



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# **What Is Ideon, Anyway?**

A Study Of Hybrid Organizations' Legitimacy

by

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# Abstract

This study aims to analyze how hybrid organizations earn legitimacy through competing stakeholder role evaluations in institutionally complex environments. In the case of Ideon Science Park, the study examines how corporate branding influences stakeholder legitimacy interpretations.

The paper follows a qualitative single-case study with an abductive research approach. The primary data includes semi-structured interviews with Ideon's external stakeholders such as startups, university faculty, and regional actors part of the ecosystem. The study utilizes corporate branding material as secondary data, including Ideon website content, impact reports, social media and strategic marketing materials.

The analysis identified uneven legitimacy across the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions. Pragmatic legitimacy emerged strongly, moral legitimacy was found as conditional, and cognitive legitimacy had the weakest results. As institutional complexity fragmented stakeholder legitimacy interpretations, the study identifies how different stakeholders evaluate the role of corporate branding as a tool to help influence role understanding without entirely removing the inherent ambiguity of hybrids.

The research was constrained by the time frame of the master thesis period, which limited the stakeholder sample size. Additionally, the study is based on a single hybrid organization which limits the study's generalizability.

The research suggests managers of hybrid organizations should prioritize role clarity through coherent communication to reduce fragmentation.

This study provides a unique understanding of how hybrid organizations earn legitimacy evaluations within institutionally complex environments, specifically hybrid organizations that operate as intermediaries across competing institutional logics.

**Keywords:** Hybrid Organizations, Legitimacy, Corporate Branding, Institutional Complexity, Stakeholder Evaluation, Innovation Ecosystems, Science Park

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# 1. Introduction

*\*(This section incorporates selected text from a previously submitted mock study)*

## 1.1 Background and Relevance of the Study

As countries develop over time and pursue policies that strengthen their economies, science parks have emerged as key actors in developed economies. Science parks are knowledge-based organizations concentrated in specific geographic locations that generate economic growth and accelerate innovation (Klofsten et al., 2025). They offer growth support and facility space, enabling a built-in culture of innovation and the flow of specialized knowledge between universities, research institutions, and private industry stakeholders (Henriques et al., 2018).

Innovation results from actors such as universities, industry, research institutes, and government collectively generating knowledge that catalyzes economic and social development (Russell & Smorodinskaya, 2018). They all belong to an ecosystem, which generates value by facilitating the innovation process and enabling individual actors to collaborate (Chaudhary et al., 2024). As a result, science parks become central to the innovation process by fostering collaboration among actors from diverse institutional spheres.

Science parks are structurally complex because they facilitate collaboration, knowledge and technology transfer, funding, and talent attraction across various stakeholders (Buday et al., 2025). As an intermediary organization coordinating multiple stakeholders, its role is not always clearly defined or understood (Henriques et al., 2018). As science park literature expands on the characteristics of these organizations, there remains a gap in research exploring what types of organizations they are from an institutional theory perspective. Science parks have therefore been categorized as hybrid organizations, as their intermediary position within the innovation ecosystem requires them to simultaneously combine the institutional logics of academia, industry, and government (Huybrechts et al., 2020). This hybrid nature creates legitimacy problems, as each stakeholder group expects something different from the science park and evaluates it against its own criteria, making it difficult to maintain a shared organizational identity. Within this context, corporate branding becomes relevant as a communicative mechanism. According to Hatch & Schultz (2001), a strong corporate brand is vital to an organization's visibility, recognition, and reputation, thereby shaping perceptions among all its stakeholders. As a result, corporate branding becomes a tool for communicating identity, values, and purpose, enabling management to shape stakeholder expectations and interpretations of the

organization's role (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). In the case of hybrid organizations operating across multiple institutional logics, this tool becomes relevant, as management can use it to guide stakeholders and shape their perceptions.

## 1.2 Research Gap

Although the literature on hybrid organizations, legitimacy, and innovation continues to grow, there remains limited research on how these areas intersect. Existing research has mainly focused on the challenges hybrid organizations face when engaging with multiple institutional logics, as well as the role ambiguity that emerges from this complexity. However, there remains a gap in existing research on how stakeholders evaluate a hybrid organization's role and whether those evaluations contribute to earned legitimacy, with corporate branding serving as the mechanism that shapes stakeholder interpretations of the organization's role and value. Despite growing research on science parks, they have not been examined as hybrid intermediary organizations from an institutional theory perspective. Research on science parks has mainly focused on their structure, functions, and contribution to innovation ecosystems. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing how legitimacy is socially earned through stakeholders' evaluations.

## 1.3 Justification of the Study

The research delivers both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends institutional theory by analyzing how legitimacy is earned across different stakeholders within a hybrid organization, through the empirical context of a science park. The study examines how competing institutional logics shape how organizational roles are understood and evaluated. The research also complements the case by adopting corporate branding as a mechanism that shapes stakeholders' evaluations. As a result, corporate branding can indirectly shape how stakeholders interpret the organization, influencing legitimacy evaluations by improving role understanding. According to Scott (2013), legitimacy is a foundational condition of an organization's existence in society. Specifically, for hybrid organizations in the context of science parks, legitimacy earning is particularly important because it is granted by social audiences that judge whether the organization is desirable, proper, or appropriate (Suchman, 1995).

## 1.4 Research Aim and Research Question

The study aims to explore how hybrid organizations earn legitimacy from stakeholders from different institutional spheres, each with varied interests and criteria for evaluating the

organization's role. More specifically, it examines stakeholder evaluations based on their understanding of the organization's role within the innovation ecosystem. The analytical lens uses institutional theory, with Suchman's (1995) three dimensions of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive, applied iteratively as an interpretive framework alongside the empirical material. Based on this, the study asks:

***How do hybrid organizations earn legitimacy across competing stakeholder evaluations of their role?***

## 1.5 Research Context and Case Selection

This study examines Ideon Science Park, which serves as the empirical context given its renowned status as Sweden's first science park (SISP, n.d.) and its influence on Sweden's innovation community. Regarding legitimacy and stakeholder evaluation, science parks remain understudied, making them a suitable case for hybrid organizations. They operate across several external stakeholders that influence their strategic orientation, offering insight towards multi-stakeholder ownership, its role in connecting stakeholders, and the organization's susceptibility to conflicting institutional expectations (Klofsten et al., 2025). The resulting legitimacy challenges become observable through stakeholders' evaluations of hybrid organizational role understanding. Additionally, Ideon's heritage enriches the study, as it is an organization embedded in the ecosystem, offering a richer empirical context than other organizations. The case study enables the study to explore the theory in a practical context, with implications for other hybrid organizations operating in similar environments.

## 1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The rest of the thesis follows the next structure: Chapter 2 introduces the literature review, setting the stage for the theoretical foundations. This chapter expands on innovation ecosystems and the intermediary role of science parks; hybrid organizations and institutional logics; role ambiguity; legitimacy and stakeholder evaluation; and corporate branding, introduced as a supporting concept that acts as a communicative mechanism.

Chapter 3 establishes the analytical lens through which the study is examined. It uses institutional theory to understand how stakeholder evaluations earn legitimacy in hybrid organizations, rather than treating legitimacy as shaped solely by the organization. The study also uses Suchman's (1995) dimensions of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy to interpret

stakeholders' evaluations. The chapter also explores corporate branding as a mechanism, examining how hybrid organizations use it to shape stakeholders' understanding of their roles.

Chapter 4 outlines the method adopted in the study. It explains the use of a qualitative, abductive research design and the decision to use a single case study. The chapter also describes how primary and secondary data were collected and later analyzed through thematic analysis. Finally, it discusses the research's trustworthiness and the ethical considerations employed throughout the study.

Chapter 5 demonstrates the findings from the semi-structured interviews and the organizational materials. Additionally, it analyzes how stakeholders evaluate Ideon Science Park through the dimensions of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy.

Chapter 6 reflects on the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature review. The chapter discusses the broader understanding of how legitimacy is earned in hybrid organizations and how it is evaluated differently across stakeholder groups and across the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions outlined by Suchman (1995).

Finally, Chapter 7 ends with the study's main contributions and developments and resolves the research question. It develops on how the Ideon's case study extends the knowledge of legitimacy within hybrid organizations. The chapter also reflects on research limitations and possible future areas of research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Science parks are hybrid organizations that operate within complex innovation ecosystems. The description of what a science park is and exactly how it fits within its professional landscape is highly unintuitive. Science Park roles are ambiguous and are assessed by multiple external stakeholders, making legitimacy highly dependent on others' interpretations. The challenges to obtaining legitimacy lie in how the parks are positioned within the innovation ecosystem and in the repercussions for evaluation.

Innovation ecosystems are versatile and structured through close collaboration among multiple actors, such as private firms, universities, and government. This format allows for innovation to occur dynamically, in a non-linear, interaction-driven manner, rather than in more siloed organizational structures (Russell & Smorodinskaya, 2018). The collaborative nature of these ecosystems fosters knowledge exchange among stakeholders, enabling an innovation structure built on knowledge and relationships (Chaudhary et al., 2024). By doing so, the science parks that live within these ecosystems best balance the needs and interests of the different groups living within by coordinating knowledge and resources as coherently as possible.

As collaboration facilitators, science parks are responsible within the ecosystem for uniting diverse actors and establishing innovation processes through their networks (Klofsten et al., 2025). Not only do they need to ensure individual groups' needs are met, but they must also act as intermediaries between stakeholders. Science parks promote interaction and coordination between these parties by maintaining alignment and knowledge exchange through collaboration (De Silva et al., 2018). Beyond its role as an intermediary, science parks face hybridity, which entails integrating multiple stakeholders' intentions and goals into their operational structure (Bruneel et al., 2025; Sætre, 2023). This occurs because they are positioned at the intersection of multiple institutional expectations, addressing multiple groups within the environment simultaneously (Huybrechts et al., 2020). Therefore, a science park's value lies in its ability to coordinate ecosystem actors. However, because each stakeholder interacts with it differently, complexity and ambiguity arise.

Hybrid organizations are difficult to categorize for these reasons, offering explanations for why science parks struggle to have their roles clearly understood by the public (Huybrechts et al.,

2020). Science parks thereby lack a single organizational identity, which hinders perception, and underscores the importance of role clarity in their communication. This role ambiguity that hybrids face is further complicated by the competing expectations of its multiple stakeholders, which challenge the public in grasping exactly what the organization does and for whom (Pache & Santos, 2013).

Ambiguity highlights the importance of science parks earning legitimacy. Given how expectations and understandings vary, legitimacy cannot be an inherent trait of an organization; rather, it is a socially earned evaluation formulated by ecosystem stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy depends on how audiences perceive the park's actions as appropriate within the norms, values, and beliefs of the system in which it operates (Suchman, 1995). As science parks depend on stakeholders for organizational success, positive legitimacy perceptions are vital, and ambiguity is a major issue.

In situations where organizations seek to communicate their role and value more clearly, corporate branding is a strategic mechanism that targets an organization's identity to multiple stakeholder groups (Balmer, 2001). Corporate branding can shape how the public perceives organizations by communicating a corporation's identity and values for stakeholders to evaluate, thereby reinforcing its reputation. (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

To further examine prior research on this study, the literature review is divided into two streams: how science parks operate as innovation ecosystem intermediaries, and how legitimacy is an outcome of ecosystem actor evaluation.

## 2.2 Science Parks are Hybrid Intermediary Actors

### 2.2.1 Innovation Ecosystems

Over the years, innovation ecosystems have been heavily studied and described as complex, interconnected systems of multiple actors. In these ecosystems, actors collaborate to catalyze and share knowledge. In innovation ecosystems, relationships, actions, and innovation outcomes are not predictable; they constantly change, so innovation does not happen in a straight line but as an iterative process (Russell & Smorodinskaya, 2018). In this context, innovation is not a process in which a single actor builds from scratch, but a co-creation process in which all actors in the innovation ecosystem coordinate their resources and motivations to achieve a final result (Russell & Smorodinskaya, 2018).

A key aspect of the innovation ecosystem is the spillover effect of knowledge among its actors. According to Chaudhary et al. (2024), knowledge does not come from a single source of truth, but is distributed through different actors, such as universities, companies, and government institutions. Therefore, the development of new knowledge depends on dynamic interactions among actors within the innovation ecosystem, positioning collaboration and the exchange of ideas as central to its functioning (Chaudhary et al., 2024). For ecosystems to operate effectively, structural support that facilitates communication, coordination, and shared understanding among actors must be present. Although understanding the function of the innovation ecosystem is important, it is equally important not to ignore the stakeholder framework in which it is built. This structure, called the Triple Helix model, is considered the underlying framework that organizes the innovation ecosystem. This model considers three institutional spheres, universities, industry, and government, as the main actors that catalyze innovation. In this model, the government serves as a support and facilitator across sectors, enabling collaboration (Sun et al., 2019). Although the functions of these institutions overlap, their overall dynamics contribute to the creation, application, and diffusion of knowledge at the regional and national levels. Sun et al. (2019) argue that although the theoretical benefits this dynamic offers are important, in practice, it is difficult because it requires the three stakeholders to act in accordance with their own motivations and institutional logics.

The dynamics of coordination across different institutional logics create challenges for aligning on a single goal, norm, or expectation. For instance, what a university might want is to develop knowledge, which can be different from what the industry may want, which is to create profit, and the same with the government; what they may seek is regional development, therefore, all have different interests and expectations (Sun et al., 2019).

### 2.2.2 Science Parks as Intermediaries

As a possible solution to coordinate the innovation ecosystem, science parks have emerged, acting as intermediary organizations, enabling different actors within the ecosystem to connect. Science parks act as innovation intermediaries, creating synergies within the ecosystem and facilitating organizations' and firms' access to knowledge and resources, as well as their collaboration with other actors, thereby contributing to the innovation process (Caloffi et al., 2023). De Silva et al. (2018) expand on the definition of innovation intermediaries, describing them as actors that support different actors at various stages of the innovation development, placing them at the center of innovation ecosystems.

Science parks not only facilitate connections among actors within the innovation ecosystem but also engage in various activities to bring them together, coordinate cross-sector relationships among actors with different institutional backgrounds, and help them learn together (Caloffi et al., 2023). Additionally, they offer physical spaces where actors can network and build connections organically (Caloffi et al., 2023). Overall, the activities that science parks perform lead the actors within the innovation ecosystem to develop meaningful connections that promote shared innovation values and resources that enable innovation (Caloffi et al., 2023).

The activities that innovation intermediaries, such as science parks, execute have an impact on the broader innovation ecosystem. The activities impact how information is distributed across the ecosystem and how knowledge is shared, offering opportunities for collaboration and a platform for exchanging ideas (Caloffi et al., 2023). At the same time, De Silva et al. (2018) describe these innovation intermediaries as builders of the innovation ecosystem, as they are responsible for creating the bridge between actors; thereby, their biggest contribution is the capacity to build and bridge the innovation system.

Across the literature, science parks are often difficult to define due to their broad roles and varying focuses. Klosthen et al. (2025) state that each science park is an independent organization, with its objectives determined by its strategic orientation and ownership. This difference in the identity of science parks is part of their hybridity. Thus, the organization's structure shapes how they engage with stakeholders and how it is evaluated.

### 2.2.3 Science Parks as Hybrid Organizations

A hybrid organization is defined as one that combines multiple institutional logics (Bruneel et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Huybrechts et al. (2020) define them as organizations that combine institutional logics, even when those logics are competing ones from different sectors. This definition is complemented by Sætre (2023), who adds that hybrid organizations are contradictory, combining logics and value systems. Therefore, for this study, hybrid organizations are being defined as organizations that combine logics even when those logics are contradictory. In this view, logic refers to the values, beliefs, and goals deemed appropriate and meaningful within an institution.

In the case of science parks, hybridity is part of their organizational nature, given their intermediary position within the innovation ecosystem. As they function as connectors between the university, industry, and government, they constantly balance between logics: academic logic that aims to create knowledge, business logic that seeks profitability, and governmental logic that

seeks social benefits. Each of these logics is distinct and at times contradictory. Therefore, science parks must navigate them while maintaining legitimacy, as stakeholders evaluate the organization differently according to their own criteria. This situation that science parks face is directly related to Bruneel et al. (2025), who argue that hybrid organizations must incorporate characteristics of multiple institutional logics to meet expectations and interests and be evaluated as successful by stakeholders.

In this perspective, Bruneel et al. (2025) state that failing to follow a specific logic directly leads to having the weakest form of legitimacy. Although organizations can choose any strategy to navigate differing logics, none of them actually resolve the underlying issue; instead, they must manage expectations by combining all the strategies. This aligns with Battilana & Dorado (2010), who argue that hybrid organizations are inherently unstable because they combine competing logics; therefore, to remain hybrid over time, they must develop a common organizational identity that balances the logics they combine.

As hybrid organizations engage with different stakeholders and therefore different logics, they must maintain legitimacy. However, the process of earning and maintaining legitimacy becomes challenging, as the success of a hybrid organization depends on satisfying the expectations of stakeholders with different evaluative criteria (Bruneel et al. 2025).

## 2.3 Role Ambiguity in Hybrid Organizations

The structural complexity of a hybrid organization is reflected internally and externally, as its ambiguous identity spills over into stakeholders' perceptions of its role. The ambiguity in hybrid organizations is not a communication issue but rather an embedded structural issue, as they operate under multiple logics with different role understandings.

As hybrid organizations operate under competing institutional logics, they constantly face the challenge of adopting a single logic as part of their strategy. Consequently, this singular logic could lead to the neglect of other stakeholders' expectations. This directly relates to Pache & Santos (2013), who identify the challenge that hybrid organizations face when they must navigate misaligned external expectations that dictate what constitutes legitimate behavior.

Understanding how organizational structure restricts an organization's ability to meet stakeholder expectations is particularly important in the study of hybrid organizations. According to Dahan and Leca (2025), maintaining legitimacy can be challenging for hybrid organizations, as different

stakeholders have distinct criteria for what they consider legitimate. Simultaneously, their criteria are shaped by their institutional logics. In this context, Fu et al. (2026) expand on this, noting that the mission and priorities of an organization are evaluated differently across diverse stakeholders' expectations, thereby making it a more complex challenge for organizations to communicate and engage effectively with their audiences. For instance, an organization's social and welfare message may conflict with its business logic, which may prioritize profitability and efficiency. As a result, the structural limitations that hybrid organizations face impact how effectively they communicate with all their stakeholders.

Adding to the limitations that hybrid organizations face, an ambiguity challenge arises from multiple identities stemming from stakeholders' evaluations of the same organization. Rosser et al. (2022) argue that hybrid organizations constantly combine multiple organizational identities and action logics to serve different stakeholders, making it difficult to develop a consistent role understanding across stakeholders, a condition that, as this thesis argues, increases role ambiguity and weakens legitimacy. This statement also aligns with Zollo et al. (2022), who expand on this point from an internal perspective, noting that hybrid organizations often include members from diverse institutional backgrounds. These differences can complicate the development of a coherent shared identity, as members may hold different understandings of the organization's purpose (Zollo et al., 2022). Moreover, the internal fragmentation of identities makes it difficult for hybrid organizations to communicate a consistent role to external stakeholders, who assess them using different and potentially contradictory criteria (Huybrechts et al., 2020)

Hybrid organizations are complex; this complexity is further emphasized when stakeholders try to categorize them, for instance, by questioning whether the organization is a public actor, a for-profit organization, or a university-associated organization, thereby complicating the scenario for these organizations. According to Huybrechts et al. (2020), the issue of organizations merging goals and logics makes them difficult to categorize, hindering stakeholders' ability to understand and evaluate the organization comprehensively. As a consequence, this problem often leads to organizations receiving limited support from stakeholders and access to resources, and to eroding legitimacy. Additionally, stakeholders face a challenge in evaluating legitimacy because they lack an understanding of which category the organization falls into (Huybrechts et al., 2020). This is expanded upon by Gümüşay et al. (2020), who argue that stakeholders' logics are value-dependent, so they not only provide meaning to organizations but are also constructed through meaning; thus, the same logic is understood and enacted differently by different stakeholders depending on the values and beliefs they consider important.

## 2.4 Legitimacy and Stakeholder Evaluation

### 2.4.1 Legitimacy

Legitimacy plays an important role in organizational evaluation, as it indicates stakeholder approval in complex innovation environments. Hybrid organizations that depend on their stakeholder groups for success feel pressure to appear legitimate, or they will struggle to secure the support they need. Legitimacy is explained by Suchman (1995) as the perception of an organization's actions as desirable, proper, and appropriate by evaluating audiences within the firm's respective environment. Each organization operates within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs in which it is expected to abide (Suchman, 1995). As socially constructed expectations shape these judgments, there is also variation in legitimacy perceptions. Legitimacy is not an inherent property; rather, it is earned during the evaluation stage, as stakeholders apply their respective criteria (Suchman, 1995).

Suchman (1995) notes how organizational behavior and external expectations align or misalign, often resulting in legitimacy evaluations based on socially constructed norms and beliefs. However, while stakeholder groups socially evaluate legitimacy, each group has a different working relationship and intention in its partnership with an organization. The relationship between stakeholders and organizations is not uniform, creating evaluative differences based on levels of experience and understanding.

There are three legitimacy dimensions: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Each of them provides an alternative way for evaluators to assess organizations and their actions, based on different thinking frameworks. Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the evaluation of value between organizations and stakeholders, noting the benefits and objectives to be gained from the partnership (Suchman, 1995; Wiggins, 2019). It serves as a rationale for actors to want to work with an organization based on what is in it for them, and how the relationship benefits their organization moving forward. Moral legitimacy is composed of normative evaluations regarding how well an organization acts, and whether, socially and ethically, its performance is the "right thing to do" (Suchman, 1995; Wiggins, 2019). Unlike pragmatic evaluation, moral evaluation prioritizes the well-being of the professional environment by ensuring ethical codes are followed and that corporations do not sell out for the exclusive benefit of financial gain. Lastly, cognitive legitimacy stems from intuitive logic and perception that organizational action is understandable and necessary (Suchman, 1995; Wiggins, 2019). It provides an evaluative framework based on taken-for-grantedness, implying that an organization is legitimate because it ought to be accepted

by others so commonly (Suchman, 1995; Wiggins, 2019). Legitimacy is seen through these three dimensions, each differently, and no organization is limited to a single one of them. This causes misalignment among perceptions of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy when evaluating the same company, underscoring that legitimacy is multidimensional and contextual.

## 2.4.2 Stakeholder Evaluation

Legitimacy is earned during a stakeholder's evaluation phase, which varies depending on each stakeholder's criteria. Stakeholders are evaluators with diverse interests, expectations, and motives for how they judge organizational behavior (Vartiainen, 2003). It is not a straightforward, structured process; rather, it is subjectively evaluated by individuals and groups, shaped by differing perspectives within each group.

Evaluators assess firms based on different criteria, as each stakeholder has their own perception of a company's alignment with values and expected behaviors (Choi & Shepherd, 2005). The alignment between values is known as affective congruence, which signals that internal and external sides are aligned (Choi & Shepherd, 2005).

As legitimacy judgments emerge through evaluations, they then contribute to collective and broader evaluations (Wiggins, 2019). These multi-level judgments assess organizational legitimacy both actively and passively, focusing on both sole evaluation and wider shared perceptions (Wiggins, 2019). Lastly, stakeholders commonly reach different legitimacy conclusions about an organization because they use different frameworks and evaluation criteria (Suchman, 1995; Fu et al., 2026). When an organization is perceived as legitimate by one, another may have a contrasting perception based on different thinking.

## 2.4.3 Importance for Hybrid Organizations

Since hybrid organizations work with numerous stakeholder groups that hold diverse viewpoints and intentions, earning legitimacy is particularly challenging and threatens organizational success. Given that hybrid organizations rely on stakeholder support due to their positioning in the workforce, a positive perception is vital, as resources and relationships with others are central to their organizational model. These relationships often span multiple institutional domains, posing a challenge for hybrid organizations in meeting conflicting expectations (Huybrechts et al., 2020). Hybrids are tested by balancing the demands of all external groups and adjusting to work alongside different organizational logics.

An inability to meet the expectations of any of the competing logics results in a loss of support. While it is nearly impossible to meet all expectations, hybrid organizations must earn legitimacy, as this is necessary for survival (Huybrechts et al., 2020). Legitimacy keeps hybrid organizations afloat by ensuring that stakeholders continue to support them both financially and resourcefully. As organizations depend on multi-level coordination among stakeholders, continued support from these actors positions hybrids best for long-term success and approval.

## 2.5 Branding as a Mechanism

As legitimacy is contingent on stakeholder evaluation, how organizations are perceived becomes focal in understanding why some are assessed positively or negatively. As hybrid organizations are positioned as intermediaries, understanding their value and role is challenging, given their heightened exposure to many stakeholders and evaluators. Therefore, corporate branding becomes an answer to the challenges hybrid organizations present as it can be strategically used to communicate and differentiate its identity across multiple audiences (Balmer, 2001). Ultimately, the main idea is that this tool supports organizations to shape stakeholder interpretations by communicating more coherent messaging about role and value, while simultaneously addressing concerns about ambiguity (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). This directly links to Dahan & Leca (2025), who argue that communication is key to shaping the meanings evaluators assign to a hybrid organization. In this context, corporate branding helps minimize role ambiguity by clarifying the organization's purpose and outlining its role and mission. However, while corporate branding attempts to shape stakeholder role perceptions, legitimacy is ultimately earned during stakeholder evaluation, shaped by how they interpret organizational signals.

To further examine the evaluative criteria of external stakeholders, the theoretical framework dives deeper into how legitimacy evaluations are formed. The framework's analytics lens examines how legitimacy is interpreted, yielding greater findings from this study.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Introduction

Institutional theory serves as the analytical lens within the theoretical framework to understand how hybrid organizations communicate and are evaluated by external stakeholders. These organizations face legitimacy evaluations within complex institutional environments that reflect norms, values, and expectations within the organizational landscape (Scott, 2013). Institutional theory regards symbolic systems, activities, and resources as the means by which institutions convey internal value to institutional actors (Scott, 2013). It highlights that legitimacy is not necessarily derived from material resources or technical information, but is instead shaped by stakeholders' perceptions and evaluations of the organization (Scott, 2013).

Thereby, legitimacy is used as the central concept through which organizations are evaluated, as it serves as a generalized perception and sign that corporate actions align with socially constructed norms and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). However, due to institutional complexity, hybrid organizations experience conflicting institutional logics, leading to varying stakeholder expectations and evaluative criteria (Greenwood et al., 2011). In this context, corporate branding is relevant because it provides a way to examine how organizations communicate their meaning, identity, and role to external stakeholders. Corporate branding, as a mechanism, exemplifies how organizations influence stakeholders' role and value interpretations in institutional complexity. To better grasp how external stakeholders perceive corporations within broad, complex systems, one must understand what institutional theory entails.

### 3.2 Institutional Theory as a Lens For Organizational Evaluation

Institutional theory illustrates how organizations operate within institutional environments and are perceived within the ecosystem by their alignment with stakeholder expectations. Their meaning is interpreted beyond performance, as they are evaluated on how their norms, values, and beliefs relate to environmental systems (Scott, 2013). Institutions are multifaceted structures built on and engaged with symbolic elements, activities, and material resources (Scott, 2013).

Within institutional theory, there are three institutional pillars, each consisting of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements (Scott, 2013). The regulative dimension identifies

institutional rules, indicating that enforcement tactics dictate corporate actions to get companies to conform to expectations of the institutional environment (Scott, 2013). The normative dimension clarifies the values and obligations corporations are expected to uphold to meet desirable standards within institutional theory (Scott, 2013). Lastly, the cultural-cognitive dimension analyzes the concept of shared understanding between internal and external parties, highlighting how meaning is built upon symbolic systems and interpretations (Scott, 2013). In this view, cultural-cognitive elements are interpreted as “the way things are done” because a lack of compliance and differing corporate behavior are inconceivable to others in the institutional ecosystem (Scott, 2013).

The regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars exist independently, providing a framework for how institutions ought to function in line with external expectations. The manner in which organizations change, align, and adapt is understood as institutional carriers (Scott, 2013). Carriers are utilized convergently or divergently, transmitted by symbolic and relational systems, or employed through corporate practices and company artifacts (Scott, 2013). Furthermore, this relationship provides insight regarding how institutions utilize these mechanisms in the process of earning legitimacy.

In connection with the study, hybrid organizations exist within complex institutional environments, where their roles and values are often misunderstood. Therefore, institutional theory serves as an analytical lens for the study, as companies are perceived by their alignment with environmental rules, norms, and meaning (Scott, 2013). Scott (2013) highlights legitimacy as a “fundamental condition of social existence” and an outcome of stakeholder evaluation.

### 3.3 Legitimacy as a Socially Earned Evaluation

Legitimacy is socially earned during the evaluation stage by external stakeholders. The concept of legitimacy is an outcome rather than an inherent characteristic, grounded in an organization’s actions that are deemed appropriate within the context of socially constructed systems of norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). Organizational legitimacy is relationship-based, as it is socially earned through the evaluations of external stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is not an inherent property of an organization; it must be earned and constructed through social perceptions and evaluations, shaped by the criteria of the respective environmental systems (Suchman, 1995).

While socially constructed criteria set standards for institutional behavior, organizations cannot always follow them to the letter. When institutions deviate from the system's behavioral criteria,

it does not indicate that legitimacy is lost. Rather, when institutions depart from norms, they can still retain legitimacy due to the uniqueness of the situation (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is interpreted through a series of events, dependent on historical alignment with stakeholder expectations to be used during evaluation (Suchman, 1995). Ecosystem actors interpret institutional actions in terms of their alignment with norms, values, and cultural beliefs (Suchman, 1995).

Legitimacy is earned through stakeholder evaluation along a few dimensions. Stakeholders evaluate corporate behavior for pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy, each based on separate criteria. Pragmatic legitimacy is the validation of institutional actions by stakeholders based on the expected value retained (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, if the return is high enough and considered valuable, legitimacy is evaluated positively. Suchman (1995) defines moral legitimacy as an evaluation based on norms and appropriateness, placing great weight on whether the activity is “the right thing to do” for the evaluator. It does not necessarily base legitimacy on the benefits reaped by the stakeholder, but rather on whether it aligns with the audience's social norms (Suchman, 1995). Lastly, cognitive legitimacy follows intuitive evaluation, rooted in the taken-for-granted acceptance of corporate behavior (Suchman, 1995). It is assessed through the belief that it simply makes sense and that its role or function is naturally needed or accepted within the value system (Suchman, 1995).

Attaining legitimacy is particularly important for corporations, as it enables them to mobilize stakeholder support more easily. Stakeholder willingness to provide financial resources and support is particularly vital for hybrid organizations, as their success depends on relationships. Furthermore, since legitimacy is socially earned, these evaluations strongly indicate whether hybrid organizations are accepted and successful in complex institutional ecosystems.

### 3.4 Institutional Complexity and Hybrid Organizations

Institutional complexity arises when complex multi-actor ecosystems generate competing expectations for organizations. Nonetheless, in complex institutional environments, multiple evaluators with different institutional logics create difficulties for corporations in maintaining legitimacy.

Competing institutional logics are the stem of institutional complexity, as they consist of symbolic constructions and material practices set in place to guide corporate actions (Scott, 2013). Not only do institutional logics shape behavior, but they also frame the meanings and norms of institutions within the environmental ecosystem (Scott, 2013). Earning legitimacy

becomes challenging because multiple logics coexist within the environment, which are inherently vulnerable to incompatibility and conflicting expectations (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Given the many institutional logics in complex organizational ecosystems, hybrid organizations respond to competing logics by blending them (Greenwood et al., 2011). Blending multiple competing logics is no easy task, and while it works for some organizations, many opt to attribute them separately. Greenwood et al. (2011) define structurally differentiated hybrids as organizations that opt to compartmentalize multiple institutional logics, creating subunits that operate under different mindsets, norms, actions, and procedures. Compartmentalization and blending both involve adapting to multiple, and often incompatible, institutional logics, and whichever strategy is context-specific for organizations.

In relation to institutional identity, competing institutional expectations create role ambiguity for organizations, as multiple stakeholders ask for different things. As it is impossible to please everybody, legitimacy also becomes very challenging to earn across all ecosystem actors, given different expectations and evaluative criteria (Scott, 2013). Multiple authoritative evaluators threaten a consensus of legitimacy interpretation because the criteria are inconsistent, meaning that organizational conformity to one standard does not necessarily align with another firm's expectations (Scott, 2013).

Applying institutional complexity towards hybrid organizations, these corporations may hold relationships with several external actors, such as academic, government, and private entities. Each of these ecosystem players has slightly to significantly different agendas, fueling competing expectations placed upon an organization. The institutional complexity and ambiguity challenge hybrid organizations as they must satisfy numerous external stakeholder groups. The communication of institutional logics within organizations is, by nature, abstract. Thus, actors represent the logics they are familiar with, and thus, their interpretations shape organizational decisions (Greenwood et al., 2011). As a result, the identity of hybrid organizations turns fluid due to their versatility and ability to meet multiple expectations. On the surface, being able to work with anyone is seen as a positive attribute of a hybrid organization. In this context, Greenwood et al. (2011) highlight organizational identity as a way to manage competing logics, emphasizing that the stronger the identity of an organization, the greater the flexibility it achieves in responding to institutional demands, but this flexibility is tied to the organization's established social category, ultimately shaping how legitimacy is perceived and granted. However, ultimately, it presents identity problems, as it is difficult to define something that accepts everything.

In this study, institutional complexity will be observed through conflicting stakeholder evaluations given the multilayered nature of hybrid organizations. Given this, legitimacy becomes increasingly difficult to earn as organizations must balance all perspectives and criteria as best they can. To achieve clearer role clarity in complex institutional systems, organizations develop corporate branding tactics to shape stakeholders' understanding of their roles and minimize ambiguity.

### 3.5 Corporate Branding: The Practice Through an Institutional Lens

Corporate branding is a communication tool that strategically aligns internal and external stakeholders in multi-actor environments. From an institutional perspective, branding is a tool for communicating an organization's identity, role, and meaning in a way that stakeholders easily understand. It is a mechanism that utilizes institutional carriers such as organizational symbols, communication artifacts, and narratives as signals within institutional environments (Scott, 2013). These carriers influence stakeholder perceptions, as strong corporate branding shapes meaning and aligns organizations with what is seen as appropriate and credible (Scott, 2013). In this way, corporate branding is vital to shaping stakeholders' role understanding, which is key to legitimacy evaluations.

While external stakeholders' expectations vary across groups, strategic branding, when managed cohesively, can influence how easily stakeholders interpret an organization's corporate role. Therefore, corporate branding helps reduce role ambiguity by implementing coherent messaging, making it a key strategy for hybrid organizations operating in complex institutional environments.

While hybrid organizations benefit tremendously from corporate branding for coherence, this does not automatically translate into legitimacy. Legitimacy depends on stakeholder evaluation, and its inherent nature implies it is earned rather than given (Suchman, 1995). Corporate branding plays a part in how organizations are judged, but varying criteria remain an element of institutional evaluation.

Collectively, institutional theory, legitimacy, institutional complexity, and corporate branding as a practice form the theoretical framework for this study. This analytical lens will be applied to generate managerial insights into legitimacy evaluation in hybrid organizations.

### 3.6 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework guides the study's analytical interpretations by examining artifacts and communication through a specific lens. A hybrid organization will be analyzed using this framework, drawing on institutional theory, legitimacy, institutional complexity, and corporate branding. Legitimacy perceptions will represent stakeholder evaluation outcomes; institutional complexity will serve as the operational context of the hybrid organization; and corporate branding will be the practice studied.

Moreover, within this environment, institutional complexity raises multiple competing expectations, placing immense pressure on the organization to meet demands (Greenwood et al., 2011). Corporate branding is then examined as a practice in which the organization communicates its brand identity, role, and value, and is evaluated by multiple actors.

Role, value, credibility, and ambiguity are the empirical dimensions analyzed in the stakeholder legitimacy evaluations. How the study's stakeholders evaluate the organization's value, credibility, role, and ambiguity will indicate how legitimacy is earned in the study. Through the dimensions of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy, the framework captures key perceptions during the evaluation stage. Furthermore, the following chapter outlines how the method will empirically uncover and analyze the relationship between the framework's elements.

## 4. Method

*\*(This section incorporates selected text from a previously submitted mock study)*

This chapter builds on the study's methodological logic by presenting the research design, data collection, case study, empirical material used to develop the research, and the sampling strategy adopted to gather the data. Overall, the methodological approach reflects the study's aim to explore how competing stakeholder evaluations influence legitimacy earning in the context of a hybrid organization.

The study uses a qualitative approach, through interviews with several external stakeholders in the innovation ecosystem, to examine legitimacy evaluation. The study considers legitimacy to be a socially earned concept shaped by stakeholder evaluations. Additionally, the research adopts an abductive approach, moving iteratively through empirical material and theoretical concepts.

A case study uses Ideon Science Park to gain a practical understanding of the phenomenon under study. This approach allows for an understanding of how organizational role understanding and legitimacy are connected.

### 4.1 Research Design

This research study adopts a qualitative, abductive design (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The study is developed through a constructionist perspective, which is appropriate for this study, as it considers different external stakeholder perspectives, each based on their individual interests and expectations, and each delivering a different view of the hybrid organization's role and value within its environment. As a result, legitimacy is evaluated, allowing different realities and perceptions to coexist (Carson et al., 2001).

In this context, the study aims to analyze how external stakeholders evaluate Ideon Science Park's role in the innovation ecosystem and how this evaluation shapes legitimacy. Role understanding, value, credibility, and ambiguity are the empirical dimensions analyzed in terms of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Therefore, legitimacy is observed through how stakeholders make sense of Ideon as an organization.

Qualitative research suits the study, uncovering the study's phenomenon through descriptive data that details interactions within contexts and among people, enabling an understanding of how they evaluate legitimacy (Carson et al., 2001). In this case, the qualitative approach allows the study to interpret how corporate branding influences stakeholders' understanding of hybrid organizations. Additionally, it enables the capture of different perceptions of the organization's role, as articulated through individual experiences.

The study further employs abductive logic, which allows the research to iterate among the case, empirical findings, and theoretical concepts (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Bell et al., 2022). The analysis is developed through the examination of empirical material and the theoretical frameworks, thus relating to institutional theory, corporate branding, institutional complexity, and legitimacy. This links directly to Bell et al. (2022), who would argue that abductive reasoning allows the study to arrive at a comprehensive explanation when competing explanations or multiple interpretations of the data are present. The abductive approach uses the theoretical framework as a guide for the study, while utilizing empirical material to expand and evolve the theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Bell et al., 2022). As a result, the empirical material is used to analyze interpretations of external stakeholders regarding hybrid organizations, and the theory guides the analysis by building on theoretical concepts (Bell et al., 2022).

## 4.2 Case Study

Following a constructionist approach, the study employs a single case study, thereby facilitating the aim of gaining an in-depth, context-dependent understanding of a real-life phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This approach allows us to explore how stakeholder evaluations influence legitimacy earning in hybrid organizations.

In this context, a case study is relevant for exploring the phenomenon in a real-world setting, particularly when the phenomenon depends on the context being studied (Yin, 2018). This approach is consistent with the study, as it analyzes how stakeholder evaluation, legitimacy evaluation, and corporate branding connect within the institutional context of a science park operating in complex innovation ecosystems, thereby enabling the triangulation of empirical material (e.g., stakeholder evaluations and the organization's marketing material) and theory.

As a result, Ideon Science Park serves as the central organization from which empirical material is collected and analyzed, with the unit of analysis being stakeholders' legitimacy evaluations as

shaped by their understanding of Ideon's role (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this context, Ideon is framed as a hybrid organization that operates across multiple logics (Greenwood et al., 2011), whose legitimacy depends on multiple stakeholders with competing expectations, while also considering legitimacy as a socially earned and context-dependent phenomenon, crucially shaped by stakeholders' (Suchman, 1995). This aligns with an interpretive approach to case studies, as it builds on the meanings given by stakeholders (Myers, 2019).

As part of the study's aim, Ideon was purposefully selected for its role and heritage in the Swedish innovation ecosystem. As Sweden's first science park (SISP, n.a.), Ideon has for a long time contributed to regional development by supporting innovation and entrepreneurship, thereby holding significant importance at both the regional and national levels. Its multistakeholder nature and mixed ownership enable research to examine how expectations are managed and legitimacy is evaluated. Moreover, it provides an understanding of how the organization earns legitimacy across stakeholders' interests, expectations, and competing institutional logics. Hence, Ideon is a relevant case for examining legitimacy in the context of hybrid organizations, particularly in institutional complex environments, making it specific for an intensive analysis of the different meanings and interpretations that emerge (Bell et al., 2022).

To conclude, a single case study is appropriate for this research, as it seeks to expand on institutional theory by exploring how stakeholder evaluations of a hybrid organization's role influence legitimacy earning, with corporate branding as the mechanism that shapes those evaluations (Yin, 2018).

## 4.3 Data Collection

This study collects qualitative data from both primary and secondary sources to capture the organization's communication of its meaning and stakeholders' interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The theoretical framework aligns with this approach, as it considers corporate branding as a mechanism through which the organization communicates its role; therefore, organizational communication influences role understanding and legitimacy evaluation. The method through which the data is collected allows us to examine how Ideon Science Park communicates its role and how stakeholders through the innovation ecosystem interpret it.

### 4.3.1 Primary Data

The primary method of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with one internal stakeholder and twelve external stakeholders related to Ideon Science Park or who operate within the innovation ecosystem (Myers, 2019). The interview questions are provided in Appendix A. Semi-structured interviews allow exploration of themes such as Ideon's role, value, and relevance from differing perspectives. This approach facilitates the exploration of stakeholders' perceptions and legitimacy evaluations in a flexible manner and enables exploration of different views on the topic (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2022).

The adoption of semi-structured interviews is appropriate for the study, given that legitimacy is a perception-based phenomenon (Suchman, 1995). It is a concept earned through stakeholders' evaluation of the organization; it can only be examined through the perceptions of stakeholders with practical knowledge and prior interaction with the organization. As a result, semi-structured interviews allow us to understand how stakeholders interpret Ideon's role and to evaluate its legitimacy within the innovation ecosystem.

With this in mind, stakeholders are evaluators of organizational meaning, reflecting Ideon's identity and role in line with institutional expectations, such as norms, values, and beliefs (Scott, 2013). Therefore, interviews allow the collection of in-depth, diverse stakeholder perceptions, enabling the exploration of context-dependent explanations (Yin, 2018). In this case, stakeholders in different positions in the innovation ecosystem assign different meanings to the same organization.

### 4.3.2 Secondary Data

The secondary method of data collection was conducted through an archival collection of organizational marketing material published by Ideon, including Impact Reports, social media, Website, and Press Releases (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). These materials were examined to understand the messages Ideon communicates to stakeholders about its role and how those messages serve as criteria for stakeholder evaluation (Myers, 2019). At the same time, the analysis of the interviews interprets how legitimacy is evaluated. The artifacts reveal the messages stakeholders encounter during their evaluation of Ideon's role.

Secondary data helps explain how stakeholders form their evaluations. The artifacts and interviews thus answer the questions: what role Ideon projects through its corporate branding, and how stakeholders evaluate that role in the legitimacy-earning process.

Overall, these artifacts are framed as channels of meaning that shape stakeholder understanding of the organizational role and value. However, it is important to emphasize that the researchers interpret the artifacts. In this sense, the researchers take a standpoint similar to that of a stakeholder, evaluating what Ideon communicates.

### 4.3.3 Triangulation

The organizational artifacts reflect how Ideon adopts corporate branding to present its role and value. Meanwhile, the interviews take into account stakeholders' interpretations and evaluations of the corporate brand. Together, the primary and secondary data collected through the study complement each other, enabling the study to examine organizational intention and stakeholder perception (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The combination of primary and secondary data enables the identification of underlying misalignments between how Ideon communicates its meaning and how stakeholders evaluate it, and supports the analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). Bell et al. (2022) define triangulation as the process of studying social realities. This is done by comparing different data sources, multiple observers, and theoretical perspectives. Triangulation helps examine legitimacy when stakeholders hold different expectations and interests regarding the same organization.

Rather than consolidating a single truth, the study allows it to compare what the organization communicates to stakeholders. According to Bell et al. (2022), this approach enables the study to validate data sources against one another. Thus, exposing potential gaps between intended organizational role and stakeholder evaluations of organizational role, deepening the analysis rather than building a single narrative.

Additionally, having multiple sources helps compare perspectives on the evidence, enhancing the credibility of the findings (Yin, 2018). Together, primary and secondary data directly inform how corporate branding influences stakeholder evaluations involved in legitimacy earning.

Overall, the data collection method captures both organizational intention and stakeholders' perceptions. Furthermore, this method helps exemplify how legitimacy is evaluated and earned.

## 4.4 Sampling Strategy

The study adopted a non-probability purposive sampling strategy and snowballing sampling where the participants were chosen based with the goal of answering the research question and chosen based on pre-established criteria and expanded through their networks (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2022). This approach enabled the intentional selection of participants based on their informed perspectives, knowledge of Ideon, and their position within the innovation ecosystem.

The interview sample consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 20 minutes. Participants were chosen based on two criteria: 1) whether individuals had an institutional or professional relationship with Ideon, or 2) whether they were part of the innovation ecosystem and were in a position to reflect on the Ideons' role, value, and branding. This is aligned with purposive sampling, where the organization and people within are chosen based on their relevance to the research questions (Bell et al., 2022).

The sample criteria are consistent with the theoretical framework, which considers legitimacy as a socially earned, stakeholder-dependent concept shaped by each individual's evaluation. Therefore, it becomes important to include stakeholders who can effectively evaluate the organization's legitimacy by interpreting Ideon's resourcefulness and relevance within the innovation ecosystem.

The sample includes:

| <b>Name</b>            | <b>Position</b>                          | <b>Industry</b>      |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Cece Geijer af Ekström | Chief Marketing Officer                  | Ideon Science Park   |
| Participant 1          | Business Department at Lund Municipality | Public Sector        |
| Participant 2          | Program Director, Lund University        | Academic Institution |

|                |                                                          |                                     |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Participant 3  | Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 4  | Business and Industry Coordinator, Research Facility     | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 5  | President, Student Entrepreneurship Organization         | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 6  | Startup Advisor, Investment Firm                         | Public-Private Venture & Investment |
| Participant 7  | Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm                      | Venture & Investment                |
| Participant 8  | Legal Advisor, Corporate Law Firm                        | Venture & Investment                |
| Participant 9  | Innovation Manager, Multinational Corporation            | Corporate Industry                  |
| Participant 10 | VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center                 | Corporate Industry                  |
| Participant 11 | CEO, Early-Stage Startup                                 | Startup Ecosystem                   |
| Participant 12 | CEO, Scale-Up                                            | Startup Ecosystem                   |

*Table 1. List of Participants*

The interview samples consist of one internal employee of Ideon Science Park and 12 external stakeholders. As illustrated in the table, the list of participants is also available in Appendix B. All the interview samples are external stakeholders to Ideon Science Park and part of the innovation ecosystem. They all have a professional background that connects them directly or indirectly to Ideon Science Park; therefore, they can reflect on how Ideon is perceived in terms of its value, relevance, and role. Moreover, the adoption of snowball sampling enabled the identification of relevant participants through one of the researcher's existing professional networks, allowing the study to access certain stakeholders within the innovation ecosystem (Myers, 2019; Bell et al., 2022).

## 4.5 Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded using Voice Memos (Apple Inc.) and later transcribed manually, capturing relevant quotes and following data privacy standards. Afterward, the interview data were stored and organized in Microsoft Excel, which was later used to support coding and categorization of the same data.

The study uses thematic analysis to analyze the primary data collected. This method was chosen for its systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns to produce meaning (Naeem et al., 2023; Myers, 2019). Additionally, this type of analysis can facilitate the analysis of both primary and secondary data, allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of stakeholder perceptions and archival artifacts. Accordingly, Braun & Clarke (2006) argue that this method is useful because it allows the study to examine the underlying meaning in the collected data.

The thematic analysis consisted of multiple stages. First, the interview transcripts, theory, and archival artifacts were analyzed and understood. Therefore, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the data and identifying patterns and recurring themes regarding Ideon's role, value, and credibility within the innovation ecosystem (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes serve as empirical dimensions examined in stakeholder legitimacy evaluations.

Second, the data was coded by examining repeating ideas and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were explained through stakeholders' descriptions of Ideon; they were grouped by individual perception as a facilitator, innovation intermediary, and relationship builder, as well as by the perceptions of its value, credibility, and importance in the innovation ecosystem.

Third, once all the data was coded, it was sequentially grouped and organized into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process consisted of identifying patterns in the codes and grouping them into broad categories, with some codes being revised again to ensure they aligned with the themes. The themes are based on shared meanings among stakeholders' evaluations of Ideon's organizational role and value in innovation ecosystems.

The themes are built on the interpretation of the relationship between the theoretical framework and the collected data; therefore, they are developed through an abductive approach (Myers, 2019). Thus, stakeholders' interpretations are analyzed through the lens of institutional theory,

particularly its legitimacy dimensions, with corporate branding considered a mechanism that supports legitimacy evaluations. In this context, the archival artifacts are analyzed through the lens of institutional theory and legitimacy dimensions, examining how Ideon communicates its role, identity, and value through corporate branding. The visual representation of the process is shown in Appendix C.

The research approaches the coding process abductively, as the analysis moves iteratively between interviews, archival material, and theory. In this context, Naeem et al. (2023) argue that this process enables the emergence of a conceptual model that explains the phenomenon by developing meaningful connections between data and theory. As a result, the themes emerged from a continuous interaction between observations of the empirical material and the examination of theoretical concepts within the theoretical framework.

Overall, thematic analysis offers a feasible approach to exploring how stakeholder evaluations shape legitimacy in hybrid organizations, with corporate branding as a supporting mechanism through which the organization communicates its role and identity.

## 4.6 Credibility and Transferability

The research quality is based on two criteria: credibility and transferability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Since the study is of a qualitative design, evaluating the trustworthiness of the data through credibility and transferability grounds the study in well-supported empirical material in the given context. The study focused on exploring legitimacy as a socially earned and dependent phenomenon.

Multiple sources supported the study's credibility, using primary data from semi-structured interviews alongside secondary data in the form of archival artifacts, including press releases, social media, and impact reports. This approach enables the study to examine the phenomenon from different perspectives, particularly important in this context, as it captures Ideon's corporate branding practices and how stakeholders interpret them.

Moreover, the study's credibility is reinforced through triangulation by combining primary data from interviews with secondary data from document analysis and relating these findings to the pre-established theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach strengthens the study by examining how corporate branding aligns with external stakeholders' perceptions of its role, value, and importance. Although credibility involves validating findings with the interviewees (Bell et al.,

2022), this study enhances credibility in accordance with Yin (2018), who argues that the convergence of multiple sources strengthens the case study.

The consistency of the case selection and sampling strategies adopted supported the study's transferability. The study explores a contextual foundation that enables it to specifically research hybrid organizations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In accordance, the study provides sufficient institutional context for transferability (Bell et al., 2022). In this case, Ideon Science Park operates in a complex innovation ecosystem shaped by multiple stakeholders holding competing logics. In this sense, the sample strategy adopted and the study's analytical logic provide adequate contextual relevance to assess whether the findings apply to similar organizations operating in complex institutional environments.

While Bell et al. (2022) identify four criteria of trustworthiness, this study's focus is mainly on credibility and transferability, as it uses multiple data sources, triangulation, and a concrete empirical context. As a result, the findings are built on robust data and developed through a coherent analysis.

## 4.7 Ethical Considerations

Interviewees provided verbal consent and signed LUSEM's consent form to participate in the study, the consent form is provided in Appendix D. Before each interview, participants were informed of the research's goal to establish trust and transparency, how the material would be used, and their right to decline to answer any question at any stage; they were also given the option to be identified in the research or remain anonymous. For privacy reasons, the study kept all names anonymous. Their positions remained industry relevant without specifying which company they work for. Only the internal participant had her name and position revealed, as the research approach was a single-case study (Bryman & Bell, 2006). Additionally, participants consented to the interviews being recorded. The transcriptions were handled in accordance with data protection guidelines, limited access and use, and responsible data management, ensuring confidentiality and responsible data management (Laryeafo & Ogbewe, 2023; Bell et al., 2022).

## 5. Findings and Analysis

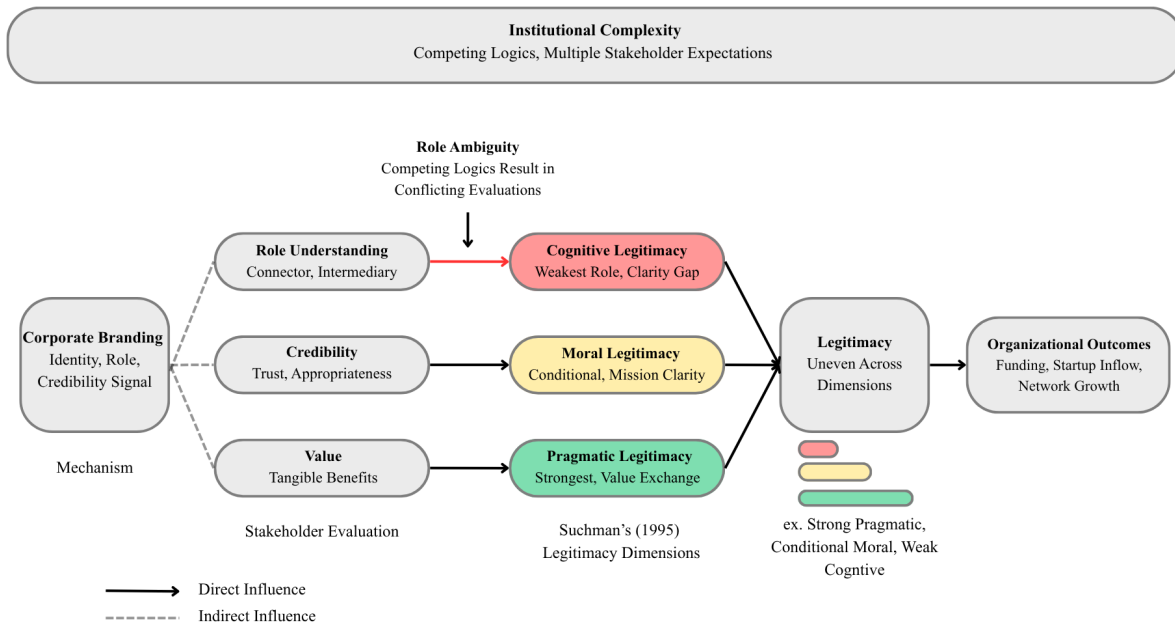


Figure 1. Conceptual model of legitimacy evaluation in hybrid organizations (adapted from Suchman, 1995; Scott, 2013; Greenwood et al., 2011)

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews and develops them through the lens of the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3. This section analyzes how external stakeholders evaluate Ideon Science Park's legitimacy based on their understanding of its role in the innovation ecosystem.

In this context, the research analyzes legitimacy as a socially earned evaluation shaped by stakeholders' understandings of an organization and by its value, appropriateness, and comprehensibility within the innovation ecosystem. As a result, this chapter explores how different stakeholders evaluate Ideon's legitimacy in its role, the value they relate to the organization, the credibility, and the ambiguity they might have on the organization when it comes to defining what Ideon is and what it does, all based on their own institutional position within the innovation ecosystem. The findings are mapped in the conceptual model shown in Appendix E.

In addition, the analysis incorporates Ideon's corporate branding materials, including its impact report, social media, website, message platform, and marketing strategy. The organization uses

these to communicate its role, value, and credibility in a manner that is more easily comprehensible by external stakeholders. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of how stakeholders evaluate legitimacy in hybrid organizations, it is important first to explore how stakeholders define and perceive Ideon's role within the innovation ecosystem.

## 5.1 Shared Stakeholder Role Understanding Does Not Eliminate Ambiguity in Hybrid Organizations

Throughout the interviews, stakeholders identify Ideon as an intermediary actor within the innovation ecosystem; however, not all interviewees define the role in the same way. Although there is a broad understanding of Ideon as a connector or intermediary, there remains ambiguity about its purpose, intended audience, and the reach of its activities. These patterns are analyzed in terms of how stakeholders can express or fail to express Ideons. The interviews reveal a tension among stakeholders' levels of understanding. They reflect the institutional complexity and role ambiguity of hybrid organizations.

### 5.1.1 Consensus Around Ideon's Intermediary Role

Across interviews, the main area of agreement among government, academia, industry, and the startup community was the broad function that stakeholders assigned to Ideon. Interviewees mainly described Ideon as an organization that brings different actors together, or an intermediary that facilitates interactions among actors within the innovation ecosystem. However, each stakeholder interprets the understanding differently, based on their specific needs and logic.

Participant 10, a senior executive at a multinational in Lund, describes Ideon's connector role from a large corporate perspective. As this organization operates under rigid confidentiality standards, the value that Ideon delivers is a platform that facilitates open dialogue and organic interaction between actors that otherwise would be difficult to interact formally:

*"I think Ideon's role for us as a corporation is that it provides us a platform where we can meet, also from corporate to corporate. Sometimes that's difficult because you immediately get into NDAs, confidentiality, and so on. So this is more neutral ground, that offers us a platform to meet between companies as well as the*

*opportunity to connect with startups and incubators."* - **Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center, Multinational Corporation.**

Participant 6, a startup advisor at an investment firm, offers a similar perspective, but through the institutional lens of a venture capital firm that operates across the public and private sectors. He relates Ideon's role to the proximity and organic relationships that come from being in the same physical space.

*"The purpose of it was, of course, to be able to create a similar effect, like a Silicon Valley effect, where basically there are small and large actors within one place, and they could, to the simplest end, end up meeting. You have someone starting a company, but they're also in the same building as an already established biotech company. So, quite a unique role."* - **Participant 6, Startup Advisor, Investment Firm.**

On the other hand, Participant 3, a business development manager in the university's innovation unit, argues that the connector role is not only functional but also carries symbolic value. Due to the spillover effect that happens within the companies that belong to the park, it gives them a sense of credibility:

*"Many startups say that being at Ideon gives them credibility. When you start, you have nothing more than your product and your team, but also by showing that you are part of Ideon, then you get more credibility, and it's easier to get customers, investors, and all the stakeholders."* - **Participant 3, Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit.**

It is expected that stakeholders' evaluations contribute to Ideon's legitimacy, but it also happens the other way around, providing legitimacy for the organizations that belong to the park. In this context, Ideon functions as an institutional connector and endorser; for instance, startups gain credibility in the eyes of investors and customers by being part of Ideon. Alongside the interview statements, Ideon is defined as a network platform that enables organizations to connect without the professional formalities that would otherwise be required for collaboration or dialogue; in a sense, it creates a community. The stakeholder interpretations align directly with Scott's (2013) cultural-cognitive dimension of institutions, which emphasizes that shared meanings are created

through interpretive frameworks. In this context, an understanding of Ideon's role emerges from stakeholders' relationships with Ideon as a connector in the innovation ecosystem.

The interviewees' interpretations closely align with the information communicated in Ideon's Annual Impact Report, reinforcing the findings. The science park's impact report highlights the "physical and collaborative environment" and position as "one of Europe's leading deep tech and innovation hubs" (Ideon, 2026). The report aligns with the stakeholders' views, as each recognizes the park as an intermediary that bridges professionals from different backgrounds. It portrays the connectivity among business, academia, public actors, and others, reinforcing the interviewees' shared stance that Ideon's role is best understood as a connector. Similarly, the Ideon website supports this role as an incubator through its "We Catalyze Innovation" positioning, which further underscores its ecosystem and resourcefulness for stakeholder groups to be part of (Ideon, n.d.a). The website, impact report, and interviews all identify common understandings of Ideon as an intermediary, suggesting that the park's corporate branding aligns internal communication with external perceptions of its role.

### 5.1.2 The Coexistence of: Organizational Recognition and Role Ambiguity

Despite stakeholders having a common ground on what Ideons' roles mean. There is no completely defined, stable, or comprehensible way it presents itself. Therefore, a second pattern that emerged across the interviews is how stakeholders struggle to give an exact definition of Ideon; they cannot define what it does, for whom the organization is primarily focused, or if it is supposed to be understood as a physical location that hosts companies or as an organization that has the function to support organizations, or perhaps both. Most interviewees are stakeholders with ties to Ideon; therefore, the ambiguity does not arise from unfamiliarity but rather reflects Ideon's hybrid structure, which serves multiple stakeholders simultaneously.

Participant 5, a student entrepreneurship organization president at Lund University, describes how she perceives Ideon from a student perspective:

*"Ideon has a lot of value in general, and it's hard to grasp. For me, at least, I don't know, maybe I didn't understand it quite right, but for me it was hard to understand where I can come in and what partnerships I can do. It was not intuitive, so it was more active research than knowing and understanding right away what it is and what it does."* - **Participant 5, President, Student Entrepreneurship Organization.**

Participant 10, a senior executive at a multinational, made a similar comment, but from a corporate perspective, with a long-standing business relationship with the organization. The perspective is focused on stakeholder targeting and organizational purpose:

*"In the sense of at what point is Ideon's mission to kind of support what I am looking for, this platform? And do they see that as, this is what we feel like we should be doing here? Or is their mission a different one where it's more focused on startups, getting them to become scale-ups and growing to become a company? That is unclear." - Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center, Multinational Corporation.*

Participant 2, program director at Lund University, adds an institutional history dimension to the ambiguity, as the organization's structure has transformed the innovation unit:

*"I find it a bit ambiguous where the lines are between the science park in terms of companies just being residents, who pay rent and hire space, versus those companies who get innovation support. They used to have something called Ideon Innovation, but that has now been absorbed into the greater science park."- Participant 2, Program Director, Lund University*

The patterns that emerged from the interviews also show that, even though there is a shared understanding of the role, there appears to be a difference in how the organization's purpose is perceived across different dimensions: functional, what Ideon exactly does, and the target audience. Who exactly is the organization made for? What happened to the innovation unit?

The Ideon marketing strategy document reflects the ambiguity, demonstrating communication is essential to "clarify Ideon's role in the regional, national, and international ecosystem" to avoid confusion (Ideon, 2026c). Without clear communication, Ideon may be misperceived as "just real estate," which misses the point of positioning the intermediary as a "platform for innovation and collaboration" (Ideon, 2026c). It is a relevant challenge given the interviewees' interpretation of the park, as they note that it is commonly associated with the park's physical location rather than its ecosystem functions. The marketing strategy reflects the need to address this issue by clarifying what the park does, thereby reducing ambiguity about the study's participants and other stakeholders. Ideon attempts to address this challenge by positioning itself as an innovation platform.

## 5.2 Pragmatic Legitimacy Appears From Stakeholder-Specific Value Logics

Across interviews, pragmatic legitimacy is the dimension that stands out. Stakeholders constantly evaluate Ideon as an organization that delivers value. It is important to distinguish pragmatic legitimacy from role understanding. Role understanding explains what stakeholders think Ideon is and how the organization's role as an ecosystem connector relates to it. Pragmatic legitimacy lies within the concrete value the stakeholders identify from engaging with Ideon. The organization can be understood by its role and still fail to offer tangible value, or vice versa.

### 5.2.1 Stakeholders Evaluate Hybrid Organizations Through Separate Senses of Practical Value

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the practical value Ideon brings to the innovation ecosystem, thereby making pragmatic legitimacy the most consistent dimension of legitimacy. Most stakeholders describe the pragmatic value based on their experiences; therefore, what arises from the data is a set of distinct value logics, all grounded in their institutional position and legitimized by emphasizing the capabilities it facilitates or provides to them, in particular, or to the overall innovation ecosystem.

Participant 8, a legal advisor at a corporate law firm, structures Ideons' value through the lens of a startup founder: he emphasizes its organizational structure and its proximity and accessibility to business experts. For him, these conditions are what create a meaningful impact:

*"I think it's very important because, say you are a student or a former student at the university, and you have a good idea that you want to try out, but you're very lonely in that phase [...] It's very, very easy to lose your positive feeling if you're by yourself [...] that's why I think it's very important that you're surrounded by others in the same position [...] also, the infrastructure that the incubator provides with excellent people working at Ideon. They have seen a lot. You can get easily available advice to take the next step."* - **Participant 8, Legal Advisor, Corporate Law Firm.**

Participant 11, the CEO of an early-stage Ideon-born startup and current tenant, explains that he finds value in Ideon's organic institutional structure and in the interactions that occur through its physical location. Also, when asked about the specific value Ideon brings to the innovation ecosystem, he expresses value in the business expertise they offer to early startups that navigate uncertainty:

*"Sitting in Ideon, you constantly meet other companies in the same situation, which allows you to help each other and give support to each other [...] If we look at Slack, for example, there isn't much activity between the companies there, but when you walk in a corridor, you stop and talk to other people. So it's the real-world meetings that are helping [...] also, for me, it's invaluable (Value that Ideon provides). And the reason is that I'm very technical (In his profession). [...] business and everything else, is where I lack experience, so there is Ideon."*

**Participant 11, CEO, Early-Stage startup.**

Their evaluation has a strong impact on the legitimacy, as what he describes is generative rather than transactional. He mentions that Ideon generates the conditions for innovation to emerge.

For government stakeholders, the evaluation of pragmatic value changes completely. Participant 1, working in the Business Department at Lund Municipality, evaluates Ideon as an organization that contributes to the region's competitive identity:

*"The kind of core thing they do, helping the startup businesses, because that's a whole fundamental thing of the ecosystem in Lund. We're known for our big startup businesses, and Ideon is kind of a cornerstone in that. I'd also say that they put Lund on the map. I would say that's also one of the things that we kind of feel is worth supporting them."* - **Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.**

Throughout the interviews, stakeholders evaluate Ideon positively through different value logics: the relational and supportive value it offers to startups, the infrastructure value of its physical location, the business expertise it provides to businesses, and the regional and symbolic value it conveys to the municipality. This is consistent with Greenwood et al.'s (2011) argument, which states that stakeholders base their evaluative criteria on their institutional logic; they apply

different evaluative frameworks to what is useful to them, depending on their institutional position.

The park's impact report highlights 400 companies, 10,000 employees, and 35 startups at the Ideon campus. It also positions the organization within a larger innovation district that hosts multiple international research facilities (Ideon, 2026a). These statistics, along with the billions of SEK raised through venture capital, indicate the pragmatic legitimacy the park enjoys as it seeks measurable, easily understandable benefits to relay to stakeholders (Ideon, 2026a). Likewise, the START, BUILD, GROW, and SCALE programs clearly outline incubation programs and processes that align with the interviewees' perception of support and networking as key, visible benefits (Ideon, 2026a). However, while Ideon presents a value proposition, the interviews reveal that stakeholders do not uniformly evaluate it. Each stakeholder group interprets the same organization differently. As the study's stakeholders recall the park's benefits during the interviews, the report presents them through quantifiable statistics, programs offered by the incubator, and the visible cluster that puts Lund on the international innovation map.

### 5.2.2 Pragmatic Legitimacy Weakens When Organizational Value is Unclear

While many of the interviewees in the study shared insights into Ideon's value, they found it significant but remained unclear about how to locate or access it. The issue is not that Ideon lacks useful benefits, but that these benefits are not always clearly visible or easy to navigate.

Participant 10, a senior executive at a multinational, reflects on legibility from the perspective of a long-term corporate tenant. His account suggests that, even when an organization is physically embedded in the park, Ideon's broader value can remain unclear:

*"I think there are a ton of companies here, and some of them are Swedish companies, some of them are international. Some of the events are purely held in Swedish, which for some people is okay, and for others, it's uninviting [...] In this sense, I have an office there that I can rent, and Ideon is the hotel for me, so to speak."* - **Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center.**

Participant 11 emphasizes the legibility issues that arise for current tenants, such as startups, from his perspective. Some benefits are not clearly stated and remain unclear even when being part of the organization's startups:

*"What's not clear is the financial help you get. For example, if you're in the science park, you have access to financing for marketing analysis and stuff like that. Things you don't know until you're in there [...] it is quite clear that they have business developers there, but what is not clear is the financial aid, that you actually get help from the government to do certain things, like IP or get help with cybersecurity."* - **Participant 11, CEO, Early-Stage Startup.**

This also aligns with Participant 5's view; these two findings reveal a gap, indicating that pragmatic legitimacy evaluations are strongest among stakeholders who have previously engaged, but not among those who have not. As a result, this reveals a communication and legibility gap that limits Ideon's outreach with potential stakeholders. Regarding pragmatic legitimacy, the vagueness that stakeholders have on how to access the direct value of engaging with Ideon undermines the value exchange on which pragmatic legitimacy relies (Suchman, 1995). The interviewee's statements provide a key perspective as pragmatic legitimacy encompasses the ability to provide legible value. The more comprehensible the benefits are, the stronger stakeholder legitimacy evaluations become.

Likewise, the marketing strategy artifact further identifies the unintuitiveness of the park's benefits, as the perception gap persists. Its strategy explains, through communication, what the organization does, how it delivers value, and more, so that prospective external stakeholders can better understand its role (Ideon, 2026c).

As Ideon largely succeeded in earning pragmatic legitimacy amongst the study's interviewees, the organization's usefulness captures only one of three legitimacy dimensions used in this research. In addition to evaluating the benefits of Ideon, ecosystem stakeholders also assess the organization's appropriateness and credibility in their perceptions.

### 5.3 Moral Legitimacy Depends on Coherence Between Mission and Behavior

The ecosystem stakeholders grant legitimacy towards Ideon regarding its trustworthiness, whether it behaves in a manner that stakeholders identify as appropriate with ecosystem norms, and toward a collective benefit. While many participants highlighted the park's behavior as appropriate, valuable, collaborative, and credible, its moral legitimacy is also dependent on how clear the organization's mission is, given its institutional structure or versatility.

### 5.3.1 Consistent Professional Appropriateness Reinforces Moral Evaluations

Ecosystem stakeholders evaluate beyond just the practical benefits and check whether the organization they would like to collaborate with is the right type. The working relationship between the park and stakeholders goes beyond value to include how well they align in terms of morals and compatibility. Interviewees commonly expressed that Ideon is professional, collaborative, and embodies high character in its working relationship with external stakeholders. The actors' interpretations indicate moral legitimacy, as their evaluations depend on whether Ideon is acting in a socially appropriate manner to meet expectations (Suchman, 1995).

Participant 12, the CEO of an Ideon scale-up, emphasizes that Ideon prioritizes the ecosystem's benefits over organizational self-interest, positioning it as a non-profit organization and highlighting the long-term value it has brought to the innovation ecosystem. This signals moral legitimacy as it positions itself in the eyes of stakeholders as an organization that has transcended by the time it has contributed to supporting innovation:

*"They are an organization that typically does good. I don't look at Ideon as a for-profit organization. They are trying to stimulate the ecosystem, and they are long-term."* - **Participant 12, CEO at a Scale-up.**

As Participant 12 mentions that they are a "long-term" organization, this carries moral weight, aligning with Suchman (1995), who argues that an organization's legitimacy is not based on its present behavior. However, in its persistence, it carries through time.

From an investor perspective, Participant 7, a venture capitalist, approaches moral legitimacy from a comparative lens, where he has engaged with science parks internationally, so he established Ideon as an organization that has distinguished itself through time by rigorously staying true to its values:

*"I think professionalism, integrity, innovation [...] and rigor. The quality of rigor is a core effect. If you compare it to some other science parks or incubators, Ideon has the history and the strength of having been around and established processes. So it feels like a quality place in a way."* - **Participant 7, Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm.**

Participant 1, from a governmental standpoint, signals Ideon as an organization that has historically contributed to the development of the innovation ecosystem in the region, keeping its reputation intact through time, and mentioning that it is an organization worth supporting from his institutional position as a public actor:

*"They are regarded as a very professional organization, and they have a kind of reputation as well for being internationally branded as one of the best and one of the first in the Nordics and Europe. So I would say that their reputation precedes them and that they are kind of [...] a cornerstone to the ecosystem. Without Ideon, I don't think that anything else would have kind of happened. So they are kind of part of the history."* - **Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality**

He further emphasized the engagement that Ideon has with its stakeholders, emphasizing its willingness to collaborate with them and receive feedback, not only signaling its values but also a competitive advantage over other actors in the innovation ecosystem:

*"The innovation side of it, of course, is their bread and butter... and they're very good at keeping good relationships with everyone [...] Ideon has a kind of culture about collaboration [...] they are very inclusive, always kind of want to hear other parties' side of things, which gives them... a big advantage over other actors."* - **Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality**

This strengthens positive legitimacy evaluations in the ecosystem, as their moral actions that align with the broader norms of appropriate and desirable behavior suggest they are the right kind of actor to work with (Suchman, 1995). Deviating from self-interested behavior and opting to act as a collaborative, foundational actor in innovation demonstrates a strong sense of moral responsibility. Ideon brings significant value to the innovation ecosystem and prioritizes doing so in a morally correct manner to earn legitimacy.

Its website further conveys its values, with words such as innovation, collaboration, knowledge sharing, sustainability, and excellence evident throughout the page (Ideon, n.d.a). In line with the interviewees' perspectives, the park's moral attributes are shared and understood in a professional, collaborative manner. Likewise, the impact report further underscores the park's CEO's commitment to sustainably catalyzing innovation, demonstrating the park's priority of acting beneficially and consciously toward society (Ideon, 2026a).

### 5.3.2 Misalignment Produces Conditional Moral Legitimacy

As articulated in the participants' interviews, moral legitimacy is clearly important but also depends on whether the organization has a mission or direction. The need for clarity makes moral legitimacy conditional, as stakeholders recognize Ideon as credible and appropriate, but also desire consistency. The stakeholders demand meaning and intention, expecting moral actions to remain aligned and maintain a specific focus.

Participant 10 offers a view from a large corporation perspective, where mission and the company strategy need to be rigorously aligned with the organization, focusing on the need for a clear mission that allows the organization to continuously deliver value to its stakeholders:

*"I think by having a clear mission statement and a clear focus. If Ideon, or any science park, jumps from topic to topic just because it's in, I think you lose credibility. If you're clear on this is what we stand for [...] this is the same for a company. If the company has a clear mission statement [...] then everything we do, we focus on this."* - **Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center.**

This aligns with Ideon's collaborative values and the challenge of communicating a concrete mission. This statement also signals the importance of staying true to a mission statement, as inconsistent corporate actions only dilute the purpose of organizational behavior. The message must align with the organizational mission statement and direction, and not confuse stakeholders about what the organization stands for. Ecosystem actors seek to work with organizations that align with what stakeholders see as normatively appropriate, and mixed messaging diverts attention from the mission (Suchman, 1995).

As for Participant 1, they see a need for more clarity in Ideon's mission. The organization needs to be more explicit in how it communicates why it needs public funding in order to achieve its broader mission, signaling a conditional legitimacy, as its moral value relies on aligning with social values expected by the municipality:

*"I would say that their mission and their kind of vision could be even clearer to kind of provoke the municipality that we need this funding to get to this vision [...]"*

*I would say maybe that's kind of unclear, and the role sometimes."* - **Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.**

To strengthen moral legitimacy evaluations, the park should align its mission with its messaging across all platforms. This is a particularly challenging task for Ideon, given the demands of its multiple stakeholder groups, as coherent messaging keeps the mission clear but remains subject to competing expectations.

Furthermore, the impact report and the website outline Ideon's areas of impact across key projects, ranging from deep tech, cybersecurity, and defense to semiconductors, as well as the organization's mission (Ideon, 2026a; Ideon, n.d.a). This situation underscores the need for further clarity, as the areas of impact at times appear distinct from the organization's overall mission. As Participant 10 mentioned, it remains unclear whether the corporation's actions are fully in line with the organization's mission, or whether they are aligned in principle but insufficiently communicated as such. Advancing organizations' capabilities in a professionally relevant manner is no weakness to Ideon; rather, it requires further communication to explain why it is done to uphold coherence. It is tied together by the characteristics of moral legitimacy, where an organization's actions must be perceived as congruent with stakeholders' expectations of its mission: in the case of Ideon, innovation and value must be communicated properly, in alignment with a coherent mission, to avoid a perception of conditionality (Suchman, 1995).

The interviews found that moral legitimacy is present and that perceptions are closely aligned with the degree of directness in their organizational purpose. The stakeholders closely monitor the park's actions to ensure moral alignment. While the park's mission helps build moral legitimacy, the interviewees did not always demonstrate a strong sense of role understanding.

## 5.4 Cognitive Legitimacy is Constrained by the Gap Between Recognition and Role Understanding

Cognitive legitimacy is achieved when an organization's existence and role are taken for granted by stakeholders. According to Suchman (1995), this occurs when an organization's existence is seen as natural or evident in its institutional environment; in other words, it does not need to justify its existence, as it is taken for granted because it makes sense. While Ideon is widely recognized by external stakeholders and benefits from its organizational longevity, its role in the ecosystem remains unclear to many. Recognition and historical ties do not equate to strong

cognitive legitimacy evaluations, as Ideon's role is unintuitive and ambiguous for several reasons.

#### 5.4.1 Historical Embeddedness as a Source for Hybrid Organizational Recognition

Across the external stakeholder interviews, it was strongly evident that Ideon is recognized by all actors in the innovation ecosystem and is associated with its longevity. The interview participants commonly portrayed the hybrid organization as a central and historically recognized figure in the local region. Cognitively, the park's presence in Southern Sweden makes sense to external stakeholders due to its historical ties within the ecosystem.

Participant 1 expresses the foundational role that Ideon has in the region and in the innovation ecosystem across the country, mentioning that without Ideon, innovation would have developed as it currently has, framing it as a blueprint of science parks:

*"They are kind of the first one in the ecosystem [...] the one actor that's been part of the ecosystem for so long that they're kind of regarded as a cornerstone [...] without Ideon, I don't think that anything else would have kind of happened."* -

**Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.**

This quote identifies Ideon as an organization that is known for its historical foundation of the ecosystem. Framing it as a "cornerstone" suggests it is taken for granted in explaining its role as a symbol of regional development.

Participant 3, from the university's innovation unit, connects Ideon's cognitive legitimacy to its relationship with the university, as Ideon became embedded in the university's history:

*"The science park has grown up together with the university, so it is a natural part of what we have here. So it wasn't really that we became aware of the science park. It grew up together with the university, I would say."* - **Participant 3,**

**Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit.**

This statement signals cognitive legitimacy within the university's ecosystem, framing it as an organization that has always been part of the innovation environment. Its contribution to the

environment is perceived as an institution that fits in organically with the university's environment.

Similarly, Participant 7, who has experience as a venture capitalist internationally, sees Ideon through a comparative lens where its cognitive legitimacy lies in the ability to attract technology companies, the brand history, and the size of the overall science park:

*"From its brand name being the oldest science park in Sweden, one of the bigger ones, from the success of the companies that have been here. So it becomes a magnet for new companies, like ARM setting up here or Volvo... So that's the value in itself, right?" - Participant 7, Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm.*

While the historical foundation as one of Sweden's oldest science parks makes it legitimate, the success of companies associated with the park reinforces its position as a credible and established actor, further strengthening its legitimacy. Ideon's name is associated with a symbol that is surely not unfamiliar, as interviewees across the board treated the organization as common knowledge among anyone working in regional innovation. This taken-for-granted recognition indicates cognitive legitimacy, appearing legitimate through an established interpretive frame and its historical embeddedness in society (Suchman, 1995). Drawing on the interview results, it is clear that external stakeholders perceive the park as an established and recognized actor within the local innovation ecosystem.

On Ideon's website and social media, the interviewees' perceptions of the park as long-standing and recognizable are reinforced through relationships and historical narratives, as well as positioning it as Sweden's oldest science park (Ideon, n.d.b; Ideon, 2026d). The website recalls the development of the park from the 1980s and the astounding number of companies and jobs created within the Ideon community since then, as well as the community's successful corporations (Ideon, n.d.b). The website aligns with reasons the study's stakeholders perceive cognitive legitimacy, as the park has a reputation for its establishment and taken-for-grantedness in the local region through time (Suchman, 1995).

#### 5.4.2 The Tension Between Recognition and Role Understanding Results in Ambiguity

The tension between role understanding and organizational recognition is largely due to ambiguity. It undermines Ideon's cognitive legitimacy, as the organization works with numerous

external stakeholder groups, leading to varied interpretations of its role. This legitimacy tension creates organizational ambiguity, a natural outcome of complex organizational structures. Hybrid organizations are inherently unintuitive given their multiple services and stakeholder groups. As a result, Ideon's cognitive legitimacy is partial: stakeholders understand that Ideon exists as an organization and recognize its importance, but they do not always understand what Ideon does, who it is supposed to serve, or how to access its value.

Participant 12 explains that Ideon exists in actors' minds as a location, for actors inside and outside alike. However, besides that, it does not stand for anything more, thus turning the organization into its most basic interpretation:

*"What is unclear is the non-location part of it. I think that is unclear both inside and outside Ideon. What they do, apart from the physical place, is less well known [...] If you ask someone in Lund, "What is Ideon?" they will say it's an industrial park... But if you ask, "What do they do?" they'll say they rent locations [...] But that's it."* - **Participant 12, CEO at a Scale-up.**

As a location, Ideon has a strong sense of cognitive legitimacy, but when it comes to identifying its broader role as an ecosystem actor, it often becomes ambiguous. This relates to the comments from Participant 10 in section 5.3.2, where they note that it is unclear whom the organization is meant to serve: startups, corporates, or the entire ecosystem.

On the other hand, Participant 2 shares an important contribution to the findings. From an academic point of view, they understand Ideon's audience is research entrepreneurs and students. That means the cognitive understanding among this audience has not yet been formed, revealing a gap in the organizational recognition and the recognition of the role.

*"The connection between students who want to create a startup and Ideon is nonexistent."* - **Participant 2, Program Director, Lund University.**

Hybrids are challenging for all to comprehend, thereby constraining cognitive legitimacy, which depends on both comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness, as stakeholders struggle to form stable interpretations around the organization's role (Suchman, 1995). The innovation ecosystem actors and interview participants hold different interpretation frameworks. Thus, perceptions vary across groups (Scott, 2013). This tension reinforces the inherent organizational ambiguity in

hybrid organizations, making it the strongest roadblock to Ideon's cognitive legitimacy interpretations among innovation ecosystem actors.

This perspective on the legitimacy tension is further reinforced by the marketing strategy document, which illustrates the complexity of innovation ecosystems. It suggests that strategy, goals, and innovation should be more easily understood by providing simplified direction and clearer strategic communication (Ideon, 2026c). The park's marketing strategy aims to address ambiguity as a barrier to cognitive legitimacy, while acknowledging that it cannot entirely reduce the cognitive load of understanding the hybrid organization.

As the tension between the park's recognition and its role provides a thorough context for the lack of cognitive legitimacy, the story does not end there. The unintuitive and ambiguous nature of the hybrid organization can be further understood by examining institutional complexity.

## 5.5 Institutional Complexity Generates Fragmented Legitimacy Evaluations Across Stakeholders

### 5.5.1 Competing Institutional Logics Form Conflicting Evaluation Criteria

Ideon's professional environment is complex and unlike traditional organizations, as it collaborates with startups, corporations, municipalities, university actors, and investors. While each group works with Ideon for different purposes, consistent role understanding becomes nearly impossible, as they operate in an institutional context of complexity in which Ideon faces multiple, sometimes competing, logics (Greenwood et al., 2011). Startup stakeholders may value business support, access to networking, visibility, and exposure to capital investment opportunities; corporate stakeholders may seek innovation partnerships; investors may look for a high-quality ecosystem; and public actors may seek regional development.

Participant 10 remarks on the operational complexity that Ideon faces when navigating large stakeholders' interests as well as those of small stakeholders:

*"I think Ideon could do more of that. But I also see that they have to balance between big corporate companies, which are here, and small startups."*

**Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center.**

This statement captures the institutional complexity that Ideon faces: the organization must balance the needs of all its tenants, even though they engage with the ecosystem in different ways. This makes Ideon's legitimacy depend on its ability to remain important to all stakeholders without prioritizing any one stakeholder.

Institutional complexity is also seen through the funding context. Participant 1 adds that a certain complexity is added to the organization as the funding requires more legitimacy demands:

*"It's kind of a good thing, and it's a bad thing because the municipality... Many of the other science parks in Sweden are kind of municipality funded 100% [...] they've worked on kind of their value proposition. It's politics and money, it takes time."* - **Participant 1, Business Department at Lunds Municipality.**

This insight is quite important for legitimacy claims, as it reveals that Ideon's operational structure requires it to navigate an even more challenging institutional complexity that not only creates value for all stakeholders alike but also justifies its value to public stakeholders, whose evaluations can sometimes be influenced by regional development and funding objectives. What is seen as valuable or credible by one actor may be perceived as illegitimate by another, creating competing expectations and fragmented legitimacy evaluations.

### 5.5.2 Hybrid Intermediary Positioning Prevents Coherent Role Understanding

Stakeholders who regularly engage with the organization find it difficult to comprehend who does what and why. This complexity is important for Ideon to understand, as the organization's value depends on whether it is evaluated as a connector within the innovation ecosystem, which makes its function difficult to comprehend.

The situation is vocalized by Participant 7, as their relationship with different stakeholders in the innovation ecosystem allows them to reflect on the challenges that Ideon faces regarding stakeholder role understandings:

*"It's not super easy, not being part of that ecosystem directly, to understand who does what and why and when and how they work together. So that definitely can be clearer."* - **Participant 7, Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm.**

As multiple actors in the ecosystem seek different benefits and services, Ideon's role as an intermediary helps make the interviewees' interpretations understandable. The same elements that make them versatile are also the ones that complicate their legitimacy evaluations. The intermediary connects several stakeholder groups and works with each differently, making it difficult to define the organizational role clearly and consistently. Ideon faces competing logics and unattainable evaluative criteria, as the science park's ability to meet expectations differs depending on which actor is engaging with it (Greenwood et al., 2011).

The Ideon marketing strategy supports this view by outlining how the park operates within a multi-stakeholder environment that requires credible, professional communication amid competing expectations. The document notes differences in target groups and stakeholders, reinforcing the fact that each has varying expectations based on their level of involvement with Ideon (Ideon, 2026c). The park's marketing strategy understands the institutional complexity it must combat, requiring Ideon to attend to multiple audiences in its stakeholder segmentation. The park is subject to legitimacy evaluation across multiple perspectives, as seen in the interviews and the marketing strategy, making it difficult to reach all stakeholder groups coherently with a single pitch.

As institutional complexity creates misaligned legitimacy perceptions within the innovation ecosystem, a mechanism exists to address this issue. In complex environments, Ideon uses corporate branding to shape external stakeholders' understanding of their roles.

## 5.6 Corporate Branding as a Mechanism

### 5.6.1 Indirect Influence Through Storytelling and Ambassadors

Corporate branding communicates key information about Ideon to shape external stakeholders' understanding of its role. Legitimacy construction depends on stakeholder evaluation, but effective corporate branding can help shape what stakeholders notice, understand, and associate with Ideon.

The interview participants supported this viewpoint by articulating how corporate branding positively affects their perception of the organization. Through strategic communication, they found that Ideon presents itself more clearly as an intermediary within the ecosystem. Ideon's corporate branding is a tool they use to communicate a more understandable organizational role by providing clear symbols, stories, and references through which they can assess the park.

Participant 6 emphasizes the organization's ability to give itself a face, to act as an ambassador of its purpose, and to address the challenge of communicating its role. Giving a voice to their employees to interpret who they are gives stakeholders an easier reference point to understand the organization:

*"Something they're very good at is that they highlight the people quite a lot that are working behind it. I think that's also really important, to be able to see who is behind it [...] especially these broad organizations. You don't really know what the hell a science park is, right? You have to see the people that are behind it in some kind of way, and then you kind of make an understanding."* - **Participant 6, Startup Advisor, Investment Firm.**

Participant 3, from the university's innovation unit, reflects on this, having been involved with the park for a long time and having an understanding of its history. They add how storytelling helps develop a narrative through which companies explain their growth journey within the park:

*"I think that the greatest value of a science park is the companies who are at the science park, and I think that is what they gain most from showing storytelling about their startups or their companies, telling about how they grow, success stories, and so on. I think that is what most stakeholders and also potential companies moving to the science park are most interested in."* - **Participant 3, Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit.**

This finding suggests that corporate branding is a mechanism that influences stakeholder interpretation by showcasing concrete results. Rather than just explaining what Ideon does, creating a narrative makes its abstract claims more tangible and functions as evidence-based branding. It makes stakeholder evaluations pre-objective, aligned with their interests.

The interviewees' narratives support the idea that corporate branding can assist with meaning creation. Corporate branding is effective in this sense because it provides symbols and meanings that shape interpretation, such as recognizable organizational representatives, symbolic cues, institutional carriers, and more (Scott, 2013). Corporate branding helps the park go beyond mere familiarity, offering distinctive attributes that more clearly link the organization to desirable and credible features.

However, corporate branding is only indirectly related to legitimacy earning as the evaluative criteria of multiple stakeholder groups differ. As previously mentioned, ambiguity remains due to different working relationships with the park, which creates a structurally differentiated hybridization between groups and Ideon (Greenwood et al., 2011). The variance in perception highlights the importance of evaluation, as it is here that legitimacy is earned through audience assessments (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is not an inherent outcome of corporate branding, but the interviewees indicate an indirect relationship between the practice and legitimacy.

The message platform underscores the importance of branding as a tool by emphasizing stakeholder alignment through consistent communication. The platform serves as a 'voice of our brand' and helps Ideon convey its value cohesively to its target groups, better aligning its brand identity with role understanding (Ideon, 2026b). Additionally, Ideon retains narrative control to a certain extent by featuring 'Voices of the community' in the impact report, positioning stakeholder views on the importance of being part of Ideon's network (Ideon, 2026a). Furthermore, the Ideon marketing strategy connects branding to legitimacy by helping explain roles and identities across the ecosystem (Ideon, 2026c). While corporate branding is a tool, the strategy also frames it as a 'trust infrastructure,' used to demonstrate professionalism and establish credibility (Ideon, 2026c). The message platform and marketing strategy thus draw on the theoretical concept of corporate branding by illustrating how the hybrid organization signals its role, value, and credibility to its stakeholders. Legitimacy is not an inherent trait of the organization; rather, it is determined by evaluators who assess its corporate branding efforts. Ideon's corporate branding thereby attempts to align internal and external beliefs, shaped by the evaluation criteria used to make legitimacy judgments.

### 5.6.2 Differentiating by Means of Positioning and Consistency

As corporate branding helps shape role understanding through strategic communication, it also establishes organizational differentiation. This organizational edge is evident in strengthened positioning and consistency, ultimately increasing the company's trustworthiness. Differentiation is a fundamental and competitive business strategy that helps organizations better understand the value they bring to the marketplace.

Cece Geijer, the key internal stakeholder in this study, has thrived in her role at Ideon due to her strong ability to turn perspective into strategy. Although she is an internal employee, Cece Geijer truly understands the external perspective and why that matters with respect to positioning:

*“But to me, it all starts with positioning [...] where we are in relation to other actors in our competitive area, or whatever you want to call it. So we need to figure out what our position is.”* - **Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.**

Her leadership mindset emphasizes the importance of positioning, as it is the foundation for all that follows in communication. Positioning enables an organization to find its niche and practice consistent communication:

*“The strategy is to have one clear tone of voice and visual guidelines that are more or less consistent across all channels.”* - **Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.**

She further emphasized on the importance of using branding as a “cultural tool”, reflecting on the idea that internal values must be well understood by the stakeholders in order to effectively communicate their value wherever they go:

*“So branding is used for positioning. But branding is also something I believe we use as a cultural tool, and that is something I want to work with much more. I would like all our people to feel that they are brand ambassadors”* - **Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.**

Cece Geijer's perspective is invaluable, as it helps strategize how best to reach external stakeholders. It reflects Hatch and Schultz's (2001) view on the alignment between internal and external audiences, as the clear voice and visuals contribute to stakeholder role understanding. She holds an impressive external mindset as an internal employee, allowing Ideon to base its communication in a manner that resonates with external audiences:

*“Personally, I think it is important to have a personality, a strong personality, and that has to be shown in the individuals, in the tone, in how you communicate, and in what you communicate.”* - **Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.**

Her experience as an internal actor demonstrates an outside-in approach prior to formulating organizational communication strategies relayed inside-out. Cece Geijer is heavily involved with building Ideon's organizational artifacts, part of this study. These reflect the corporate branding strategies that embody differentiation, positioning, and consistency. The use of organizational material supports Scott's (2013) concept of institutional carriers, as cues that bolster the organization's role and value understanding through differentiation, positioning, and consistency.

As seen on the message platform, the park emphasizes that communication is “the voice of our brand,” and that consistency is a “core part of our branding” (Ideon, 2026b). The message platform further shares the importance of corporate branding as the organization highlights the need for all internal and external stakeholders to be “aligned on the core messaging” (Ideon, 2026b). Alongside consistency, Ideon positions itself more clearly in the message platform by framing itself as an innovative “deep tech engine, where cutting-edge research meets real-world application” (Ideon, 2026b). These platform statements regarding the importance of positioning and consistency help differentiate Ideon, which is particularly important given its ambiguity issues. Cece Geijer’s work on the message platform is a step in the right direction towards indirectly influencing legitimacy evaluations through corporate branding.

Additionally, the marketing strategy aligns with these priorities by emphasizing how Ideon’s “one clear tone of voice” and “consistent profile” enable coherent communication (Ideon, 2026c). Regarding positioning, the strategy highlights the need to “clarify Ideon’s role in the regional, national, and international ecosystem” to avoid the risk of “being perceived as just real estate” (Ideon, 2026c). Ideon’s marketing strategy addresses these elements by integrating them into its corporate branding efforts, aiming to increase external stakeholders’ understanding of its role through intentional differentiation.

## 5.7 The Importance and Overall Evaluation of Legitimacy

The theoretical framework frames legitimacy as a socially earned concept, and the perspective of Ideon’s Chief Marketing Officer provides insight into the practical value it generates for an organization. When asked how important it is to be perceived as legitimate, Cece Geijer af Ekström stated:

*"I think that means everything, because without that, we would not get any funding. We would not get any inflow, any startups coming to our incubator, which is, of course, our livelihood [...] the stream of companies coming in. So it is absolutely crucial. Top leadership, being seen as credible, is extremely key." -*  
**Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer at Ideon Science Park**

This statement clearly emphasizes the importance of legitimacy to an organization like Ideon, framing it as a key condition for securing external resources and attracting companies to its operations. According to Scott (2013), legitimacy is not a tangible resource that can be easily possessed, but a condition that depends on being seen as credible and appropriate according to a system of values, a condition that is key for survival.

Furthermore, she reflected on the importance that corporate branding plays in their operation, framing it as "a tool for building trust and credentials" that also helps their main business operations, as legitimacy not only allows them to attract capital, but also companies that are interested in their community, allowing them to grow their network. Consequently, stakeholders' evaluations of the organization become crucial to its survival.

The findings indicate positive legitimacy evaluations through the study's analytical lens, not necessarily making the organization legitimate in the overall sense of the word. Rather, legitimacy is evaluated differently across the three dimensions. The interviews and artifacts identified a relationship between Ideon's strategic communication and stakeholder evaluations. Ideon garnered the highest legitimacy from both pragmatic and moral perspectives, but was less cohesively interpreted. However, cognitive legitimacy remains weak due to the gap between recognition as an organization and understanding of the role.

Ideon's pragmatic legitimacy is its strongest dimension. Stakeholders have a strong understanding of the park's benefits. The interviewees and artifacts repeatedly mentioned attributes such as the organization's network, knowledge exchange, incubation, visibility, and opportunities for collaboration as reasons why the park holds value in the innovation landscape. Nevertheless, the evaluation of usefulness differs across actors. As startups value community and support, large corporate actors value spaces for collaboration and networking, governmental actors value regional development, and academic actors value the pipeline Ideon has for turning university research into commercial ventures.

Ideon's moral legitimacy amongst the ecosystem actors is present. The interviewees and artifacts attributed desirable qualities to Ideon, such as professionalism, appropriateness, and the ability to collaborate with others. The longevity, reputation, and ability to work across the ecosystem shape stakeholders' perceptions of the organization as trustworthy and valuable. Nevertheless, the findings were not as strong as their pragmatic legitimacy, as their collaboration with multiple stakeholder groups is only conditionally positive. While it highlights Ideon's versatility, it challenges the coherence of the park's mission and positioning. This means that some stakeholders might see the organization as doing the right thing but question whether its mission is clear enough. Nonetheless, the findings were generally positive regarding Ideon's moral legitimacy.

Ideon struggled to attain cognitive legitimacy amongst the study's external stakeholders. Across the three dimensions, cognitive legitimacy was found to be the most uncertain, given the

unintuitive understanding of the intermediary's role in the ecosystem. However, the organization is widely known for its historical embeddedness in the region and its relationship to the innovation ecosystem. Participants are still challenged to explain their understanding of Ideon's role, who it serves, and how it relates to different stakeholders. Despite the park's long-standing embeddedness and widespread recognition, role clarity emerged as the largest barrier to cognitive legitimacy.

As a hybrid organization, all Ideon stakeholders engage with the organization in different ways and hold competing logics for evaluating the organization due to the conflicting interests of their external stakeholder groups (Greenwood et al., 2011). The variance in perceptions supports the existing belief that science parks are ambiguous, since not everyone can say exactly what the park does and why, as others do.

Ideon uses artifacts to communicate its value in a comprehensible manner, and stakeholders use these signals to develop their understanding of the park's role, influencing legitimacy evaluations. Thus, corporate branding may help Ideon build recognition, credibility, and interpretive clarity through professional communication, giving the organization a visible personification and success stories. Although corporate branding does not directly earn legitimacy, legitimacy is socially earned from evaluation.

In conclusion, the science park is pragmatically and morally legitimate given its value contributions and appropriateness, but is only partially cognitively legitimate due to its ambiguous role. Since legitimacy is evaluated differently across dimensions, it reinforces the idea that legitimacy is an outcome attained during the evaluation phases by external stakeholders (Suchman, 1995).

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Fragmented Legitimacy and the Primary Tension

The study advances previous hybrid organization literature by demonstrating how institutional complexity leads to uneven legitimacy evaluations across external stakeholder groups. The findings highlighted how legitimacy is not a fixed organizational condition. Instead, legitimacy evaluations are fragmented across stakeholders' competing expectations and logics.

This study further expands hybrid organization research by demonstrating that it is possible to score highly in pragmatic legitimacy evaluations yet struggle to earn cognitive legitimacy. After examining the findings on the legitimacy dimensions, a key empirical tension emerged: the park is widely recognized and considered important, but a consistent understanding of its role amongst ecosystem actors remains unmet. Each stakeholder group holds varied expectations, making hybrid organizational legitimacy based on more than just visibility and value.

Past hybrid organization literature has examined how these organizations face competing tensions and logics from institutions and stakeholders (Greenwood et al., 2011). This study advances the literature on hybrids by demonstrating how stakeholders evaluate differently depending on their level of role understanding. The study expands on competing expectations, suggesting that there are competing levels of understanding as well.

### 6.2 Interpreting Legitimacy Across Three Dimensions

#### 6.2.1 Pragmatic Legitimacy: Strong Despite Structural Fragmentation

Stakeholder accounts suggest that hybrid organizations receive stronger pragmatic legitimacy evaluations because evaluators can more easily perceive their tangible benefits. By working closely with hybrid organizations, stakeholders get experience-based value, thereby improving pragmatic legitimacy evaluations. That said, while all stakeholders widely observe pragmatic legitimacy, the extent to which pragmatic legitimacy is interpreted varies due to differences in exposure to the hybrid organization.

Furthermore, the value of hybrid organizations varies by stakeholder, given the wide range of relationships they have and the different criteria and intentions held by each actor. This study extends Greenwood et al. (2011) perspective on institutional logics and conflicting pressures, demonstrating how fragmented legitimacy arises from differing stakeholder experiences with the organization. In this context, pragmatic legitimacy is evaluated through multiple stakeholder logics, reflecting stakeholders having conflicting evaluative criteria of an organization's tangible value. However, hybrid organizations cannot achieve consistent pragmatic legitimacy due to the prior and direct exposure and experiences stakeholders have with the organization.

### 6.2.2 Moral Legitimacy: Positive and Conditional

Regarding moral legitimacy, the study indicated that hybrid organization stakeholders care about alignment between organizational action and its mission. Hybrids within ecosystems earn stronger moral legitimacy evaluations through credible, coherent regional development and stakeholder coordination.

However, this legitimacy dimension is conditional relative to Ideon's focus and mission clarity. While Ideon's behavior is considered credible and appropriate, many interviewees could not connect the actions to the organization's mission. This builds upon Suchman's (1995) view of moral legitimacy, in which hybrid organization stakeholders judge the coherence of its actions in terms of their appropriateness. Even if hybrid organizations behave appropriately, positive legitimacy evaluations may decrease if their actions diverge from the organization's mission, which many perceive as unfocused, as this study reveals that conditional moral legitimacy is directly influenced by the drift from the social mission spilling over the organizational identity, which external stakeholders perceive as it spills into external messaging. This situation strengthens the argument made by Zollo et al. (2022), who argue that hybrid organizations that handle both social and commercial missions should balance both values, as this prevents them from deviating from stakeholders' mission perceptions.

### 6.2.3 Cognitive Legitimacy: Recognition Versus Role Understanding

Participant responses reveal that cognitive legitimacy is inherently more difficult for hybrid organizations to earn, given their role as intermediaries. Hybrid organizations can be widely recognized as leading organizations in the regional innovation ecosystem, and this was seen as the main commonality across stakeholder understandings.

The results indicated that visibility does not equate to cognitive legitimacy. Through Suchman's (1995) way of thinking, the physical existence of Ideon is taken for granted, whereas the performative attributes of the organization lack comprehensibility. Cognitive legitimacy is based on believing in something because it is commonly accepted, which can be troublesome for hybrid organizations, given that taken-for-grantedness can exist but is limited to the organization itself, as the shared comprehension is limited (Suchman, 1995).

The study expands on previous literature by showing that hybrid organizations can be highly recognized without having clear role understandings. The understandings thereby remain fragmented, diluting the possibility of taken-for-granted legitimacy evaluation since multiple stakeholder groups assess the science park in various ways (Suchman, 1995). The study demonstrates that even organizations historically embedded in an environment can lack cognitive legitimacy, thereby expanding on Battilana & Dorado's (2010) argument that hybrid organizations need to develop a shared identity that balances different logics to achieve long-term viability. Therefore, the findings suggest that historical positioning generates a certain identity awareness due to its embeddedness, but does not necessarily lead to an understanding of a hybrid organization.

### 6.3 Institutional Complexity as the Underlying Reason

Institutional complexity was identified as the reason hybrid organizations attain fragmented legitimacy evaluations. A hybrid's positioning within the innovation environment is unavoidable, as its assignment is to facilitate relationships among them to advance innovative development in the region.

The study adds a new layer of understanding regarding this; ambiguity consistently emerges across stakeholder perceptions as a result of the intermediary role within institutionally complex environments, and not just a communication problem. As a hybrid intermediary, ambiguity will persist given the competing institutional logics of the stakeholder groups (Greenwood et al., 2011). Since actors hold competing standards of value and appropriateness, hybrid organizations will always have difficulty meeting the demands of all stakeholders, suggesting that fragmented legitimacy is an underlying factor in organizational structures rather than a communication flaw. Furthermore, the study differs from previous corporate branding literature by demonstrating that corporate branding by hybrid organizations cannot, in itself, remove ambiguity. Instead of focusing on resolving the ambiguity, stakeholders will need to manage it, as it reflects

institutional complexity. This advances the argument made by Pache & Santos (2013), who discuss the structural challenge that hybrid organizations face in complying with competing logics internally. Hence, this study extends the discussion by shifting its focus from internal to external legitimacy evaluations, revealing that an organization's structural foundations directly influence how stakeholders perceive and evaluate it.

The findings also develop the science park literature, mainly the points signaled by (Caloffi et al., 2023; De Silva et al., 2018; Klofsten et al., 2025), who position innovation intermediaries such as science parks as actors that facilitate innovation across multiple stakeholders, but have not examined how that positioning produces a legitimacy divergence as a structural condition. Additionally, Sun et al. (2019) found that the triple helix structure follows different logics but does not address the challenge that intermediary organizations within the innovation ecosystem face in being understood by their stakeholders. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by showing that the distinctive intermediary positioning of science parks within the innovation ecosystem inherently generates counterproductive outcomes, such as fragmented legitimacy evaluations of their role within the ecosystem.

This is a key implication for stakeholders surrounding hybrid organizations, especially when discussing hybrid organizations that require public and private investment. Traditional frameworks for evaluating companies based on measurable outcomes and clearer data will need to be adjusted to a broader perspective, as hybrid organizations deliver social and commercial value. Therefore, the framework for evaluating these types of organizations should consider more abstract and systemic criteria. Hybrid organizations are challenging to evaluate when stakeholders have unclear role definitions and the potential investor value remains ambiguous. To secure adequate funding and investment from external stakeholders, hybrid organizations will need to clearly communicate their value as investors reset their original evaluation criteria.

## 6.4 Practicing Corporate Branding To Help Shape Evaluation

The study's findings reflect how corporate branding is used by hybrid organizations to shape stakeholders' role understanding within complex institutional environments. The artifacts used in the study serve as carriers, which Scott (2013) would explain as the hybrid organization's way of making sense of its role and operations through communication. The study builds upon Hatch & Schultz's (2001) framework, strategic vision, organizational culture, and corporate images, especially the alignment between internal and external images, highlighting how hybrid

organizations that act as intermediaries address legitimacy evaluations by attempting to use corporate branding to align external stakeholder role understandings.

While corporate branding surely serves as a tool to influence stakeholder perception, ambiguity will always prevail to some degree as Ideon functions within an institutionally complex environment. As Balmer (2001) notes, corporate branding is particularly difficult when an organization needs to manage multiple identities. For hybrid organizations, this presents inherent challenges. Its role as an intermediary between multiple stakeholders and demands means it must be operationally versatile while communicating coherently. This finding strengthens the argument made by Rosser et al. (2022), who state that hybrid organizations need to adopt a strategic approach that allows them to differentiate their identities for specific stakeholder groups to become legitimate. The findings provide sufficient empirical support for this claim, stakeholders with differing interests and expectations produce fragmented evaluations, leaving the organization with a fragmented identity. Thus, leaving hybrid organizations with a difficult task: managing organizational identity.

An intermediary position will always make earning cognitive legitimacy harder. The study contributes original knowledge that a hybrid organization's use of corporate branding cannot remove institutional complexity, instead making it a mechanism to address fragmented role understanding through greater coherence and clarity. Regarding future hybrid organization corporate branding, it is entirely possible that these companies similarly use the mechanism to convey greater role understanding than traditional promotion. As the innovation landscapes become increasingly complex, continued role understandings will be desired by stakeholders. This enables corporate branding as a tool for hybrid organizations to communicate greater clarity about their role amid potentially fragmented perceptions.

## 7. Conclusion

The main focus of the study is to explore how hybrid organizations earn legitimacy in environments where competing logics and stakeholder expectations are contradictory, by employing Ideon Science Park as the single case study. The research argues that legitimacy is not an inherent condition possessed by the organization, but rather a socially earned outcome shaped by external stakeholders' evaluations.

The study answers the research question: How do hybrid organizations earn legitimacy across competing stakeholder evaluations of their role?

The study's findings suggest that, in hybrid organizations, legitimacy is not earned by adopting a single, coherent identity. Instead, it is evaluated unevenly across dimensions, with each dimension guided by a different evaluative criterion. Across all dimensions, pragmatic legitimacy emerges the strongest when the value is directly experienced. However, the dimension remains fragmented due to differences in stakeholders' value perceptions. Moral legitimacy evaluations are positive but conditional. More specifically, ethical behavior alone does not uphold legitimacy. It requires stakeholders to interpret how the organization's behavior aligns with a prioritized mission.

Meanwhile, cognitive legitimacy is the hardest dimension to earn. Even when the organization's heritage and longevity are known, it remains cognitively weak because stakeholders fail to fully explain what it does or how to engage with it. Instead, they simplify the role to its most basic definition as an organization. Ultimately, while corporate branding may support a hybrid organization in influencing stakeholders' interpretations and managing expectations for its role, the final judgment of an organization's legitimacy ultimately rests with stakeholders. This poses a challenge for the organization in establishing a consistent relationship across vision, culture, and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2001) due to the natural structure of its competing logics.

Throughout the findings, a common underlying factor appeared that impacted coherence across stakeholder legitimacy evaluations, inherent to the organization's structural conditions rather than a lack of a coherent communication strategy. This relates to Pache & Santos (2013), who argue that hybrid organizations are inherently contradictory, as they often face the dilemma of balancing different stakeholder expectations. They reflect the difficulty of meeting stakeholder

expectations, underscoring the need to adopt organizational strategies to address the underlying condition of the hybrid organization's structure.

In conclusion, while Ideon operates under competing logics, legitimacy is not inherently earned. Instead, it is a resource that must be managed among actors and leveraged through communication.

## 7.1 Theoretical Contributions

The study is the first of its kind to analyze hybrid organizational legitimacy in the context of a science park. Furthermore, the study builds on existing literature by demonstrating that hybrid organizations can obtain fragmented legitimacy across the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions under institutionally complex conditions. Previous literature has documented how more traditional organizations earn legitimacy, whereas the study's findings reveal the complexity of legitimacy earning. The study adds new knowledge by highlighting ambiguity as an inherent trait of serving as an intermediary, rather than poor communication alone. Similarly, the study builds upon cognitive legitimacy by emphasizing how the recognition of a hybrid organization does not equate to proper role understanding. Moreover, this study advances legitimacy theory by differentiating between hybrid organizational recognition and comprehension. The research findings challenge previous literature on this topic, as legitimacy is not taken for granted through recognition. Recognition alone was insufficient to confer cognitive legitimacy, indicating that both recognition and role comprehension are necessary for perceptions of cognitive legitimacy in hybrid organizations. Lastly, the study theoretically contributes to understanding how hybrid organizations use corporate branding to shape external perceptions, aiming to influence positive legitimacy evaluations.

Circling back to the core tension identified in this discussion, hybrid organizations are recognized by their existence but remain incomprehensible in terms of their role as an institution. Thus, the study's theoretical contribution is that legitimacy for hybrid intermediaries such as Ideon is not a singular criterion to fulfill, but rather a fragmented outcome shaped by the complexity of serving multiple stakeholder groups from an intermediary position.

Lastly, the study extends Suchman's (1995) legitimacy concept by establishing that hybrid organizations that act as intermediaries can serve as legitimacy sources for engaged stakeholders. For instance, when startups join Ideon's ecosystem, the organization has a spillover effect, in

which the legitimacy that Ideon permeates stakeholders makes them more credible in the eyes of investors. Thereby making Ideon a source of legitimacy as well.

## 7.2 Managerial Implications

Managers may use the study's findings to make strategic choices about balancing organizational operations with the demands of their stakeholders.

Managers at hybrid organizations must approach legitimacy earning differently across stakeholder groups. This is important because legitimacy is asymmetrical and is evaluated differently by external stakeholders.

Hybrid organizations should more clearly outline how they work with different stakeholder groups, reducing confusion about whom to work with and how. Senior managers must align organizational activities with the company's mission to strengthen moral legitimacy evaluations.

Managers must clearly articulate the hybrid organization's role to the best of their ability so that external actors perceive the organization more than just its most basic definition. Many hybrid organizations struggle to earn cognitive legitimacy as stakeholders can recall an organization's existence more clearly than they can explain its role.

Institutional complexity can be used to interpret the organization's role, providing context for how hybrids operate across multiple groups. Hybrid organizations should leverage their complexity by offering a broad understanding of what they do, investing in stories, ambassadors, and symbolic carriers that transmit the organization's functions to stakeholders. Materializing what the organization does, what it can accomplish, and who it serves. By doing so, managers can leverage structural complexity as a signal of adaptability. The structural complexity will persist, but managers can contextualize it as a defining characteristic of hybrid intermediaries' operations and ultimately reframe it as a strength.

With respect to hybrid organizations within innovation ecosystems, fragmented stakeholder perceptions are evident among companies operating in innovative technology environments as the industry becomes increasingly crowded. As these organizations work across multiple stakeholder groups to continuously innovate, managers will need to meticulously monitor

stakeholder legitimacy evaluations as misalignment with expectations becomes increasingly complex.

Regarding funding, hybrid organizational managers must know that their traditional evaluation metrics may not align. The organizational value thereby requires an alternative, more clearly defined way to satisfy the expectations of these stakeholders. The financial and measurable outputs must reach policymakers and investors in a manner that enables continued support and growth of the organization.

Lastly, the study informs managers that corporate branding is not entirely about managing a firm's reputation. It is a mechanism to improve stakeholder role understanding through strategic communication. It is used to enhance the evaluative inputs of the hybrid organization, thereby strengthening legitimacy evaluations.

## 7.3 Limitations and Future Research

The findings from this research leave the door open to new fields of work on this topic. Future work on hybrid organizations can therefore focus on these uneven legitimacy evaluations, specifically examining how different stakeholder groups construct their own legitimacy criteria.

Across the study, several limitations were acknowledged. First, the single-case design and small sample size may constrain the generalizability of the findings.

Second, all participants held previously existing relationships with Ideon, which may have given them preconceived views of the organization. Additionally, due to time and geographic constraints, the sample was mainly composed of stakeholders in Lund and Malmö, which may not capture the full range of viewpoints across the wider innovation ecosystem. The sample is therefore better understood as a reflection of particular stakeholder positions than as a representative account of the broader institutional landscape.

Third, one member of the research team is employed within the science park and possesses inside knowledge of its operations. Although this proximity offers certain analytical advantages, it may also have influenced the interpretation of the empirical material.

This study is limited to a single case and reflects stakeholder perceptions within a specific innovation ecosystem context. Future studies could explore research regarding comparative cases, stakeholder-specific legitimacy strategies, and legitimacy evolution over time.

To conclude, role understandings amongst modern and future hybrid organizations will likely remain fragmented as they grow in complexity. As hybrid organizations become increasingly prevalent across sectors, stakeholders' understanding of their purpose will continue to evolve alongside their institutional importance. In the case of science parks specifically, this is particularly relevant given the growing priority governments place on accelerating technological innovation in the current geopolitical landscape. Therefore, it highlights the importance of these organizations, as policy tools for fostering innovation and strengthening national technological competitiveness emerge. These developments will continue to introduce new actors to the ecosystem and further stimulate the ongoing demands of hybrid organizations.

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# Appendix A

## List of Questions of the Semi-Structured Interviews

### Internal Stakeholder Questions

1. How would you describe the role of the science park to someone unfamiliar with the concept?
2. What do you see as the core value the science park provides to the innovation ecosystem?
3. How does the science park use branding or external communication to explain its role and value?
4. Which communication channels or materials do you consider most important for presenting the park externally?
5. What does “being perceived as legitimate” mean for the science park?
6. What do you think external stakeholders look for when evaluating the credibility of the science park?
7. Do you think the park’s message differs across platforms and audiences? If so, how?
8. Science parks appear to have the same activities and operate in a similar way, from your perspective what do you think differentiates this Science Parks from others?
9. From a marketing perspective, where do Ideon need to stand out from other science parks and where do they have to align with others?

### External Stakeholder Questions

1. How did you first become aware of Ideon Science Park?
2. How would you describe Ideon’s role in the innovation ecosystem?
3. What value, if any, do you think Ideon provides within the innovation ecosystem, and what makes you think that?
4. Through which channels or materials do you mainly engage with Ideon?
5. Based on Ideon’s communication, what qualities or values do you associate with it?
6. Do you think Ideon’s communication is clear in explaining what it does and why it matters? Why or why not?
7. What, if anything, do you find unclear or ambiguous about Ideon’s role?
8. What makes an organization like Ideon credible or trustworthy in your view?
9. How does the way Ideon presents itself shape your view of its role and importance in the innovation ecosystem?

10. In what ways, if any, could Ideon communicate its role and value more clearly or more convincingly?

# Appendix B

Table 1. List of Participants

| Name                   | Position                                                 | Industry                            |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Cece Geijer af Ekström | Chief Marketing Officer                                  | Ideon Science Park                  |
| Participant 1          | Business Department at Lund Municipality                 | Public Sector                       |
| Participant 2          | Program Director, Lund University                        | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 3          | Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 4          | Business and Industry Coordinator, Research Facility     | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 5          | President, Student Entrepreneurship Organization         | Academic Institution                |
| Participant 6          | Startup Advisor, Investment Firm                         | Public-Private Venture & Investment |
| Participant 7          | Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm                      | Venture & Investment                |
| Participant 8          | Legal Advisor, Corporate Law Firm                        | Venture & Investment                |
| Participant 9          | Innovation Manager, Multinational Corporation            | Corporate Industry                  |
| Participant 10         | VP of Engineering and Head of R&D Center                 | Corporate Industry                  |
| Participant 11         | CEO, Early-Stage Startup                                 | Startup Ecosystem                   |
| Participant 12         | CEO, Scale-Up                                            | Startup Ecosystem                   |

# Appendix C

Table 2. Thematic Analysis

| <i>Theme</i>                                                                                          | <i>Sub-Theme</i>                                                               | <i>Quotes</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>5.1 Shared Stakeholder Role Understanding Does Not Eliminate Ambiguity in Hybrid Organizations</b> | <b>5.1.1 Consensus Around Ideon's Intermediary Role</b>                        | <p><i>"I think Ideon's role for us as a corporation is that it provides us a platform where we can meet, also from corporate to corporate. Sometimes that's difficult because you immediately get into NDAs, confidentiality, and so on. So this is more neutral ground, that offers us a platform to meet between companies as well as the opportunity to connect with startups and incubators."</i> - <b>Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&amp;D Center.</b></p> <p><i>"The purpose of it was, of course, to be able to create a similar effect, like a Silicon Valley effect, where basically there are small and large actors within one place, and they could, to the simplest end, end up meeting. You have someone starting a company, but they're also in the same building as an already established biotech company. So, quite a unique role."</i> - <b>Participant 6, Startup Advisor, Investment Firm.</b></p> <p><i>"Many startups say that being at Ideon gives them credibility. When you start, you have nothing more than your product and your team, but also by showing that you are part of Ideon, then you get more credibility, and it's easier to get customers, investors, and all the stakeholders."</i> - <b>Participant 3, Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit.</b></p> |
|                                                                                                       | <b>5.1.2 The Coexistence of: Organizational Recognition and Role Ambiguity</b> | <p><i>"Ideon has a lot of value in general, and it's hard to grasp. For me, at least, I don't know, maybe I didn't understand it quite right, but for me it was hard to understand where I can come in and what partnerships I can do. It was not intuitive, so it was more active research than knowing and</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

|                                                                                |                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                |                                                                                                    | <p><i>understanding right away what it is and what it does." - Participant 5, President, Student Entrepreneurship Organization.</i></p> <p><i>"In the sense of at what point is Ideon's mission to kind of support what I am looking for, this platform? And do they see that as, this is what we feel like we should be doing here? Or is their mission a different one where it's more focused on startups, getting them to become scale-ups and growing to become a company? That is unclear." - Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&amp;D Center.</i></p> <p><i>"I find it a bit ambiguous where the lines are between the science park in terms of companies just being residents, who pay rent and hire space, versus those companies who get innovation support. They used to have something called Ideon Innovation, but that has now been absorbed into the greater science park." - Participant 2, Program Director, Lund University.</i></p> |
| <b>5.2 Pragmatic Legitimacy Appears From Stakeholder-Specific Value Logics</b> | <b>5.2.1 Stakeholders Evaluate Hybrid Organizations Through Separate Senses of Practical Value</b> | <p><i>"I think it's very important because, say you are a student or a former student at the university, and you have a good idea that you want to try out, but you're very lonely in that phase [...] It's very, very easy to lose your positive feeling if you're by yourself [...] that's why I think it's very important that you're surrounded by others in the same position [...] also, the infrastructure that the incubator provides with excellent people working at Ideon. They have seen a lot. You can get easily available advice to take the next step." - Participant 8, Legal Advisor, Corporate Law Firm.</i></p> <p><i>"Sitting in Ideon, you constantly meet other companies in the same situation, which allows you to help each other and give support to each other... If we look at Slack, for example, there isn't much activity between the companies there, but when you walk in a corridor, you stop and</i></p>                        |

|                                                                  |                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
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|                                                                  |                                                                                   | <p><i>talk to other people. So it's the real-world meetings that are helping [...] also, for me, it's invaluable (Value that Ideon provides). And the reason is that I'm very technical (In his profession). [...] business and everything else, is where I lack experience, so there is Ideon."</i> - <b>Participant 11, CEO, Early-Stage Startup</b></p> <p><i>"The kind of core thing they do, helping the startup businesses, because that's a whole fundamental thing of the ecosystem in Lund. We're known for our big startup businesses, and Ideon is kind of a cornerstone in that. I'd also say that they put Lund on the map. I would say that's also one of the things that we kind of feel is worth supporting them."</i> - <b>Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.</b></p>                                                                                                                                     |
|                                                                  | <b>5.2.2 Pragmatic Legitimacy Weakens When Organizational Value is Unclear</b>    | <p><i>"I think there are a ton of companies here, and some of them are Swedish companies, some of them are international. Some of the events are purely held in Swedish, which for some people is okay, and for others, it's uninviting [...]"</i> In this sense, I have an office there that I can rent, and Ideon is the hotel for me, so to speak." - <b>Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&amp;D Center.</b></p> <p><i>"What's not clear is the financial help you get. For example, if you're in the science park, you have access to financing for marketing analysis and stuff like that. Things you don't know until you're in there [...] it is quite clear that they have business developers there, but what is not clear is the financial aid, that you actually get help from the government to do certain things, like IP or get help with cybersecurity."</i> - <b>Participant 11, CEO, Early-Stage Startup.</b></p> |
| <b>5.3 Moral Legitimacy Depends on Coherence Between Mission</b> | <b>5.3.1 Consistent Professional Appropriateness Reinforces Moral Evaluations</b> | <p><i>"They are an organization that typically does good. I don't look at Ideon as a for-profit organization. They are trying to stimulate the ecosystem, and they are long-term."</i> - <b>Participant 12, CEO, Scale-Up.</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

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| <p><b>and Behavior</b></p> |                                                                        | <p><i>"I think professionalism, integrity, innovation... And rigor. The quality of rigor is a core effect. If you compare it to some other science parks or incubators, Ideon has the history and the strength of having been around and established processes. So it feels like a quality place in a way." - Participant 7, Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm.</i></p> <p><i>"They are regarded as a very professional organization, and they have a kind of reputation as well for being internationally branded as one of the best and one of the first in the Nordics and Europe. So I would say that their reputation precedes them and that they are kind of [...] a cornerstone to the ecosystem. Without Ideon, I don't think that anything else would have kind of happened. So they are kind of part of the history." - Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.</i></p> <p><i>"The innovation side of it, of course, is their bread and butter [...] and they're very good at keeping good relationships with everyone [...] Ideon has a kind of culture about collaboration [...] they are very inclusive, always kind of want to hear other parties' side of things, which gives them [...] a big advantage over other actors." - Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.</i></p> |
|                            | <p><b>5.3.2 Misalignment Produces Conditional Moral Legitimacy</b></p> | <p><i>"I think by having a clear mission statement and a clear focus. If Ideon, or any science park, jumps from topic to topic just because it's in, I think you lose credibility. If you're clear on this is what we stand for [...] this is the same for a company. If the company has a clear mission statement [...] then everything we do, we focus on this." - Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&amp;D Center</i></p> <p><i>"I would say that their mission and their kind of vision could be even clearer to kind of provoke</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                                                                                                      |                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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|                                                                                                      |                                                                                          | <p><i>the municipality that we need this funding to get to this vision[...]</i>I would say maybe that's kind of unclear, and the role sometimes." - <b>Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>5.4 Cognitive Legitimacy Is Constrained by the Gap Between Recognition and Role Understanding</b> | <b>5.4.1 Historical Embeddedness as a Source for Hybrid Organizational Recognition</b>   | <p><i>"They are kind of the first one in the ecosystem[...]</i>the one actor that's been part of the ecosystem for so long that they're kind of regarded as a cornerstone[...]without Ideon, I don't think that anything else would have kind of happened." - <b>Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.</b></p> <p><i>"The science park has grown up together with the university, so it is a natural part of what we have here. So it wasn't really that we became aware of the science park. It grew up together with the university, I would say."</i> - <b>Participant 3, Business Development Manager, University Innovation Unit.</b></p> <p><i>"From its brand name being the oldest science park in Sweden, one of the bigger ones, from the success of the companies that have been here. So it becomes a magnet for new companies, like ARM setting up here or Volvo... So that's the value in itself, right?"</i> - <b>Participant 7, Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm.</b></p> |
|                                                                                                      | <b>5.4.2 The Tension Between Recognition and Role Understanding Results in Ambiguity</b> | <p><i>"What is unclear is the non-location part of it. I think that is unclear both inside and outside Ideon. What they do, apart from the physical place, is less well known[...]</i>If you ask someone in Lund, "What is Ideon?" they will say it's an industrial park... But if you ask, "What do they do?" they'll say they rent locations[...]But that's it." - <b>Participant 12, CEO, Scale-Up.</b></p> <p><i>"The connection between students who want to create a startup and Ideon is nonexistent."</i> - <b>Participant 2, Program Director, Lund University.</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

|                                                                                                     |                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| <b>5.5 Institutional Complexity Generates Fragmented Legitimacy Evaluations Across Stakeholders</b> | <b>5.5.1 Competing Institutional Logics Form Conflicting Evaluation Criteria</b>  | <p><i>"I think Ideon could do more of that. But I also see that they have to balance between big corporate companies, which are here, and small startups." - Participant 10, VP of Engineering and Head of R&amp;D Center.</i></p> <p><i>"It's kind of a good thing, and it's a bad thing because the municipality... Many of the other science parks in Sweden are kind of municipality funded 100%[...] they've worked on kind of their value proposition. It's politics and money, it takes time." - Participant 1, Business Department at Lund Municipality.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                                                                     | <b>5.5.2 Hybrid Intermediary Positioning Prevents Coherent Role Understanding</b> | <p><i>"It's not super easy, not being part of that ecosystem directly, to understand who does what and why and when and how they work together. So that definitely can be clearer." - Participant 7, Venture Capitalist, Investment Firm.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>5.6 Corporate Branding As A Mechanism</b>                                                        | <b>5.6.1 Indirect Influence through Storytelling and Ambassadors</b>              | <p><i>"Something they're very good at is that they highlight the people quite a lot that are working behind it. I think that's also really important, to be able to see who is behind it[...] especially these broad organizations. You don't really know what the hell a science park is, right? You have to see the people that are behind it in some kind of way, and then you kind of make an understanding." - Participant 6, Startup Advisor, Investment Firm.</i></p> <p><i>"I think that the greatest value of a science park is the companies who are at the science park, and I think that is what they gain most from showing: storytelling about their startups or their companies, telling about how they grow, success stories, and so on. I think that is what most stakeholders and also potential companies moving to the science park are most interested in." - Participant 3, Business Development</i></p> |

|  |                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |                                                                      | <b>Manager, University Innovation Unit.</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|  | <b>5.6.2 Differentiating by Means of Positioning and Consistency</b> | <p><i>“But to me, it all starts with positioning [...] where we are in relation to other actors in our competitive area, or whatever you want to call it. So we need to figure out what our position is.” - Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.</i></p> <p><i>“The strategy is to have one clear tone of voice and visual guidelines that are more or less consistent across all channels.” - Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.</i></p> <p><i>“So branding is used for positioning. But branding is also something I believe we use as a cultural tool, and that is something I want to work with much more. I would like all our people to feel that they are brand ambassadors” - Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.</i></p> <p><i>“Personally, I think it is important to have a personality, a strong personality, and that has to be shown in the individuals, in the tone, in how you communicate, and in what you communicate.” - Cece Geijer af Ekström, Chief Marketing Officer, Ideon Science Park.</i></p> |

# Appendix D

## Consent Form



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick the appropriate box):

|     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                      |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | I understand the information about the project.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 2.  | I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 3.  | I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 4.  | I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 5.  | The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 6.  | If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 7.  | The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 8.  | I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.                                                                                                                                                                                  | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |
| 9.  | Select only <b>one</b> of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.</li><li>I do not want my name used in this project.</li></ul> | <input type="checkbox"/><br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. | I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <input type="checkbox"/>                             |

**Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher:**

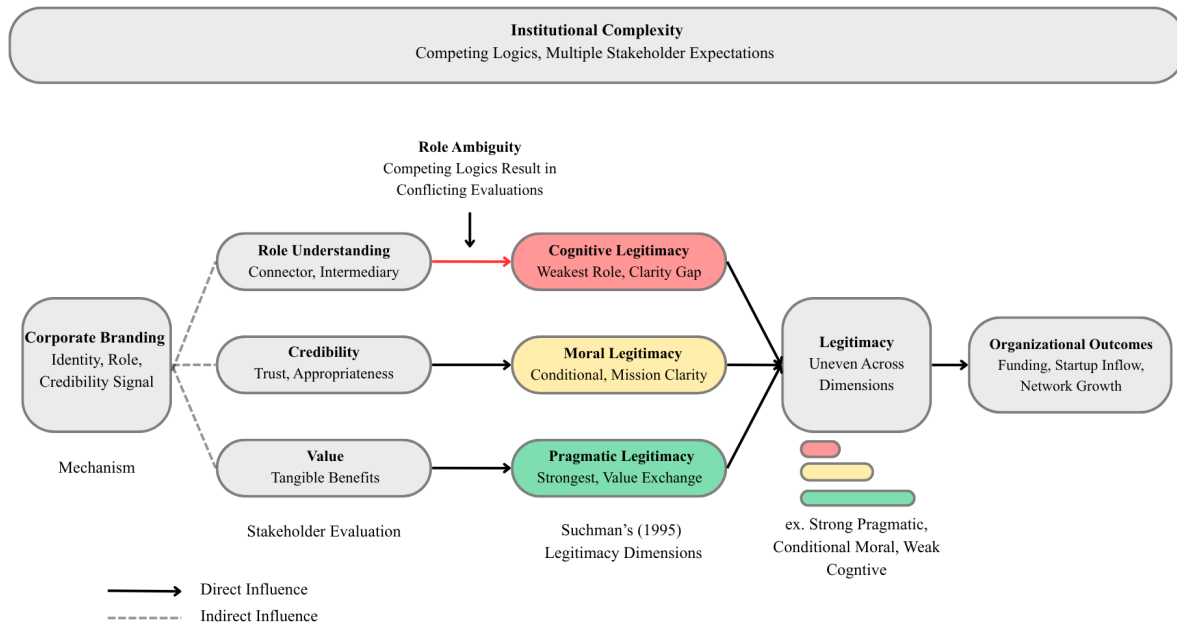
\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# Appendix E

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Legitimacy Evaluations in Hybrid Organizations



# Appendix F

## Use of AI Statement

In the development of the present master thesis, AI tools were employed to support different aspects of the writing and research process. These tools, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, with the aim of brainstorming, correcting grammar, language corrections, coherence in sentences, and academic writing corrections.

No generative AI tool was used to create data, conduct analysis or replace human judgment, aligning with Lund University's ethical guidelines regarding research conduct.