INITIATING, DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP WORK

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Abstract
Social partnerships are increasingly seen as a means by which both government and non-government agencies can identify and respond to localised need. This paper reports the findings of the first phase of the project that aims to inform how best social partnerships can be formed and developed to support vocational education and training at the local level. This phase sought to identify key principles and practices that will underpin this aim, using the experiences of 10 existing social partnerships. A key finding was the importance of partnership work. This is detailed through five dimensions of partnership work, and principles and practices that were identified and verified as most likely assisting the development and transformation of social partnerships over time. The dimensions of ‘partnership work’ comprise (i) cultural scoping work; (ii) connection building work; (iii) capacity building work; (iv) collective work, and (v) trust building work. The principles manifest with subtle differences at the initial and later stages of partnership work, include developing and maintaining: (i) shared goals; (ii) relations with partners; (iii) capacity for partnership work; (iv) governance and leadership, and (v) trust and trustworthiness. The specific implications for VET will be explored in the next phase of this project.

Social partnerships
In Australia, and worldwide, governments, civic organizations and global agencies, including those associated with vocational education and training (VET), are increasingly valuing social partnerships as means to understand and address local and regional concerns and for building social capital. ‘Social partnerships’ are localised networks that connect some combination of local community groups, education and training providers, industry and government to work on local issues and community-building activities (Seddon & Billett 2004). Social partnerships hold the prospect of engaging communities with government and non-government organizations in solving problems, making decisions, and negotiating desirable outcomes cooperatively. They are seen as a way to assist collaborative decision-making and build local capacity in ways that support economic, social and civic development attuned to local needs and circumstances. By its very nature, a partnership requires partners to collaborate in achieving common goals. However, the process of working together is complex and challenging, and at times contested. It requires partners and participants to understand that effective social partnerships work in specific ways directed towards shared goals or more likely, a common focus.

This paper reports on a NVTRE funded research project to investigate the formation, development and continuity of in social partnerships in order to understand how best they might be initiated and developed. The project reviewed the workings and
achievements of social partnerships first investigated in earlier research (i.e. Seddon et al 2002, Seddon, Billett and Clemans 2004, Billett & Seddon 2004) and some other longstanding partnerships. The aims of that review were to:

1. identify the key principles and practices that underpin the formation, development and maintenance of social practices that are effective in assisting localised decision-making and capacity building associated with vocational education.
2. describe the effective enactment of these principles and practices as shaped in different ways across these social practices.
3. identify how these principles and practices are associated with establishing and developing social partnerships robust enough to manage changing circumstances, tasks and goals.

In the following, the context for social partnerships, and our research into the practices that effect the development and maintenance of social partnerships are discussed.

**Context for social partnerships**

Globally, government and non-governmental agencies are now viewing social partnerships as a means of improving service delivery and for building enhanced capability at the local level (Green, Wolf & Leney 1999, United Nations Development Program UNDP 1997). This view has arisen out of a range of concerns and needs, particularly a growing: (i) consensus that centralised agencies struggle to understand and accommodate the diverse needs of communities, such as in providing effective and tailored educational provisions for young people (e.g. O’Donoghue 2001); (ii) government interest in building capacity at the local level to assist in the effective targeting and delivery of service provisions, such as VET courses and provisions (e.g. Kosky 2001); (iii) to find ways of securing economic goals through local partnerships and decision-making, such as aligning VET provisions with local enterprise needs (e.g. ANTA 2003); and (iv) governmental interest in engaging and mobilising individuals and communities more directly in civic activity and community building projects (Field 2000). So there are both economic and social motives in government and non-government agencies’ interest in the effective enactment of social partnerships at a local level. However, the formation and ongoing development of these social partnerships can be complex and vexed, and likely requiring particular kinds of support and guidance.

Some social partnerships evolve as a product of local concerns, such as those focusing on localised skill shortages or concerns about unemployment (Billett & Hayes 2000). More typically, new partnerships are those that government and non-governmental agencies are intentionally enacting for specific policy purposes. Yet, these ‘enacted’ partnerships are of a different kind than those that emerge spontaneously from a locally identified need (Seddon & Billett 2004). This is partly because these ‘enacted’ social partnerships are often more global in their ambitions, more inclusive in their membership, wider in their localities and are subject to governmental administrative and accountability measures. Moreover, as they are enacted and supported from outside the community, their formation is often necessarily predicated upon and auspiced through an existing network or affiliations which necessarily requires negotiation with and transformation of these existing partnerships. These are referred to as community partnerships (Billett & Seddon 2004).

It follows, that the processes for the effective formation, development and maintenance of these partnerships are both potentially complex and differentiated. In the
Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) the prospects for the development of consensual decision making was found to be premised upon the scope of the partnerships, the diversity of interests represented, securing representation and, the participants’ experience in consensus-based decision making processes and what constituted consensus building activities within the partnerships (Seddon, et al. 2002). Moreover, ‘enacted’ partnerships such as these rely heavily upon volunteer effort. While essential, voluntary effort adds further complexities to the establishment, development and maintenance of social partnerships. This voluntary effort takes a number of forms. There are those who volunteer their time personally and make individually based decisions about their involvement. Then, there are those who represent an agency/enterprise/institution that is a partner. There decision making may be influenced by the interests of their sponsoring institution. These volunteers may not be directly subject to the edicts of the social partnership or any sponsoring agency. They elect how and when they participate and for what purpose. So, a process of building trust, genuine engagement and progress that reflects personal or employer concerns is also required. However, partnership work likely proceeds in ways that are subject, in part, to contestation among institutional and individual partners, which is not surprising given the often complex relations, histories and competing interests of individuals and institutions that are represented in these social partnerships.

So while potentially being able to: (i) make significant contributions to localised decision making in VET; (ii) support local initiatives associated with skill development; (iii) participate in and guide the development of local capacity building through and for vocational education, these partnerships are themselves in need of support and guidance in their development and continuity. The agencies sponsoring these partnerships need to conduct their role in ways that best support the prospect of effective partnership development and assist them locally promote workforce capability development. From the perspectives of both the social partnerships and their sponsors, their development needs to be informed by principles and practices to guide and support their development and avoid repeating needless mistakes. It is to this end, that this project sought to identify the kinds of practices and principles that stand to support the formation, development and continuity of these social partnerships.

**Identifying principles and practices**

Ten social partnerships that had existed for some time and, by degrees, had experienced changes in their circumstances and goals were selected for participation in this project. Those selected represented different kinds of social partnerships, with diverse foci and locations. Some are examples of *enacted partnerships* - partnerships initiated and sponsored by agencies external to the communities in which they are located (e.g. the LLENs), *community partnerships* – those that were initiated by the community (e.g. Deception Bay Community Youth Program, Wide Bay Coalition) and some that are best characterised by being initiated through interaction between internal and external interests (e.g. Mt Isa Regional Skill Capability Project) – *negotiated partnerships*. Although all the partnerships are concerned with addressing localised need and capacity building, there is some diversity in their specific purposes. The common goal for these partnerships is about transforming individuals and communities through individual and community capacity building activities or learning. These partnerships collectively are located in inner metropolitan areas, provincial centres, outer suburbs of metropolitan cities, and remote centres.
Data were gathered through interviews with up to three key informants in each social partnership. The informants included those employed within the social partnerships as well as those in the community who engage with the partnership (see Billett, Clemans and Seddon 2005). These interviews elicited information about the development of the social partnership from their early formation to their current manifestations and goals. The interview items focused on specific events in the development of the partnership to identify factors that sustained or undermined the partnership and partnership work. Analysis of the data gathered from interviews identified guiding principles in developing partnership work. From this work, a tentative set of principles and practices for developing and sustaining social partnerships was identified and presented as initial findings. These were returned to the ten participating social partnerships for verification and endorsement.

Outcomes of investigation

Conceptions of partnerships

The ten partnerships were initially conceptualised according to the factors identified as initiating the origins, purposes and focus for their work as per the earlier study (Billett & Seddon 2004, Seddon & Billett 2004). They are represented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Characteristics of types of partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genesis</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Processes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enacted partnership</td>
<td>From outside the partnership which is to be the target of the engagement, yet with goals or resources that the community is interested in engaging with</td>
<td>To secure outcomes aligned to external funding body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community partnership</td>
<td>Concerns, problems, issues identified within the community</td>
<td>To secure resources to address issues, problems and concerns, often from agencies outside the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiated partnership</td>
<td>Need to secure a provision of service or support that necessitates working with partners</td>
<td>To develop effective working relations outside of the organisation that comprises the social partnership</td>
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In this project, the ten participating social partnerships could be so categorized.  

*Enacted partnerships*, which were initiated by external agencies, but whose goals are of relevance to, or are shared by, the community. These include: Banyule-Nullimbik Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), Maribyrnong-Moonee Valley LLEN and Mornington-Frankston LLEN. These three social partnerships focus on creating pathways to training and employment for young people disengaged from education and training. These enacted local learning networks were established in Victoria in 2001 and continue to operate through a group of community stakeholders who come together to plan and initiate pathways and programs for youth.

*Community partnerships*, which originated in the community to address local concerns, but worked with external agencies to secure adequate resources and support for
dealing with identified problems and issues. These include: Upper Yarra Secondary College/Upper Yarra Community House, North Eastern LLEN, Mt Isa Regional Capability Project, Deception Bay Community Youth Program and Wide Bay Coaliton, Disability Sector Training Fund. These community social partnerships have been in operation for around 1-3 years. Their work is directed towards overturning the employment and educational prospects for disadvantaged social groups. The Upper Yarra Community Centre and Upper Yarra Secondary School partners to improve school retention by providing young people with a vocational Year 12 program (VCAL) provided by the community centre. The North-Eastern LLEN aim to connect young people to employment and work placements while Wide Bay DSTF Coalition decides on training priorities for the disability sector, including parents and carers.

*Negotiated partnerships*, which were formed between partners with reciprocal goals to secure a service or support and required effective negotiation of interests and agendas. These include: St James College and the Queensland Community Services and Health ITC. These social partnerships have been in operation for around 11-15 years, relatively longer than social partnerships described above. The Queensland Community Services and Health ITC social partnership is a tripartite organisation providing advice on VET to the Queensland government. It also brokers training through regional networks. It was established in 1990. St James College draws on a social partnership model to provide structured workplace learning for Year 11 and 12 students.

These categories serve to point to how these different conceptions of social partnerships or partnership work are motivated and enacted. Importantly, commonly they provide premises for understanding and guiding the initial formation of social partnerships. That is, a set of concerns or goals that have to be met collectively and/or through partnerships with others. In this way, these conceptions of social partnership provide a means to understand their initial formation including their goal or goals as the key premise for organising and acting collectively. This includes engaging with others who are seen as holding the resources to address these issues, and whose needs are aligned with the emerging goals of the social partnership.

However, as foreshadowed, while these three conceptions provide a means to understand different motivations, goals and processes, the data also suggest that these characteristics and qualities only reflect particular moments in the life of all social partnerships (particularly their formation and initial development). To understand how partnerships operate to secure these goals, respond to changing circumstances and new goals and priorities, it is important to go beyond these three conceptions of partnerships. It is necessary to understand how they work to articulate and demonstrate a common need to negotiate and realise a common set of concerns or goals that have to be met collectively, and through partnerships with others who hold various resources. Participants within partnerships typically refer to this process as building trust in others as a basis for effective engagement and participation. We have called this process of building relationships of trust *partnership work*. Yet, making complex this building of trust is the contested character of much partnership work. For instance, the LLENS were enacted as collaborative, yet enacted in an institutional environment that was stepped in competitive practices.

**Partnership work**

A key outcome of this project was to identify that social partnerships are established and maintained because participants engage in partnership work. *Partnership work* is held to be
the interactive and collaborative process of working together to identify, negotiate and articulate goals, and to develop processes for realising and reviewing those goals (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005). Effective partnership work embraces and harnesses the contributions of local partners and external agencies, their interactions and transformations in the collective work of realising shared goals. The processes of working together allow:

- communities to identify and represent their needs, and to secure quality partners and partnership arrangements that will enable them to achieve their objectives
- government and non-government agencies to understand and respond to local needs, to utilise local resources and enhance capacity for local governance.

From the analysis of the interview data of these ten social partnerships, it is proposed that partnership work is a critical and ongoing process in social partnerships. It contributes to the consolidation of relationships of trust. However, this process of trust building is unlikely to ever be complete. It is continually being enacted, negotiated and remade throughout the life of the partnership, albeit in different ways and by different degree in changing circumstances. Consequently, participants must continue to work at relationship-building if trust is to be maintained between the partners.

Seeing social partnerships from a process perspective emphasises these as an outcome of partnership work as well as being dependent upon it. Focusing on successful partnership work offers a useful approach for understanding the complexity and diversity of social partnerships’ working, prospects for achieving their goals, their transformations and engagement with other agencies and partnerships. It also illuminates how social partnerships operate, how they respond to changing circumstances, and how they might be best supported by external sponsoring agencies to realise their purposes in sustainable ways.

**Principles and dimensions of partnership work**

Five principles were identified as guiding the initial and later stages of effective partnership work. These principles are enacted around five dimensions of partnership work and manifest in a set of practices aligned to them. These dimensions emerged as participants articulated the nature of partnership work. These dimensions, broadly speaking, are the foci towards which effort and action among partners are targeted. They comprise:

(i) cultural scoping work;
(ii) connection building work;
(iii) capacity building work;
(iv) collective work, and
(v) trust building work.

Together, these five dimensions and associated principles and practices form the basis of partnership work. This work is realised through the work processes within social partnerships, may be supported and informed by external sponsors and will adopt particular variations and emphases within social partnerships over time.

Five sets of principles were identified as guiding the initial stages of effective partnership work. These are:

1. **Building and maintaining shared purposes and goals.** This comprises initially involves identifying the partners’ interests and concerns, and developing a framework for collectively realising goals. Over time, it involves the partners actively reflecting upon, reviewing and revising goals, identifying achievements, and renewing commitment.
2. **Building and maintaining relations with partners.** This initially involves building trust and commitment, encouraging participation, and developing processes that are inclusive and respectful. Over time, it involves endorsing and consolidating existing relationships, recognising partners’ contributions, and facilitating new and strategic relationships.

3. **Building and maintaining capacities for partnership work.** Initially this involves engaging partners in the collective work of the partnership, through developing the infrastructure and resources needed to achieve goals. Over time, it involves securing and maintaining partners who engage effectively with both community and external sponsors, and managing the infrastructure required to support staff and partners.

4. **Building and maintaining partnership governance and leadership.** Initially this involves formulating and adopting consistent, transparent and workable guidelines and procedures for the partnership work and enactment of leadership. Over time, it involves developing and supporting close relations and communication between partners, and effective leadership.

5. **Building and maintaining trust and trustworthiness.** This initially involves establishing processes that engage and inform partners, and that encourage cooperation and collaboration. Over time, it involves focusing on partners’ needs and expectations, and ensuring that differing needs are recognised and addressed.

These sets of principles and their associated practices are seen as ‘ideals’ to be worked towards and to advance as desirable outcomes, albeit in environments that while purporting to be benign are often highly contested. Moreover, these principles and their elaborations have been endorsed by participating social partnerships as reflecting the kinds of principles that lead to development of and sustaining partnership work. Elsewhere, these principles and practices have been elaborated (Billett et al 2005) and they have also been used to evaluate and plan social partnership activities (e.g. QSHITC 2005).

**Social partnerships in prospects**

In these ways, this research has endorsed the potential social partnerships as an increasingly prevalent organisational form. They work well to intuit, articulate and respond to local needs and capacity building – the very purposes of vocational education and training. However, social partnerships do not just happen as result of external demand: they have to be enabled and supported. Social partnerships, themselves, need to initiate, develop and sustain the capacities required for partnership work. There is sometimes slippage between supporting social partnership for its own sake and the purposes for which it was set up. Articulation and restatement of purpose was a frequent habit in social partnerships to keep purpose in sight.

While it is possible to define a social partnership according to the genesis of its formation, in fact, the qualities and forms of social partnerships are not fixed. They take on different forms as they evolve. Yet, the genesis of the social partnership and the antecedent conditions for its existence did shape the scope of partnership work undertaken. Government and non-government agencies seeking to use social partnership for policy or program purposes should aim to become partners and engage in partnership work rather than attempting to direct and control. They might also find evaluating social partnerships could be best achieved through appraising the quality and sustainability of partnership work, through the principles and practices articulated above. While partnership work is the
obvious activity within social partnerships, the qualitative character of that work is also evident in many other work and community settings. Understanding partnerships and partnership work within distinctive localised needs/skills ecosystems may provide a way of more tightly contextualising and conceptualising the motivations, goals, work practices, resources and definitions of success. Consideration of the dimensions, principles and practices within social partnerships may, indeed, be an important reference point for the development of vocational curriculum that authentically reflects current and global organisational forms. Given that vocational education provision is often supported by social partnerships, as reflected by many of the partnerships canvassed in this study, the nature of partnership work to secure robust social partnerships is of interest and relevance to VET.

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References