

Incentives for sustainability in research–practice partnerships

School-University
Partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – School–University Partnerships (SUPs), particularly those organised as Research–Practice Partnerships (RPPs), are increasingly promoted as strategies for strengthening the relevance, quality and societal value of educational research. Despite their growing prominence, many such partnerships struggle to achieve long-term sustainability. This article conceptualises incentives as a central, yet under-theorised, dimension of sustainability in SUPs.

Design/methodology/approach – The article offers a conceptual analysis drawing on international RPP literature and documented experiences from the Swedish ULF (Education, Learning, Research) infrastructure. While analytically distinguishing between practitioners and researchers to clarify roles, incentives and epistemic positions, it does not assume a fixed dichotomy between these groups. The conceptual analysis draws on published research, evaluations, reports and policy documents related to ULF, to explore how incentive structures interact in practice.

Findings – The analysis demonstrates how individual, organisational and system-level incentives interact and how misalignments among these levels may undermine the development of shared epistemic objects necessary for long-term, cumulative knowledge building. A key contribution is the elaboration of the concept of a democratic, shared incentive: a collectively structured commitment to knowledge production that extends beyond individual or organisational interests and supports peer-reviewed scientific work grounded in professional needs.

Originality/value – By foregrounding incentives as epistemic and democratic conditions for sustainability, the article contributes to international and comparative discussions on how RPPs can be designed and sustained as long-term, collective knowledge-building infrastructures across diverse educational systems.

Keywords Sustainability, Incentives, Learning, Practice-based research, Research–Practice Partnerships, Shared democratic incentives, ULF (education)

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction: why incentives matter for sustainability

Throughout this article, the term research–practice partnership (RPP) is used to denote sustained and formalised collaborations between school authorities and higher education institutions oriented towards joint knowledge production. Across international contexts, school–university partnerships (SUPs) and RPPs have increasingly been promoted as a means of strengthening the relevance, quality and impact of educational research. Such partnerships are often framed as vehicles for mutual learning, joint knowledge production and system improvement. Despite widespread support for these ambitions, many partnerships struggle to endure over time. A recurring challenge concerns sustainability: how collaborations can be maintained beyond individual projects, short-term funding cycles or the involvement of particularly committed individuals.

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In the Swedish context, the ULF initiative constitutes a comprehensive attempt to address this challenge by establishing long-term structures for practice-based research through school–university collaboration. The overarching aim of ULF is to strengthen the scientific foundation for education in schools and teacher training.

It is the partners' conviction that the quality of practice-based research in collaboration increases when it is characterized by an equal and complementary approach based on mutual respect, where different knowledge and skills are utilized. Optimal use of the combined resources contributes to strengthening the joint infrastructures. This, in turn, strengthens the opportunities to increase the participation of professionals in practice-based research in collaboration. (National ULF Agreement, 2025–2034, § 3).

Analyses and reports of the ULF infrastructure, such as the evaluation of the period of experimentation (Prøitz *et al.*, 2022), the evaluation of the development of a national agreement (Haikola, 2023) and the synthesis of the transition period from experimentation into a more regular structure (Nihlfors & Bjørnhammer, 2025), describe ULF not merely as a collection of individual projects but as an emerging ecosystem for RPPs. Within this ecosystem, multiple actors (teachers, school leaders, researchers, school authorities and universities) are connected through shared infrastructures, agreements and boundary-crossing practices. ULF thus provides a system-level framework intended to enable continuity, reciprocity and cumulative knowledge building across multiple partnerships over time.

Importantly, participation in ULF is not limited to compulsory and upper secondary schools; it also includes early childhood education, adult education and other parts of the education system. Teacher-educators and students in teacher training are included. That means that ULF involves a broad range of professional groups, reflecting the ambition to strengthen the scientific foundation of education (Nihlfors & Bjørnhammer, 2025).

This ecosystem perspective highlights the fact that sustainability is not solely a property of individual collaborations but is shaped by the broader organisational and policy conditions in which they are embedded. However, even within a relatively well-developed ecosystem such as ULF, questions of sustainability remain closely tied to incentives. While ULF provides structural, economic and policy support for collaboration on different levels, the extent to which partnerships are sustained over time depends on how different incentives – academic, professional, organisational and societal – are aligned across levels.

1.1 Research questions and methods

In this article we address two research questions:

- (1) How can incentives be conceptualised as a central dimension of sustainability in RPPs?
- (2) How can the concept of democratic, shared incentives contribute to understanding long-term sustainability in RPPs?

By introducing the concept of the democratic, shared incentive, the article seeks to contribute to international and comparative discussions on how partnerships can be sustained over time as cumulative knowledge-building infrastructures.

The article proceeds through a conceptual analysis grounded in existing research and documented experiences from practice-based research infrastructures. The analysis draws on three interrelated sources: (1) international research on RPPs, (2) peer-reviewed scientific publications emerging from the ULF initiative and (3) national evaluations, internal reports and policy documents related to ULF. The ULF-related documents analysed in this article are publicly available through the national ULF documentation website (www.ulfavtal.se/om-ulf/dokumentation). These three sources are used as analytical resources for conceptual development rather than as empirical data in a case study design.

The documents were first read independently and then discussed jointly by the authors. Particular attention was paid to how incentives related to long-term sustainability were

described across the different sources. Building on the previous synthesis of the nodes annual reports 2022–2024 (Nihlfors & Björnhammer, 2025) and the nodes and the national report of 2025 (www.ulfavtal.se/om-ulf/dokumentation), we conducted a focused conceptual re-analysis guided by our two research questions. This analysis informed the presentation of the ULF ecosystem in Section 4 and the conceptual arguments developed in Sections 5 and 6.

1.2 Author positionality

The authors have both been closely involved in ULF. Author 2 is one of the initiators of ULF and was coordinating ULF at the national level from its inception until 2024. Author 1 has been involved in ULF since 2017 through participation in local research projects and steering groups. Since 2025, Author 1 has served as the National Coordinator for ULF.

These roles have provided the authors with detailed knowledge of the development, governance and documentation of ULF. The purpose of this article is not to evaluate the quality or effectiveness of ULF. Rather, published research, peer-reviewed publications, evaluations, reports and policy documents related to ULF are used as analytical material to explore and conceptualise how incentives shape the sustainability of RPPs. The analysis therefore focuses on the meanings, functions and interrelationships of different types of incentives.

2. Conceptual framework: incentives, knowledge production and sustainability

2.1 Knowledge production in partnerships: *what, how and why*

Knowledge production within SUPs is, in this article, understood as structured around three interrelated questions: *what* knowledge is produced, *how* it is produced and *why* it is produced (cf. Björnhammer, 2025). These dimensions are analytically distinct but mutually dependent, and together they frame knowledge production as a collective and epistemic practice rather than as the outcome of isolated projects or individual actors. For analytical purposes, this article distinguishes between practitioners and researchers in order to clarify differences in institutional positions, roles and incentive structures. This distinction does not assume a fixed or stable dichotomy but serves as a heuristic device for examining how incentives operate across institutional locations.

First, the *what* of knowledge production concerns the study purpose and perspectives. Research in ULF takes its point of departure in school professionals' need for new knowledge in relation to the current state of knowledge. This implies that research questions are formulated in dialogue between practitioners and researchers, in relation to existing research in the fields.

Second, the *how* of knowledge production concerns the organisation of collaboration. The purpose of the study, its complexity, etc., influences how the study will be designed and by whom. Knowledge production within partnerships is premised on relationships that are both equal and complementary, and on the existence of a shared epistemic object (Knorr Cetina, 2001). Such an object provides a common focus for inquiry and enables different forms of expertise, professional and academic, in a joint knowledge-building process.

Third, the *why* of knowledge production concerns its epistemic and societal rationale. Practice-based research within ULF aims to enable a double critical perspective, in which both practice and research are subjected to scrutiny. By combining professional knowledge with research-based perspectives, such collaborations contribute to ecological validity (Gravemeijer & Cobb, 2006), as both researchers' critical perspectives on practice and practitioners' critical perspectives on research are treated as equally legitimate (Björnhammer, 2025). “By interacting with others and developing and comparing plausible alternative models for understanding problems in the world, we are likely to gain a deeper, multifaceted appreciation of reality than one perspective or person can create alone” (Van de Ven, 2013, p. 297).

Together, these three dimensions highlight that knowledge production within partnerships is oriented towards long-term, cumulative knowledge building rather than short-term problem solving alone. This understanding accommodates the fact that actors within ULF often occupy

hybrid positions, such as teachers with a doctorate, researchers employed by school authorities, doctoral students, student teachers and university-based researchers with professional experience in schools.

2.2 *What is meant by incentives?*

Incentives are understood broadly as the conditions that motivate, enable and constrain participation in knowledge production within SUPs. On an overall level, an incentive can be the fact that different perspectives are needed to be able to produce knowledge about complex problems. Participative forms of research, where different perspectives are taken into account “... *both advances a scientific discipline and enlightens the practice of a profession* (Simon, 1976, as cited in [Van de Ven, 2013](#), p. 265).

[McGeown and Sjölund \(2025\)](#) identify incentives as one of four key enabling conditions for RPPs, drawing on a broader literature on engaged and practice-oriented scholarship. They argue that practice-based research may be more valuable than other forms of research in many respects, and that stronger incentives should therefore be provided for researchers to engage in such work, particularly through recognition within academic merit systems. From practitioners’ perspectives, incentives are often associated with developing research literacy, strengthening the school’s scientific foundation and fostering a more critical and reflective approach to their own practice. Furthermore, in Sweden teachers may have their participation in practice-based research formally recognised as a merit within the recently introduced National Professional Programme. Engagement in such research can be credited as part of the qualifying activities for higher certification levels, thereby acknowledging teachers’ contributions to the production and use of research-based knowledge in schools. This policy underscores the programme’s aim to strengthen education on a scientific foundation and to promote sustained collaboration between research and practice ([Swedish National Agency for Education \[Skolverket\], 2025](#)).

Other important incentives are individual (such as merit, professional learning or career advancement), organisational incentives (such as time allocation, mandates and recognition) and system-level incentives (such as funding structures, policy frameworks and national agreements).

What is less explicitly emphasised in these discussions, however, is the incentive to do something together. Within partnerships, actors may have different individual purposes for participating, but such individual incentives are not sufficient to sustain collaboration over time. Even when practice-based research is formally recognised and rewarded, a broader motivational dimension remains essential, particularly for sustaining collaboration beyond individual projects.

2.3 *The democratic, shared incentive*

In this article, the democratic, shared incentive is conceptualised as a form of collective orientation that may emerge when actors commit to knowledge production beyond individual or organisational gain. The democratic, shared incentive should not be conflated with intrinsic motivation or professional commitment. While individual actors may be driven by personal values or professional ethics, the democratic, shared incentive refers to a collectively structured orientation embedded in organisational and epistemic arrangements. It is not merely a psychological disposition, but a relational and institutional condition that supports cumulative knowledge building. That a profession is given the opportunity and takes responsibility for its own knowledge production can also be seen as a democratic issue. By strengthening the profession’s scientific voice, a more balanced relationship between the school’s professions and politicians is possible. Strengthening the profession’s scientific voice can function as an incentive insofar as it positions practitioners as legitimate contributors to knowledge production.

The democratic, shared incentive exists in interaction with individual incentives. Those who recognise the value of practice-based research may also see that engagement in such research ought to be rewarded. The key question, however, is not which incentive comes first, but how different types of incentives are interconnected and mutually reinforcing over time.

How democratic, shared incentives may take form in RPPs can be illustrated through the way collaboration is organised within the ULF infrastructure. Professional questions emerging across educational practice are brought into recurring dialogues among teachers, school leaders and researchers through idea days, thematic networks and research collaborations. Participants may come from different schools and school authorities, including municipalities and independent school providers, but share an interest in developing knowledge about common educational challenges. Rather than being fixed from the outset, research questions are tentative and continuously refined through dialogue, engagement with previous research and insights generated during the research process. In this way, a shared epistemic object evolves over time and often extends beyond the boundaries of individual projects.

While democratic, shared incentives can be observed in the symmetrical and complementary collaboration within individual RPPs, they are not confined to single projects. Rather, they emerge across the wider ULF infrastructure, where recurring interactions, shared governance, organisational support and cumulative knowledge building connect multiple partnerships over time. The incentive therefore lies not only in contributing to an individual project but in participating in a sustained collective process of knowledge development that benefits educational practice, research and the education system more broadly.

Within ULF, the overarching aim articulated in the [National ULF Agreement \(2025–2034\)](#) is to improve teaching and educational practice in schools and teacher training, through a strengthened scientific foundation, building on school professionals' needs for new knowledge in relation to existing national and international research. Incentives for collaboration can therefore be understood as both professional and societal, oriented towards producing knowledge that benefits educational professionals and, ultimately, children, pupils and students learning. It is a question of equality and equity.

3. What do we know from previous research on sustainability in research–practice partnerships?

Research on SUPs, and particularly on RPPs has expanded considerably over the past decade, with a growing body of work defining core principles, organisational forms and variations across contexts ([Coburn & Penuel, 2016](#); [Farrell *et al.*, 2021](#)). Studies addressing the relevance of practice-based research and engagement with practitioner knowledge further underline the increasing scholarly attention to research–practice collaboration ([Kelchtermans, 2021](#)).

This literature highlights a range of enabling conditions for sustainability, including relational trust, mutual respect, joint ownership of research questions and ongoing dialogue between partners. The evaluation of ULF ([Prøitz *et al.*, 2022](#)) describes the importance of meeting places to handle these conditions. It can be arranged as a third place ([Moje *et al.*, 2004](#)), or a trading zone ([Collins *et al.*, 2007](#)). Another crucial condition turned out to be written agreement to enable sustainability. Sustainability is often described in relational, organisational and epistemic terms, referring to the endurance of partnerships, the embedding of collaboration within institutional structures and the development of shared ways of knowing.

Incentives are frequently mentioned in this body of research but often treated as background conditions rather than as objects of analysis in their own right (cf. [Coburn & Penuel, 2016](#)). Studies have pointed to misalignments between academic reward systems and the demands of practice-based research, as well as to the limited incentives for practitioners to engage in research alongside their everyday responsibilities ([McGeown & Sjölund, 2025](#)). Systematic reviews further show that much research has focused on relational and processual aspects of collaboration, while comparatively less attention has been paid to how knowledge

generated within partnerships accumulates, is validated and contributes to broader scientific knowledge bases (Sjölund *et al.*, 2022).

4. The Swedish ULF ecosystem as an illustrative context

To illustrate how incentives interact – and sometimes collide – in practice-based research, this section draws on the ULF initiative as an illustrative example. The aim is not to present a full case study, but to show how the article’s analytical arguments are manifested within a nationally organised SUP. While the ULF initiative is situated within the Swedish context, the analysis is intended to illuminate broader structural dynamics relevant to SUPs internationally. The discussion in this section draws on published scientific articles from ULF-related research, as well as internal and external evaluations and reports documenting the development of the initiative.

4.1 ULF as a national structure for practice-based research

ULF originated as a collaboration built on different local levels, networks formed on a regional level and a loosely coupled national collaboration. The experience from several years of experimental work at local and regional levels laid the foundation for a joint national agreement. The [National ULF Agreement \(2025–2034\)](#) was signed by representatives of all universities with teacher education and all major school organisers in Sweden. The agreement establishes collaboration at both local and node levels, providing formal frameworks for sustained RPPs. After seven years of experimenting, searching for a sustainable infrastructure for collaboration, a [National ULF Agreement \(2025–2034\)](#) was formed. This agreement includes a framework for an infrastructure for ULF to help collaborations on different levels, throughout the country, to become sustainable.

The national agreement is structured around five regional nodes, each encompassing multiple local RPPs between school authorities and higher education institutions. Within each node, collaboration operates across several interconnected levels, including the local level – where each partnership corresponds to a distinct RPP governed by a local agreement – node-level coordination, and national governance structures. At the local level, each RPP is constituted by a formal agreement involving one or several higher education institutions and one or several school authorities. Steering and coordination groups are established at each of these levels, ensuring both local anchoring and system-wide coherence. A national steering committee has been established, consisting of a majority of representatives from each node, together with a few persons from each organisation on the national level who signed the agreement.

A defining feature of the ULF organisation is the principle of equal representation between higher education institutions and school authorities across governance levels. This organisational design reflects the ambition to support school–university collaboration as a genuinely joint endeavour rather than as a researcher-driven initiative. The node structure enables regional adaptation while maintaining national alignment, allowing diverse local RPPs to operate within a shared framework. ULF is explicitly designed to support long-term collaboration. Rather than promoting isolated projects, the initiative establishes infrastructures intended to enable continuity, reciprocity and cumulative knowledge building across multiple partnerships over time. ULF encompasses the entire school system. Participation includes early childhood education, compulsory and upper secondary schools, adult education and other parts of the education system. Likewise, ULF involves a broad range of professional groups, including teachers, school leaders, special educators, leisure-time pedagogues and other educational professionals.

Recent analyses from evaluations describe ULF not merely as a collection of projects but as an emerging ecosystem for RPPs. The national evaluation of the ULF pilot initiative (Proitz *et al.*, 2022), Haikola’s (2023) evaluation of the development of a national ULF strategy and agreement and reports from the different nodes (Nihlfors & Björnhammer, 2025) all

emphasise the systemic character of ULF. Within this ecosystem, multiple actors (teachers, school leaders, researchers, school authorities and universities) are connected through shared infrastructures, agreements and boundary-crossing practices. School-University Partnerships

4.2 ULF as an ecosystem of RPPs

Within the ULF ecosystem, close to thirty locally anchored RPPs have developed, varying in scope, organisational form and thematic focus. This collaboration has resulted in over 400 publications during the experimental period (2017–2023) and 183 publications during 2024–2025, reported in the annual national report of 2025 (ULF, 2025). Together, these partnerships illustrate the breadth and diversity of collaboration enabled within the ULF framework.

Several studies provide insight into how such RPPs operate in practice. One strand of research analyses a long-standing partnership organised around teacher-driven, practice-based research and sustained collaboration over time (Andrée & Eriksson, 2019). Another examines organisational capacities and boundary-crossing roles within a university-based RPP, highlighting how collaboration is shaped by institutional conditions and professional roles (Jarl *et al.*, 2024a, b). A third provides an in-depth account of a locally situated RPP, focusing on how researchers, teachers and school leaders navigate opportunities and challenges within the ULF framework (Backman Bister & Persson, 2021; Bergman & Graeske, 2022; Eriksson & Öhman Sandberg, 2022; Trondman, 2025; Houmann & Di Lorenzo Tillberg, 2026).

Taken together, these studies illustrate how individual RPPs within ULF are supported by shared infrastructures and policy frameworks, while also developing locally adapted forms of collaboration. These partnerships operate within formal agreements intended to secure continuity regardless of changes in personnel or leadership positions. They show that sustainability depends not on a single model, but on the interaction between local practices and the broader ULF ecosystem, including institutional commitments, organisational capacities and shared orientations towards long-term knowledge building.

ULF encompasses structured processes of idea generation, research, publication and knowledge sharing. Many RPPs engage in organised idea-generation activities before formal research projects. These may take the form of idea days or thematic meetings, where researchers and practitioners meet to present and discuss ideas grounded in professional needs and educational challenges. Such arenas enable participants to identify shared questions and to develop potential shared epistemic objects before research projects are initiated.

Recurring thematic networks bring together practitioners and researchers around issues such as subject didactics, school attendance, classroom leadership or bullying, creating continuity and coherence across projects. Knowledge sharing constitutes a further central component of the ULF ecosystem. In addition to peer-reviewed publications, ULF-related work is disseminated through conferences, seminars and open forums where researchers, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders are invited to participate. These practices feed back into both idea generation and subsequent research, reinforcing ULF as a dynamic and cyclical knowledge ecosystem rather than a linear research programme.

Importantly, research conducted within ULF encompasses both qualitative and quantitative approaches. At present, however, qualitative studies appear to be more prevalent, reflecting the practice-based, exploratory and context-sensitive questions that have so far dominated ULF-related research. This methodological plurality reinforces the understanding of ULF as an inclusive ecosystem for cumulative knowledge building rather than a programme tied to a single methodological tradition.

5. Misaligned incentives as a threat to sustainability

We present our analysis in two parts, where we first highlight examples of what appear to be recurring problems (section 5), and then we argue for the possibilities for sustainability, with support in the concept of democratic, shared incentives (section 6).

We find that a key explanation, why school-university partnerships and practice-based research have difficulties in sustaining collaboration over time, lies in the misalignment of incentives operating at different levels and within different parts of the system. When individual, organisational and systemic incentives are not aligned, partnerships risk becoming fragile, short-lived or confined to isolated projects.

Beyond organisational inefficiencies, these difficulties also have epistemic consequences. When incentives diverge across actors and levels, shared epistemic objects risk becoming fragmented, short-term or subordinated to individual agendas, thereby weakening the cumulative character of knowledge building.

5.1 Academic incentives and the needs of practice

A recurring theme in research on RPPs concerns tensions between academic reward systems and the needs of practice. Researchers are typically rewarded for publications in highly ranked journals, external funding and individual achievements. Research conducted in collaboration is often time-consuming, relational and less easily translated into rapid academic outputs (cf. [McGeown & Sjölund, 2025](#)).

When practice-based research is not recognised as meritorious within academic evaluation systems, it risks being deprioritised, despite its potential societal and scientific value. This affects not only individual researchers' choices but also the sustainability of partnerships themselves.

Teachers who have completed doctoral studies and choose to work in schools – or who hold shared positions between schools and universities – often struggle to secure time and institutional support for scientific publication. These actors frequently serve as boundary-crossing professionals, and when incentive structures do not recognise their dual roles, the sustainability of collaborative knowledge production may be weakened. If participation in collaboration is perceived as detrimental to career progression, long-term engagement becomes difficult to justify. Partnerships may then become dependent on individual champions rather than being supported by stable organisational conditions.

5.2 The time logic and organisational conditions of practice

From the perspectives of schools and school authorities, different incentive-related challenges emerge. Teachers and school leaders operate in contexts characterised by time pressure, accountability demands and immediate operational needs. Even where there is a strong interest in research participation, the absence of time, mandate and organisational support can make sustained collaboration difficult.

An asymmetry thus arises between the longer-term cycles of research and the short-term demands of school practice. When these different temporal logics are not acknowledged and jointly addressed, frustration and diminished trust may follow.

The challenge also comes from outside when politicians intervene in school and teacher training practices through regulations and mandated policies. The critical approach that scientific work requires can then be put to the test.

This temporal mismatch is not merely an organisational issue, but also an epistemic one, as it affects which questions can be pursued, how inquiry unfolds and whether shared epistemic objects can be maintained over time.

5.3 Projectification and epistemic fragmentation

Another consequence of misaligned incentives is the projectification of collaboration, a pattern identified in the national evaluation of the ULF pilot initiative ([Prøitz et al., 2022](#)) and in analyses of organisational capacities within ULF-related partnerships ([Jarl et al., 2024a](#)). Projectification should not be interpreted as a critique of small-scale, context-sensitive or qualitatively oriented studies per se. Many foundational contributions to established research fields are based on empirically limited and contextually situated inquiries.

The critical issue concerns whether research contributions are positioned within a cumulative and critically scrutinised knowledge-building process. When studies – regardless of scale or method – remain disconnected from prior research, broader epistemic conversations and peer review, their potential contribution to long-term knowledge building is weakened, along with the democratic dimension of partnerships. There is currently a difficulty in finding ways to search for existing research from credible sources when a question arises requiring knowledge. Experience from ULF shows that several projects have overlapped due to a lack of this knowledge.

From this perspective, sustainability should be understood as a long-term process of cumulative knowledge development rather than as a matter of scale. Sustainable knowledge building is not undertaken by single individuals, isolated groups or for individual schools alone, but through the collective efforts of many actors for many others over time. When incentive structures prioritise short-term outputs over cumulative inquiry, shared epistemic objects are not sustained across projects and institutional settings, and collaboration risks becoming organisationally continuous but epistemically discontinuous (Knorr Cetina, 1999, 2001).

6. Reframing incentives: towards sustainable partnerships

A central argument in this section, based on our analysis is that incentives in SUPs should not be understood solely as instrumental mechanisms designed to motivate individual participation. Rather, incentives also operate at an epistemic level by shaping what kinds of knowledge are valued, pursued and sustained over time. Distinguishing between instrumental incentives (such as merit, funding or workload reduction) and epistemic or democratic incentives clarifies how partnerships can move from short-term collaboration towards long-term, cumulative knowledge building.

If misaligned incentives constitute a structural threat to sustainability in SUPs, they also point to the potential of incentives as levers for strengthening long-term collaboration. This section argues for a reframing of incentives – from isolated and short-term drivers to relational and interconnected systems that support sustainability over time.

6.1 From individual gains to shared responsibility

Sustainable partnerships cannot rely solely on individual incentives, whether these are related to merit, finance or professional development. While such incentives are necessary, they are insufficient on their own. Enduring collaboration requires a shift towards shared responsibility for knowledge development.

This does not imply abandoning individual incentives but rather embedding them within a broader framework in which collective purposes are clearly articulated and shared. When researchers and practitioners perceive their work as contributing to something beyond their immediate roles, motivation to invest time and effort is strengthened, even in the absence of immediate returns.

Experiences from ULF suggest that the shared incentive – a commitment to contributing to shared and societally relevant knowledge – often constitutes a strong motivation for participation. Actors from both schools and universities describe their engagement as driven by a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the education system and for future generations' learning (Nihlfors & Bjørnhammer, 2025).

This democratic incentive interacts with more instrumental motivations, such as professional development and merit, but may also provide stability when individual rewards are uncertain or long-term. At the same time, ULF demonstrates that shared incentives are not self-sustaining. Without organisational structures, agreements, time and recognition, even strong collective motivations may weaken.

6.2 *The democratic incentive as a foundation for sustainability*

The democratic, shared incentive emerges as a particularly important component of sustainable SUPs. It rests on a willingness to contribute to the common good and to assume responsibility for others' professional and educational conditions. Within practice-based research, this entails recognising both schools and universities as equal knowledge partners.

Understanding incentives in democratic terms shifts the focus of sustainability from securing ongoing resources to building relationships and structures that enable joint learning and long-term responsibility. The democratic incentive thus acts as a binding force linking individual and organisational motivations and connecting local inquiry to broader societal and epistemic goals.

These incentives are also about strengthening professionals' own responsibility for knowledge production, followed by an expectation for politicians to respect and take the profession's knowledge into account in their decisions.

6.3 *Aligning incentive systems across levels*

For the democratic incentive to have a practical effect, incentive systems at different levels must support one another. At the individual level, researchers and practitioners require recognition, time and legitimacy for collaborative work. At the organisational level, schools and universities need structures that integrate practice-based research into everyday activities rather than treating it as an add-on.

At the system level, policy, funding arrangements and national agreements should promote continuity and relationship-building rather than short-term outputs. When incentives across these levels are aligned, they can function as enablers of sustainability rather than obstacles.

6.4 *Incentives, publication and shared epistemic objects*

A further reframing involves understanding incentives as relational and processual rather than as static reward mechanisms. Incentives are continually shaped through interaction, negotiation and shared experience. Sustainable partnerships require spaces for dialogue in which expectations, values and goals can be revisited over time.

An important part of this dynamic concerns scientific publication and long-term knowledge building. When incentives are framed too narrowly in individual terms, publishing in scientific journals may appear less relevant for practitioners. Writing academic articles is demanding and time-consuming, and without a shared incentive structure, publication risks becoming an activity primarily driven by researchers' individual interests.

This article argues that knowledge produced with practitioners as epistemic agents is of particular importance, as it brings together different epistemic cultures within educational research and practice (Knorr Cetina, 1999; Van de Ven, 2013, 2018). Such knowledge contributes to ecological validity by being closely connected to the complexities of educational practice (Gravemeijer & Cobb, 2006; Kelchtermans, 2021).

Searching for new knowledge can take different forms, including systematic efforts to identify gaps between established research and practitioners documented experience. The idea behind ULF is that the infrastructure should create conditions for the actors to have expanded opportunities to conduct research based on the unique issue on the agenda. Some researchers (Jahnke *et al.*, 2025) have raised concerns that practice-based research initiatives such as ULF may risk fragmentation through the proliferation of many small-scale studies.

Considered from an epistemic perspective, the issue is not primarily the scale of inquiry, but whether shared epistemic objects are established that allow practitioner inquiry to connect to cumulative, peer-reviewed scientific knowledge. Large-scale initiatives that may involve broad participation and shared professional concerns do not in themselves guarantee a shared research object in an epistemic sense. Conversely, smaller and more locally situated studies can make substantial contributions to scientific knowledge when they are theoretically grounded, build on prior research and are positioned for critical peer review. From this

perspective, both large-scale and small-scale studies can be epistemically productive if they are oriented towards cumulative knowledge building rather than treated as isolated or purely local endeavours. The issue is not the scale of studies per se, nor whether research is small-scale or large-scale. From a comparative perspective, this distinction is crucial, as debates about practice-based research in different national contexts often centre on scale rather than epistemic orientation. Rather, the key issue concerns whether the primary purpose is school development or research. If research is the leading activity, the question is whether all participants are expected to contribute to a jointly negotiated epistemic object, or whether they are primarily contributing to the researchers' epistemic object.

Within the ULF framework, there is an explicit ambition that practice-based research should be published scientifically and contribute to the development of the school professions' shared knowledge base. Recent analyses indicate that ULF has resulted in a substantial number of peer-reviewed scientific publications, demonstrating that practice-based research conducted in close collaboration with schools can contribute meaningfully to cumulative knowledge building (Nihlfors & Bjørnhammer, 2025). The annual national report highlights that a third of the 183 ULF-publications between 2024 and 2025 were published in peer-reviewed journals.

From this perspective, scientific publication should be understood not merely as an individual academic incentive but as a collective practice through which knowledge is made available for scrutiny, critique and further development over time.

7. Discussion and conclusions: shared democratic incentives for sustainable research–practice partnerships

In this article we have argued that incentives constitute a crucial yet often underexplored dimension of sustainability in SUPs. By analysing how individual, organisational and systemic incentives interact – and at times counteract one another – the article has demonstrated that sustainable collaboration cannot be reduced to goodwill, individual champions or temporary project funding.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that sustainability in SUPs depends less on scale, project design or methodological choices, and more on the presence of shared epistemic objects supported by aligned incentive structures. When partnerships succeed in integrating individual motivations within a collective and democratic knowledge project, they are better positioned to contribute to established and emerging research fields over time. These insights are relevant beyond the Swedish case, as similar tensions between academic reward systems, professional conditions and policy frameworks have been identified in multiple national contexts.

A central contribution is the conceptualisation of the democratic, shared incentive: a shared commitment to knowledge production that extends beyond individual or organisational interests. Sustainability, from this perspective, is fundamentally about long-term, cumulative knowledge building situated within shared epistemic cultures and sustained through collective engagement. The democratic, shared incentive is not assumed to exist as a stable feature of partnerships but is proposed as an analytical construct for examining how sustainability may be cultivated through aligned institutional and epistemic arrangements. Recognising sustainability as cumulative knowledge building implies that practitioners, alongside academic researchers, must be acknowledged as contributors to the development of scientific fields. When practice-based research is positioned within established research traditions and subjected to peer review, practitioners' knowledge becomes part of the shared foundation upon which future research builds.

Through the illustrative example of ULF, the article has shown how incentives can either support or undermine long-term knowledge building. When incentive structures are aligned across individual, organisational and system levels, partnerships can develop into enduring infrastructures for joint knowledge production. Different incentive structures coexist within

SUPs, but sustainability depends on whether these structures are aligned in ways that enable the emergence of shared epistemic commitments. ULF assumes that there is a mutual interest and need to explore important areas. It is demanding for both researchers and practitioners, as one prerequisite is long-term collaboration in joint research environments, a responsive and humble attitude from everyone involved. Initially articulated problems may evolve during collaborative inquiry, and research findings may challenge assumptions held by all participants.

7.1 Implications for research, practice and policy

To be able to conduct research in collaboration between schools and universities, the analysis points to the need to integrate incentive-related questions more explicitly into theoretical and empirical work. While prior studies have focused on relationships, trust and joint problem formulation, incentives have often been treated as contextual conditions rather than as shaping forces. The concept of the democratic, shared incentive provides an analytical tool for examining how norms, values and societal commitments influence long-term engagement across epistemic cultures.

For practice, the findings underscore that sustainable collaboration cannot be reduced to individual commitment or temporary funding. Organisational arrangements that provide time, mandate and legitimacy for practice-based research as part of everyday professional work are required. Making the collective purpose of collaboration visible and explicit can support sustainability by linking individual engagement to broader educational and societal goals.

For governance and policy, the analysis highlights the importance of incentive structures that promote continuity and relationship-building. Initiatives such as ULF demonstrate that clear societal ambitions can function as shared incentives, but also that such ambitions must be accompanied by long-term resources and recognition within both academic and school governance systems. Governance approaches that focus narrowly on measurable outputs risk reinforcing projectification and undermining sustainability.

In conclusion, sustaining RPPs requires a shift from just viewing incentives as individual rewards to also understanding them as components of a collective, democratic and cumulative knowledge project. Such a shift is essential if practice-based research is to contribute to robust, critical and enduring knowledge bases for education systems. This reflects a new understanding of the relational and epistemic structures as a collective capacity for knowledge building.

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