perspectives did not fully explicate the management practices the studied HEDC projects have employed. Existing answers do not fit the unique HEDC project study setting. Therefore, this study also extends extant theoretical perspectives into previously less-

explored avenues and offers building blocks for new context-bound theories to use (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019).

5.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

In this thesis, contextual considerations deserve to be put on the forefront. Studies in emerging market contexts have to express the validity and reliability of their studies (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019). To achieve this, Plakoyiannaki et al. (2019) call for qualitative researchers to address transparency and context issues and pay attention to data quality and its interpretation. In this thesis, the reporting is done as transparently as I am capable of and context addressed as thoroughly as possible. For example, I have presented the data on which my findings are based in Tables 3 and 4.

Conducting qualitative research in emerging markets have three general challenges, according to Plakoyiannaki et al. (2019). Firstly, doing interviews in a language other than the informant's mother tongue can lead to lost nuances due to language barriers. I fully acknowledge the possibility of lost meaning, but in the absence of better alternatives, I conducted all the interviews in East Africa and one interview in Finland in English. Secondly, utilizing both insider and outsider researchers should be considered, which was not a feasible option for this thesis given time and resource constraints. Thirdly and finally, Plakoyiannaki et al. (2019) bring up the trustworthiness of data, which can be addressed by using different interview tactics. Such tactics comprise conducting longitudinal research, for example. Unfortunately, conducting longitudinal research was not possible due to resource and time constraints. This is an opportunity for future researchers to grab. Conducting longitudinal research could be especially beneficial for examining how institutional management practices evolve.

Case study research can be assessed in several ways. One of the more important characteristics of excellent case studies is having some form of exceptionality, novelty, or other interest embedded in it (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This study's setting brings novel perspectives into institutional academic discussions. The study's specific context also presents opportunities for future researchers. Because this study's scope is

limited to one geographical region, future researchers could conduct similar research in other geographic locations to see whether the identified management practices could be used in other areas as well. Another point Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) bring forward is that high-quality case studies should have either practical or theoretical relevance. Of these two, this thesis focuses more on the former; to produce practical insights and recommendations.

Researcher bias needs to be addressed here because, in IB research settings, it is common that results are interpreted through the researcher's cultural lenses (Zalan & Lewis, 2004). Given the context of this thesis, it is likely that the findings and discussion resemble my cultural views, mainly because my earlier exposure to African affairs has been modest. Combining this with not doing the research in my mother tongue, some mistaken interpretations might occur. For this reason, it would be interesting to see a similar study conducted from the East African perspective in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: General interview guide

<p>1. Introductions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Introduction to thesis topicb. Background information on the development cooperation project and the informant's experience
<p>2. In general, what has been your experience with your project?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. What have been the key learning points for you during the project in terms of cooperation in the partner country(ies)?b. What have been the successes?
<p>3. What are the challenges of working with partners in East Africa?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. What challenges have been the most common?b. What kind of differences in customs have you faced from individual/institutional perspectives?c. What kind of administrative/regulative differences have you found?d. How do you perceive your project fits to the partner country environment?
<p>4. How have you taken these issues into account and managed them in practice?</p>
<p>5. Have these management practices evolved over the project lifespan? If so, how?</p>
<p>6. Looking back at your experiences, are there some things you would do differently? If so, what are those and how would you go about them this time?</p>