Bridges to the Future: The Case of Business Mill

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Abstract: Higher education institutions are no longer just centers disseminating knowledge - they are increasingly active players in regional development. Community engagement in higher education means an interactive relationship where the institution, students, businesses, and the local community build a sustainable future together. This commitment is particularly evident in business collaboration, which provides tangible benefits for both the school and the region. There are many good examples of cooperation between higher education institutions and the region in South Karelia, but this study deals with the business incubator Business Mill. The purpose of the study was to describe the South Karelian model of community commitment to education, in this case, entrepreneurship education. This study was an explanatory case study. The theoretical part described the Triple Helix collaboration model, which should be favored in cooperation between regions and higher education institutions. In addition, the current state of the region's R&D cooperation was described in the theoretical part. The theoretical part was compared to the description of the operation of Business Mill, the subject of the case study, and the results of the comparison were presented in the summary. Community commitment to higher education creates a positive spiral: The region develops when knowledge and innovations are utilized locally. The higher education institution strengthens when it acts as an active player in society and attracts students who want to make a change. Students benefit when they get meaningful learning experiences and better readiness for working life. The results show that a comprehensive business incubator can be an effective way to organize cooperation between the region and the higher education institution and increase commitment. The results also showed that a named expert, who agilely combines the expertise of the higher education institution and the needs of the company, improves the quality of cooperation and facilitates communication. As an explanatory case study, this study does not aim to create new theory but to describe the current situation, its possible successes, and challenges. In South Karelia, a municipal-funded business incubator has been implemented in collaboration with a higher education institution with good results since 2018, now the results of the study show that similar commitment and cooperation would also be beneficial in building R&D cooperation.

Keywords: Business Mill, Business Collaborations, University Industry Co-operation, RDI.

1. Introduction

The cooperation between universities and businesses has a significant impact on education, local businesses, and other actors in the region. Business collaboration provides students with the opportunity to apply what they have learned in practice and create contacts with the working life during their studies. At the same time, companies gain fresh perspectives, research information, and the opportunity to recruit motivated experts. The collaboration can be, for example, project courses and case tasks, internships and thesis work, or joint research and development projects. This kind of interaction strengthens the vitality and competitiveness of the region.

This study aims to describe one case of the region's commitment to education in South Karelia. This is an explanatory case study, which describes the results of the Business Mill business incubator since 2018, as well as the results of a recently completed RDI research project about RDI cooperation in the region. The study provides a new perspective on the region's commitment to education and companies' RDI investments.

South Karelia, as an eastern province of Finland, needs to raise labor productivity and new innovations to remain vital and inhabited now and in the future. In South Karelia, in Lappeenranta, is located the reputable LUT University (LUT, 2025), LAB University of Applied Sciences, and the Land Defense College and vocational school, yet the region's companies still make little use of new technology or new innovations (Innovation strategy 2022-2025). Cooperation, as demonstrated in the Business Mill business incubator, could also solve the challenges of the region's companies' RDI investments.

2. Overview of RDI Collaboration in South Karelia

In January 2025, the Finnish government set a goal that by 2030, Finland's research and development expenditures will be 4% of the gross domestic product, currently being at about 2.7% level. Finland has lagged behind in economic growth in terms of labor productivity compared to peer countries. (Government Program, 2023.) In South Karelia, the views of local companies on research, development, and innovation activities were surveyed in the spring of 2025.

In the South Karelia region, the innovation ecosystem has historically faced challenges in activating collaboration between companies and higher education institutions. To assess the current situation and opportunities for development, a regional RDI survey was conducted in spring 2025 by the authors in collaboration with the City of Lappeenranta and The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra (Rantanen, City of Lappeenranta & Sitra, 2025). The survey was part of Sitra's *Innovations for Sustainable Growth* program and collected 303 responses from businesses and regional stakeholders.

The City of Lappeenranta's involvement reflects a broader shift in the role of public administration from passive enabler to active co-creator. In contemporary regional innovation ecosystems, municipalities are increasingly acting as "civic laboratories" that facilitate collaboration, experimentation, and co-development between local actors (Torfing, 2019). This perspective aligns well with the aims of the Sustainable Growth Innovations subproject, which integrates public and private sector efforts under a shared sustainability agenda.

The results revealed a strong interest among local companies in engaging more actively in research and innovation cooperation. Specifically, 44 respondents identified collaboration with higher education institutions as a key area where they needed support (Rantanen, City of Lappeenranta & Sitra, 2025). Additionally, 109 respondents expressed interest in participating in workshops or increasing their involvement in RDI activities in the near future (Rantanen, City of Lappeenranta & Sitra, 2025). These findings indicate a significant demand for more structured and accessible university-business interfaces that enable applied innovation.

These insights reinforce the strategic relevance of initiatives such as Business Mill. The initiative connects academic expertise with the needs of local companies by offering tailored support and acting as a regional interface for innovation collaboration. As Rantanen and Bogdanova (2024) argue, regional innovation platforms that follow the Triple Helix model can improve commercialization outcomes and enhance regional competitiveness. This model is based on close cooperation among academia, industry, and public sector actors. In this context, South Karelia's coordinated efforts to strengthen RDI partnerships represent a timely and necessary step toward meeting both national policy goals and the region's long-term development objectives.

3. Business Mill

Business Mill is a business incubator established in 2018, located at the LUT Universities in Lappeenranta. Business Mill's funding consists of joint financing from the municipalities of the region and LAB University of Applied Sciences, in which the city of Lappeenranta plays a significant role. The primary task of the incubator is to help businesses in the South Karelia region grow and internationalize, utilizing the resources of the university campus. The core of the operation is to direct both student and expert resources to support the region's businesses. The incubator operates on a two-year funding cycle. Goals have been set for Business Mill for each two-year period by its financiers. The goals have included the number of new businesses and the number of new business concepts. The goals for the 2024-2025 period are to establish 15 new businesses and 30 new business concepts.

Currently, Business Mill is in its fourth funding round, and the fifth is in the process of decision-making. Therefore, it is highly likely that the operation will continue for the next two years, 2026-2027.

The expert team of the incubator consists of five experts. Expertise mirrors the strategic edge of LAB University of Applied Sciences: sustainable growth. (LAB, 2025)

Business Mill's customer segments are micro and small businesses in South Karelia, as well as student entrepreneurship and startups. While traditional incubators focus solely on startups, Business Mill aims to combine growth-oriented businesses and startups in the region, thus ensuring sustainable business and growth. The operation mainly consists of 1to1 counseling and sparring, but in addition, two startup trainings are organized annually, specifically intended for idea-level teams, and also the business idea competition Idearace.

Idearace is a kind of stage where campus idea-stage startups get to present their ideas to investors, stakeholders, and local entrepreneurs (Idearace).

The service range includes products for the entire life cycle of a company, from idea to renewal (Business Mill).

The municipalities of South Karelia have wanted to participate in business development at the University of Applied Sciences for several years, demonstrating strong commitment to co-development from the region.

4. Trible Helix

The Triple Helix model (figure 1.) is a framework of innovation theories that describes the collaboration between universities, businesses, and the public sector to promote innovation and economic development. The model emphasizes that innovations do not arise solely within individual organizations, but in their interaction. (Lahtonen & Tokila, 2014.) The Triple Helix model refers to the development of a tripartite network of organizations between the university, government, and industry, where the university (and similar research and educational institutions) should be considered the primary source where knowledge is produced and from where it spreads (MSM 2021). The role of universities is due to the assumption that it is the most adaptable of the three institutions of the Triple Helix. Adaptability, in turn, is a result of the constant turnover of students (Lahtonen & Tokila, 2014).

Institutional and evolutionary perspectives within the Triple Helix can also be treated as separate sub-areas. The institutional Triple Helix model describes the emergence and development of relationships between the university, business life, and public administration based on scientific knowledge, usually retrospectively. The evolutionary Triple Helix model seeks to explain how different functions affect the development of the innovation system. The evolutionary model can also provide policy recommendations aimed at reorganizing the Triple Helix network and thereby accelerating innovation activity. Often, the examination is limited to the development of a specific geographical area or innovation cluster. (Lahtonen & Tokila. 2014.)

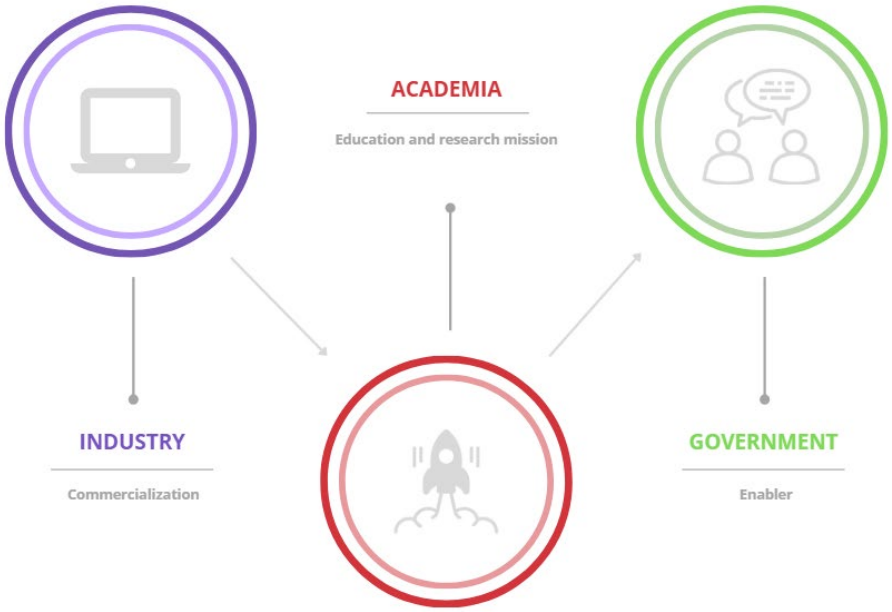

Figure 1: The second phase of the Triple Helix model.

The figure one is based on the description of the second phase of the Triple Helix model by Lahtonen & Tokila 2014, where cooperation is already underway, and the role of each actor is clear. In the next, i.e., the third phase, the Triple Helix 3 division of tasks becomes blurred, and institutions take on each other's roles situationally and flexibly, if this is believed to improve innovation activities. On the other hand, in the first phase, the government has the largest role in defining roles and initiating cooperation. (Lahtonen & Tokila, 2014.)

These theoretical phases are increasingly observable in South Karelia's ongoing innovation efforts.

Recent insights from the South Karelia region indicate a growing momentum toward deeper integration between academia, industry, and the public sector. Feedback collected during a regional survey in 2025 highlights recurring calls from businesses for more systematic engagement with universities, not only in research collaboration but also in co-developing innovative environments. Companies are increasingly open to participating in shared development efforts, such as thematic workshops and long-term partnerships, which suggests a rising willingness to break down institutional silos.

This trend points toward a maturation of the regional innovation ecosystem, where actors are not merely fulfilling predefined roles but actively shaping new ones in response to emerging challenges and opportunities. The Business Mill initiative serves as a practical interface in this evolution, bridging academic expertise and

entrepreneurial needs through co-creation processes. Such developments align with the third phase of the Triple Helix model, characterized by role hybridization and institutional reflexivity. In this context, South Karelia is demonstrating how local ecosystems can gradually transition into agile innovation arenas, where the boundaries between knowledge production, application, and regulation are increasingly blurred.

Similar patterns have been identified in other European regions, particularly in countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, where regional innovation platforms serve as active intermediaries between universities, industry, and government. These contexts similarly show that institutional hybridization and overlapping roles support innovation capacity and adaptability (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). This suggests that South Karelia's development trajectory fits into a broader trend of place-based innovation ecosystems grounded in Triple Helix logic.

5. Methodology

The research method of this article is an explanatory case study. The study aims to answer the question of why the case is exactly as it is, or why it has developed in a particular way. The object to be explained describes the relationship between complex real-life events or the methods associated with them. (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014.) In the theme analysis method, data triangulation is utilized, and perspectives and analysis are offered on the impact of the Business Mill incubator located at LAB University of Applied Sciences on university-business cooperation and the region's commitment to education. The connection to the theory was sought by examining the whole, interpreting, and linking phenomena to the theory used. General and recurring phenomena were sought from the material, and their relationships and connections were examined. (Ojasalo, 2018. 110–111.)

Data for this study was mostly qualitative, consisting of the results of Business Mill since 2018 and the results of the ongoing Sustainable Growth Innovations project. In addition, the data for the study has utilized a regional RDI cooperation result report commissioned by Sitra.

The purpose has been to describe one way of cooperation between universities and the region to increase vitality and entrepreneurship in the area.

In addition to qualitative case data, the study incorporated the results of a regional RDI survey carried out in collaboration with the City of Lappeenranta and The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra as part of their *Innovations for Sustainable Growth* program. The survey gathered responses from 303 stakeholders across South Karelia and included both quantitative and qualitative questions about RDI practices, collaboration readiness, and regional challenges. Notably, 44 respondents identified a need for stronger collaboration with higher education institutions, while 109 expressed willingness to participate in joint development activities such as workshops. These findings enriched the thematic analysis by grounding observations in a broader regional context and supporting the explanatory logic of the case.

6. Results

6.1 Business Mill Results From 2018 to 2025

Business Mill's customer numbers have been growing throughout its operation. The latest year, 2024, included exactly 200 customers, of which 143 were companies from South Karelia and 57 were teams in the idea phase.

In the spring of 2025, Business Mill is conducting a customer satisfaction survey, the preliminary results of which (response rate 15%) indicate that customers see a very significant role for incubator-like operations in the development of their companies. Over 79% of respondents said that Business Mill genuinely had an impact on the growth of their company (Figure 2.) and over 66% said they believe that Business Mill is a good partner for growth and internationalization in the future.

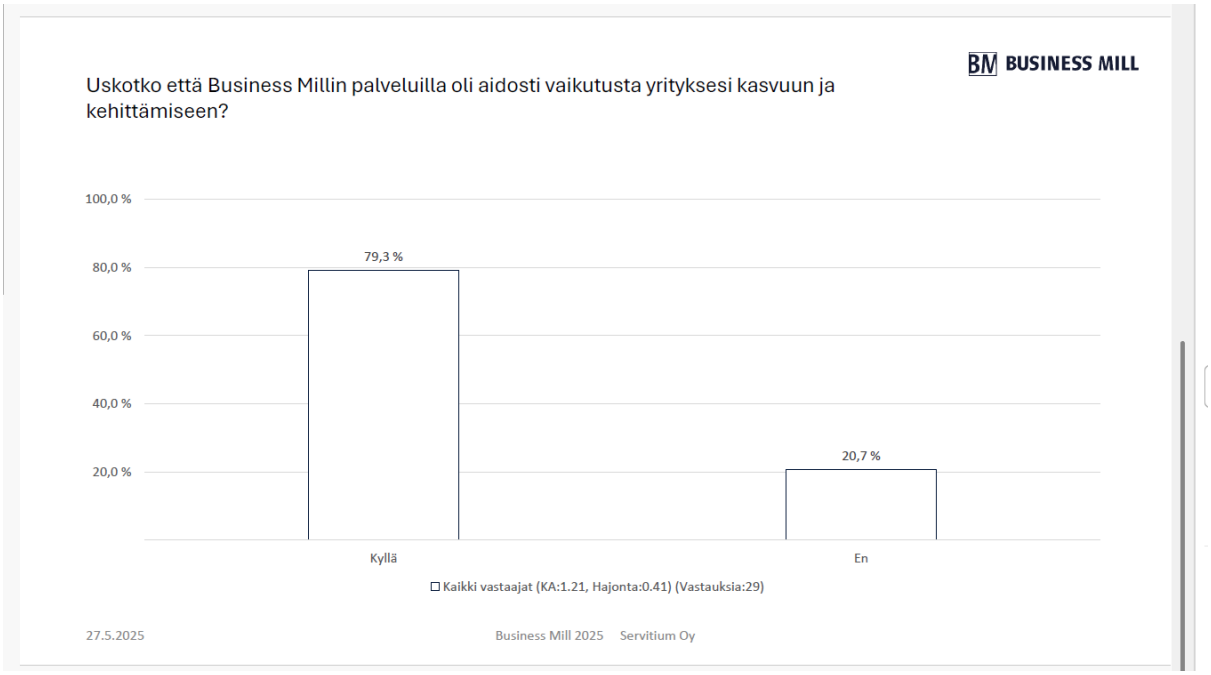

Figure 2: Preliminary results of Business Mill's customer satisfaction survey 2025. Do you believe that Business Mill's services genuinely impacted on your company's growth and development? Not yet published, it will be published at LAB Focus in September 2025.

Between 2018 and 2024, Business Mill successfully connected a total of 283 South Karelian companies to education, projects, and expertise at LUT Universities. Most of the corporate collaboration has taken place through courses and teaching. Communication, marketing, forecasting, construction technology, and various market surveys have been the most common themes around which students have been able to work in companies.

The year 2024 was the seventh working year for the Business Mill business incubator and at the same time the busiest of the operating years so far. A total of 200 customers visited for advice, of which 143 were companies. Business Mill's customers established a total of nine new companies in 2024. Of these, six were established in Lappeenranta, two in Imatra, and one in Luumäki. In total, 57 business ideas were heard in the counseling during the last year. Business Mill's corporate clients received a total of €2.5M in public and private funding for their operations development in 2024. The funding launched new products, explored the market, and developed services. In total, Business Mill's clients hired 39 new employees during the year. (Latvala, 2025)

The employees hired by Business Mill's customers are often university students, who come to work to complete an internship or to implement a development project.

One concrete way for collaboration between students and businesses is through innovations. In this process, a group of students innovate around a company's theme for either 12 or 24 hours, creating a solution that is finally presented to the company's representatives. The students work on the company's needs together for that entire time. In Lappeenranta, a cooperative of marketing students carries out these innovations. (Soikkeli, 2022.) The popularity of these innovations among businesses and other regional actors has been immense. Twelve-hour innovations have been utilized in the area by business service providers such as Lappeenranta City Business Services, municipalities like Rautjärvi municipality, and even businesses.

In total, from 2018 to 2024, Business Mill has helped over 650 South Karelian businesses to grow and internationalize. Over the years, these companies have hired numerous university graduates, who have further improved their productivity.

The positive outcomes observed at Business Mill align with recent research on university–industry collaboration. For example, Rantala et al. (2025) found that Finnish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) highly value research produced by universities and primarily use it to build their knowledge. Business Mill serves as a conduit for such knowledge-based collaboration, providing SMEs and startups access to cutting-edge research and expertise. In line with the Triple Helix model, the incubator demonstrates how an intermediary organization can enhance innovation in a region by blurring the traditional boundaries between academia, industry, and

government. The strong municipal involvement in Business Mill's funding and operations exemplifies the government's role in facilitating these interactions.

6.2 Sustainable Growth Innovations – Subproject Process and Starting Point

The *Sustainable Growth Innovations* subproject was established to experiment with new forms of collaboration between higher education institutions and regional companies. It focused in particular on fostering sustainability-driven innovation. The process was designed to operationalize the strategic goals of LAB University of Applied Sciences by embedding sustainability into business support services and by leveraging the university's expertise for regional economic development.

Business Mill functioned as the primary interface for this collaboration. By integrating academic resources, including student projects, expert consultations, and entrepreneurship coaching, into the growth paths of SMEs and early-stage startups, the initiative created a flexible and agile innovation pipeline. In addition to serving regional business needs, the Business Mill model functions as a pedagogical environment that connects students with real-world challenges. This approach is supported by research on cooperative and experiential learning, which suggests that student engagement is significantly enhanced when tasks involve authentic problem-solving with tangible outcomes (Smith et al., 2005). As students participate in startup support, expert consulting, and project-based co-development, they develop entrepreneurial competencies that complement academic learning. A major component was the Idearace startup competition. It provided visibility and feedback for early-phase ideas, while structured one-to-one sparring offered more personalized support for existing companies.

At the launch phase, regional innovation cooperation appeared fragmented and unevenly distributed across sectors. However, findings from a regional survey commissioned by Sitra in spring 2025 indicated strong interest in deepening university collaboration. Specifically, 44 respondents identified research collaboration with higher education institutions as a key development need. This emphasized a latent demand for more integrated innovation services.

These results align with broader European studies that highlight the role of universities in building regional innovation ecosystems. As previously noted by Rantanen and Bogdanova (2024), regional hubs such as Business Mill play a pivotal role in translating academic knowledge into marketable outcomes. This is particularly effective when such initiatives are embedded in a Triple Helix structure involving academia, industry, and public institutions. The South Karelia case demonstrates that sustainable growth can be supported through localized, university-driven mechanisms, assuming there is municipal commitment, strategic alignment, and an active interface such as Business Mill.

7. Conclusions

The impact of real business cases on a student's employability is specifically formed through critical work-life skills. When students get to implement real cases from local businesses during their studies, they learn such critical work-life skills that enable them to succeed well in working life. (Juvonen, 2025)

LUT universities have done an excellent job in achieving worldwide recognition, and for this reason, the region is very committed to developing education in South Karelia. LUT University has, among other things, occasionally received a significant 4-million-euro research environment with the help of partners. The research environment is studying a substitute for fossil fuels. (Hannus & Toijonen, 2025.) In addition, in early 2025, LUT University and LAB University of Applied Sciences received over 2- million euros in donations from South Karelian companies and communities to establish a professorship in artificial intelligence and particle technology at the university, and the University of Applied Sciences received a senior lecturer in early childhood education (Väisänen, 2025). In 2023, LAB University of Applied Sciences received information that, thanks to extensive corporate cooperation and funding from the company, it was able to start electrical and automation engineering education in Lappeenranta in 2024 (LAB 2023).

Since this is often only possible for medium or large companies, it is important that the region also supports the participation of small businesses in education. In South Karelia, this is realized in the form of Business Mill.

University-business cooperation is important for the region's small businesses, as cooperation helps them develop their own products and gain more understanding of future development trends (Husso, 2024).

The Ministry of Employment and the Economy has studied corporate university and research institute cooperation from a development perspective in 2024 and continued the same theme also in a business barometer conducted together with Finnish Yrittäjät and Finnvera (Suomen Yrittäjät, 2024).

Interaction between companies and universities produces various benefits according to companies' views. Companies that have worked with universities and research institutes felt that cooperation most often led to the strengthening of knowledge and skills and understanding of future development trends and markets. The most significant result of cooperation between universities of applied sciences and companies was the development of new and improved products. (Husso et al, 2024.)

This case study supports the Triple Helix proposition that active university–industry–government partnerships can be a catalyst for regional innovation. Business Mill shows how a university's third mission (contribution to society) can be operationalized through an incubator that actively engages with external stakeholders. The structured interactions in this case led to measurable business development outcomes, affirming the value of collaborative innovation frameworks in practice.

In the future, cooperation between the community and the university can deepen further, for example, through community learning environments, regional innovation platforms, and digital networks. The most important thing is to maintain open dialogue and a common goal: to build a knowledgeable, participatory, and sustainable society.

The findings in this paper reinforce the relevance of the Triple Helix model as a practical framework for regional innovation development. In South Karelia, initiatives such as Business Mill and targeted survey-based RDI assessments demonstrate how universities, businesses, and municipalities can move beyond traditional collaboration models toward dynamic, co-created ecosystems. The results suggest a growing regional readiness for hybrid innovation roles and stronger interfaces between actors. To maintain momentum, continuous feedback loops, tailored support mechanisms, and inclusive platforms like startup competitions and co-development workshops will be essential. These localized models may offer broader lessons for other regions seeking to unlock sustainable growth through knowledge-based collaboration.

For practitioners and policymakers, the Business Mill model provides a blueprint for fostering regional vitality. Key practical insights include the importance of having dedicated personnel who act as brokers between academia and companies, and the benefit of combining support for existing firms with support for new startups. Other regions aiming to increase community commitment to higher education and local innovation may consider establishing similar incubator programs that involve multi-year public funding and close university collaboration.

This study is limited by its focus on a single case in one region, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The data used (such as internal reports and a preliminary survey) were largely self-reported and specific to the Business Mill context. There is also a potential response bias in the customer satisfaction survey due to its modest response rate. Future research could examine comparable incubator initiatives in other regions or employ longitudinal designs to assess the long-term impacts of university–community engagement on regional development.

Ethics Declaration

The study did not require ethical declarations.

AI Declaration

An artificial intelligence (AI) tool called Future Objects has been used for checking and editing the language of the study. The AI tool has translated some of the Finnish terms and checked the spelling.

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