

Effective Local and Regional Partnerships for lifelong learning

Working Paper

Creating Learning Cultures:

Next steps in achieving the Learning Age

Second report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning

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1 Why Partnership?

Partnership has been a policy tool for governments of different political complexions and for different purposes. It is important to understand why this has been so, and ensure that its advantages and disadvantages are taken into account in planning. At worst, the requirement to act with and through ‘partnerships’ can be used as a form of structural and financial control. At best, it can bring together like-minded organisations, more resources, encourage innovation and collaboration and ensure better, more flexible and more varied provision for learners.

Partnerships have not just been used a policy tool in the provision of education and training, but also in health, urban regeneration and in many other areas eg PFI schemes. Over the last two decades, an increasing number of education providers, notably polytechnics and further education colleges, have been given institutional independence and have been, effectively, encouraged to compete in the market place sometimes with each other and sometimes with commercial organisations. Habits of collaboration do not, however, sit easily with habits of competition and a culture change is necessary. Is it possible for organisations which have been set up to compete ‘to change their spots’? The challenge is to lose the worst characteristics of competition and gain back the best characteristics of partnership and collaboration.

The past twenty years have seen such a fragmentation of governance and such an increase in single-issue bureaucracies that, almost without exception, every major public issue now requires the co-operation of several partners if it is to be tackled effectively - crime, disaffected youth, standards in education, health, family breakdown - they all cry out for the partnership approach.’ (Bichard, 1998).

While this paper mainly considers partnership locally and regionally, it should be noted that there are similar issues which arise nationally between different arms of government as a result of moving from competition mode to a collaboration mode. Recent years have seen more control by central government, with less local ownership and the competitive market does not, of itself, provide incentives for government departments or civil servants to work together, nor has that been their training. The particular role of government as a partner is also not often spelled out. It is important to consider what it is that government can and should bring to partnerships.

Partnerships are especially important in the provision of lifelong learning and there are already many successful examples. No single agency can meet the varied learning needs of adults, and collaboration with others can offer stronger and more effective ways of using existing resources. Adults have a very wide range of learning needs and should be enabled to make their individual choices from an equally wide range of learning opportunities.

Patterns of need are likely to change over people's lifetimes and there will also be different needs in different localities. Any one organisation may be involved in a number of different partnerships, probably playing a different role in each one. Imaginative leadership is particularly important, as is the ability to act generously inside partnerships: the politics of generosity.

2 A Statutory Duty?

It is worth noting that not all collaboration requires 'partnership'. However, all partnerships require collaboration

It has been suggested that there could be a 'statutory duty of partnership'. This requires detailed thought. Dictionary definitions of 'partnership' are general in their good intent.

... a state of sharing ... to engage jointly ... participation, inclusion, alliance, solidarity, cooperate,... work together, reciprocate, make common cause...

Implicit in these is a 'structure of expectation'. Can it be spelled out in legislation as a duty? What would the duty consist of?

Is it possible to measure the effectiveness of a partnership strategy as opposed to a competition strategy? And is it possible to measure the contribution of different partners to the whole?

3 The Government's Interest in Partnerships

The Green Paper The Learning Age includes the question:

how can we ensure that local partners - including TECs, further and higher education and local authorities, work together to support enterprises in improving learning?

and confirms the government's commitment to develop more coherent planning and funding arrangements in post-16 education.

The concern of the Secretary of State as expressed to the FEFC is that:

...the sector must be organised as cost-effectively as is practicable. To some extent this may be secured by a greater degree of collaboration both within and between sectors... (Nov, 1997).

The FEFC, the LGA and the TEC National Council have agreed to work together nationally to secure greater coherence in learning opportunities post-16 and have adopted the following key objectives:

- (a) to raise educational standards
- (b) to improve the quality of provision
- (c) to increase choice and enhance the quality of guidance
- (d) to encourage suitable broadening of the curriculum
- (e) to improve cost-effectiveness
- (f) to ensure access to local provision and
- (g) to encourage coherence of local planning and avoid wasteful duplication of provision (FEFC, 1998)

They have agreed that the following principles should underpin the development of a national strategic partnership in post-16 education and training (FEFC, 1998);

- 3.1 a commitment to inclusion, accountability and excellence
- 3.2 development of mutual understanding and respect for the different roles and remits of partners
- 3.3 a focus on outcomes, not structures
- 3.4 a presumption that new initiatives should be progressed through partnership
- 3.5 building upon existing good practice, reducing rather than creating additional groupings or bureaucracies
- 3.6 recognition of the need to retain maximum local flexibility in arrangements
- 3.7 a commitment to standardisation of procedures, data requirements and data output.

Most of these are principles which are likely to apply equally to local and regional partnerships, though the range of possible partners will be wider and more varied.

4 Reasons Generally given for the Benefits of Partnerships

- 4.1 To bring in more resources/avoid duplication of diminishing resources. To provide better value for money
- 4.2 Partnerships often prevent having to invent new institutions

- 4.3 To ensure sufficiency and adequacy of provision/to offer a seamless learning agenda
- 4.4 To ensure equity and equality of opportunities for all members of the community
- 4.5 To enable more flexibility, increase access and choice
- 4.6 To encourage innovation/learning with and from others
- 4.7 Partnerships ensure a wide range of voices and enable hidden problems and priorities to be identified through dialogue
- 4.8 They should provide better feedback and greater local accountability and therefore better provision for community needs
- 4.9 They can provide material and curricular benefits for collaborating partners.

5 The World of Partnerships Requires New Skills in Individuals and Organisations

Bichard (1998) suggests that we need different skills and competences to create and sustain effective partnerships both as individuals and as organisations. Traditional public service skills of direction, control, avoidance of mistakes and creation of uniformity are no longer the most desirable skills.

You need to be able to influence, to negotiate, to broker sub-optimal coalitions, to deal with the unexpected - and to listen ...

...organisations which make effective partners are most likely to be learning organisations, open, good at communicating, adaptable and focused more upon outcomes and results than on process and status. (Bichard, 1998).

It is desirable, but not always easy, to include learners as partners in the process. The active engagement of learners in the design, shaping and delivery of their learning is especially important in lifelong learning. Not all learners will wish to or be able to take up this role immediately, and may need others to stand as mentors for them. Providers are usually not adequate surrogates for learners, nor should they be used as a substitute for direct feedback from learners themselves. Particularly with open and distance learning, systematic survey or other feedback is required from learners themselves.

6 Some Different Types of Partnership Activity

Partnerships can be valuable across many different types of activities. Some examples follow.

- 6.1 Providers of similar services from different sectors can collaborate eg networks of providers of public and company/private learning centres to offer a wider variety of provision.
- 6.2 Partnerships in the workplace between unions, workers and employers.
- 6.3 Partners can add different inputs to the value chain, bringing together people/groups with different complementary skills eg academics with multi-media design specialists, colleges collaborating with soft-ware and hard-ware providers.
- 6.4 Partnerships to develop/experiment with models for transfer/scalability.
- 6.5 A major partnership to plan/co-ordinate provision in a locality/region to avoid duplication/competition eg a local Lifelong Learning Development Plan.
- 6.6 A consortium/grouping to act together to commission specialist provision which is too expensive for one provider eg to produce ICT based learning resources; or to set up an independent guidance centre/one-stop shop serving all the learners/providers in a locality. Such issues are discussed in the sub-group report 'Changing learners, changing technologies' for NAGCELL (1998).
- 6.7 Collaboration in market research/R&D/needs analysis/collection and provision of labour market statistics etc.
- 6.8 Monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness and outcomes.

7 What Makes A Good/Effective Partnership?

A number of generally agreed requirements follow.

- 7.1 Partnership requires a common cause/purpose, a shared vision.
- 7.2 Imaginative leadership. Individuals are important.
- 7.3 Clarity of aims and objectives. Shared targets.
- 7.4 A joint budget with reasonable and stable funding.
- 7.5 Openness, transparency and honesty.
- 7.6 Clarity of roles and responsibilities of members. Agreed and understood 'rules of association'. Mutual respect. Recognition of power relationships and contract requirements.
- 7.7 Aims and objectives must be clarified before funding issues are addressed, rather than the partnership established because funding is available.

- 7.8 Consultation, co-operation, collaboration, co-ordination, open communication, confidence.
- 7.9 Complementary skills/experience. Synergy between partners. Partners add value.
- 7.10 Continuity of member representation. It needs top-down commitment of the organisation. It cannot be based only on the goodwill of individuals, even though individuals may have been fundamental to getting the project started.
- 7.11 Involve beneficiaries effectively. Feedback and review mechanisms are vital.

8 What is the Appropriate Community/Group? Is it local or regional, national, European or even global?

There is no one answer to this? It depends on the task at hand. Partnerships can be formal or informal, set up for a particular short-term task or be designed to operate longer-term at a strategic level. They can be built in as a formal requirement to gain funding eg many European programmes, City Challenge, Lottery bids etc or they can be looked on as a desirable way of implementing policy in an inclusive and democratic way. The remits of most local/regional educational partnerships have until now been fairly focused, often aimed at a specific target group, funding initiative or policy thrust. Many initiatives, however, start informally and then grow. It is sensible for partnership requirements not to be so tight that growth and transferability is prevented. Partnerships can work well for short-term, specific purposes, and should not be artificially kept alive. They cannot be a substitute for creative energy, but they can act as a channel for it.

Informal partnerships will work at different levels than those which are responding to regional or European initiatives. Issues include understanding the complexity of community. There may be overlapping administrative boundaries or lack of coterminous boundaries such as TECs and LAs, different regional groupings eg FEFC, and the new Regional Development Areas.

The ethos or culture of the local education community is also important. Is it one in which people know each other and have worked together before eg the Bradford Partnership, or people may be put in the position of having to find partners as an external project requirement. Partnerships may be imposed: it is possible to require democratically elected LEAs to work together in a way that cannot be required of 'independent' TECs or FE colleges.

Finally, it can be a partnership in which a national provider eg the BBC or the Ufi can expect to work with many local and/or regional agencies.

9 Who should be Involved in Local/Regional Lifelong Learning Partnerships?

There are already a large number of agencies involved in the **control** and **funding** of lifelong learning, either as funders or gate-keepers or both, and frequently they have overlapping or competitive functions.

It is often not clear which bodies cover which functions, and what their current remit is. Some disappointment, time and wasted effort could be saved if there were fewer bodies with clearer functions. It is important not to introduce new layers of bureaucracy and new rigidities just as we get rid of old ones. Agencies offering funding such as the Lottery, TECs, or Government Regional Offices should think carefully before imposing a formal requirement for partnership, as it may not always be appropriate. Simple encouragement to collaborate may often be more productive and less time-consuming.

The challenge is to look creatively for new ways to forge new kinds of partnerships that bring synergy between our sectors in The Learning Age.

David Melville (FEFC) THES May 1 1998

The range of potential relevant partners is wide. It includes too many to discuss in this review paper: local authorities (eg LEA, Economic Development); TECs; Chambers of Commerce/business associations/employer networks; Further and Higher Education providers; Careers and Guidance Services/job centres; Community/Adult Education Services; Youth Services; Library Services; Social Services; Health Authorities; Voluntary Sector; Police, Probation, Prison Service; religious organisations; womens' groups eg WI; ethnic groups; other community groups.

Similarly, a variety of agencies or individuals may take the lead. There is no one magic formula. The challenge is to harness energy and enthusiasm and maximise resources.

10 Difficulties and Negatives of Partnerships

There are a number of specific difficulties identified by the FEFC in relation to institutions and partnerships, which follow (FEFC, 1998):

- 10.1 Inside an institution, it requires identification of designated staffing time.
- 10.2 The structure of provision can inhibit or foster collaboration.
- 10.3 Overcoming mutual suspicion and mistrust.
- 10.4 The temptation to continue to develop the college's own offerings.
- 10.5 Conflicting priorities with other new initiatives.

The main other negatives generally described are:

- 10.6 The time taken to **develop** partnerships.
- 10.7 Competitive bidding which requires partnerships as part of the bid.
- 10.8 Partnerships tied to short-term funding.
- 10.9 The sheer time 'gobbled up'. Involves more meetings, more paper, more time.
- 10.10 The opportunity cost of time foregone.
- 10.11 An imbalance of resources between partners.
- 10.12 Frequently there is a controlling lead partner, and other partners are not equal.
- 10.13 Partnerships that are funding-driven rather than needs-driven.
- 10.14 Cynicism based on previous experiences of bidding rounds: EC programmes, SRB, City Challenge, Lottery etc

There is significant bad experience of partnerships which have been set up artificially to meet competitive bidding requirements. Often this has been associated with the centralising funds and the use of partnership linked with competitive bidding as a method of allocating scarce resources. The time cost and effort, particularly for small organisations, as well as the resulting disappointment has been damaging. The Charities Lottery Board's requirements and their quite low ratio of grants to bids are a real deterrent.

11 Big Issues

- 11.1 Partnerships have often been associated with short-term or interim funding. However, it takes time to build up relationships and requires stable funding. Hence, as the Socrates Adult Education evaluation shows, there is a tendency for existing partnerships be at an advantage and to (continue to) gain competitive funding rather than encourage new partnerships with new players.
- 11.2 Partnerships require an acceptance of diminished individual autonomy or a willingness to sacrifice some of one's own priorities in the interest of the greater good. There may also be risk factors for institutions that give up some autonomy. A cynical description offered is 'sleeping with the enemy to get the money!'
- 11.3 Some potentially valuable partnerships are inhibited by structural, governance or funding constraints eg JANET/SUPERJANET could offer networking resources to wider partnerships if its remit/governance did not prevent it.

12 Some National Policy Issues and Questions

The valuable report of the WEA/OCN seminar Learning Partnerships (WEA, 1998) raised a number of issues and asked some policy questions which are listed here for easy reference. Some have been noted earlier, and the list is by no means comprehensive, but it offers a useful entry to further work.

Issues listed

- 12.1 It will require a shift away from the culture of competition that has characterised the period since the 1992 H&FE Act.
- 12.2 There is an imbalance in the post-16 funding formulae between school 6th forms, 6th form colleges and FE colleges which militates against partnerships.
- 12.3 Special funding arrangements involving competitive bid procedures and requiring partnerships can **prevent** imaginative educational initiatives being extended to other areas of need.
- 12.4 Timescales for developing partnership provision are often unrealistic. This can lead to poor outcomes.
- 12.5 Recognition of power relationships and contract requirements have to be addressed within effective partnerships. A particular issue for Trades Unions is how to balance collaboration with proper representation with members' interests.

Policy questions asked

- 12.6 What will the role of Regional Development Agencies and LEAs be in planning and co-ordinating education partnerships? And the role of TECs?
- 12.7 What will happen after the end of SRBs?
- 12.8 What will the role of LEAs be (in relation to adequacy of provision?)
- 12.9 What will be the relationship between the QCA and NTOs and awarding bodies such as OCNs?

13 Recommendations: Work to be Done

- 13.1 Analysis of policy or relevant other government departments and lessons arising there from.
- 13.2 A review of bodies with overlapping functions and partnership funds in the area of lifelong learning.

- 13.3 A literature review to develop a typology of effective partnerships in particular circumstances.
- 13.4 Locating (and preparing case-studies of) examples of good practice with critical success factors.
- 13.5 To develop a check list of guidelines of good practice and a dissemination strategy.

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