

Sustaining effective social partnerships

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The author/project team was funded to undertake this research via a grant under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program. These grants are awarded to organisations through a competitive process, in which NCVER does not participate.

The NVETRE program is coordinated and managed by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. For further information about the program go to the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

ISBN 978 1 921412 08 0 print edition

ISBN 978 1 921412 09 7 web edition

TD/TNC 92.12

Published by NCVER

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About the research



Sustaining effective social partnerships by Terri Seddon, Stephen Billett, Allie Clemans, Carolyn Ovens, Kathleen Ferguson and Kathleen Fennessy

Social partnerships are good tools for addressing issues which are too difficult for any single agency to tackle. Such partnerships—formed when people and agencies come together—are particularly useful in ensuring that a community has access to second chance learning and to skills development that supports local industry.

This report, *Sustaining effective social partnerships*, builds on an earlier project that identified key principles and practices underpinning the development and maintenance of social partnership. (See S Billett, A Clemans and T Seddon, *Forming, developing and sustaining social partnerships*. NCVER, Adelaide, 2005.) It used four case studies to see how these principles and practices operate and trialled the self-evaluation tool developed in the first phase of the project.

Key messages

- Forming and sustaining effective social partnerships depends upon five principles: having shared purposes and goals; having strong and well-defined leadership; establishing trust and trustworthiness; maintaining good relationships between partners; developing the capacity for partnership work; and having inclusive governance practices.
- The success of transposing these principles into practice is influenced by the size and complexity of the partnerships. If they become unwieldy, then the partnership can crack.
- By using the self-assessment tool developed out of this research, those involved in a partnership can reflect on the health of the partnership. The tool could also prove useful for evaluation.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Executive summary

Understanding social partnerships

Social partnerships are formed by a strategic alliance of partners from government, the public and private sectors, and civil society. These collaborative networks are established to develop innovative solutions to sometimes complex social and economic issues arising in local communities. These solutions should be sensitive to local people, encourage synergies between local agencies, and build practical and user-friendly relationships between people and services. However, the capacity to achieve this is dependent upon the partnership operating successfully, in terms of both governance and delivery of services.

Social partnerships involving the vocational education and training (VET) sector are usually aimed at developing skills for work and providing ‘second chance’ learning. In addition, they can play an important role in building local capacity to support industry, individuals and communities during times of changing economic and social circumstances.

Aims of project

This research examines the processes of forming, maintaining and sustaining social partnerships. It builds on Phase 1 of this project, which investigated the principles and practices underpinning the effective operation of ten social partnerships involving the VET sector around Australia (See Billett, Clemans & Seddon, *Forming, developing and sustaining social partnerships*, NCVET, 2005). The findings from Phase 1 identified:

- ✧ different types of social partnerships—enacted, community and negotiated partnerships
- ✧ the central role of partnership work in the development and continuity of social partnerships
- ✧ the principles and practices associated with this work and their phases of development
- ✧ the dimensions of partnership work, for example, building trust, establishing the culture of the partnership, establishing the processes for collaborative action.

Through four case studies, Phase 2 aimed to:

- ✧ verify the importance/applicability of the key principles and practices as identified in Phase 1
- ✧ assess the ways in which the principles and practices are associated with establishing and developing social partnerships robust enough to manage changing circumstances, tasks and goals
- ✧ evaluate the usefulness of these principles and practices as a tool to inform the work of social partnerships.

Methodology

We examined the way the principles and practices of partnership work developed in Phase 1 were applied in four social partnerships over a 14-month period. Two of these partnerships were in the early stages of development and two were well-developed partnerships focused on maintaining their vitality and relevance over changing circumstances and times.

Three data-collection techniques were used at each site: informal monitoring of partnership development; repeat interviews with up to four key informants; and an assessment of partnership 'health' based on a comparison between informants' views of the ideal principles of partnership work and their perceptions of the actual practices in their own partnership. To accomplish this, informants used a self-evaluation instrument based on the principles developed in the first stage of the project. From these data a profile of each partnership was built up. Critical moments in the partnership were also analysed, along with how these were addressed.

Forming, maintaining and sustaining social partnerships

The case studies demonstrate that forming, maintaining and sustaining social partnerships depends upon effective partnership work. The principles and practices that inform effective partnership work involve developing and maintaining:

- ✧ shared purposes and goals
- ✧ relations with partners
- ✧ capacity for partnership work
- ✧ governance and leadership
- ✧ trust and trustworthiness.

Informants from partnerships in both phases of this project indicated that they found these principles useful as a way of thinking about the dimensions of the work necessary for the success of their social partnerships.

Effective partnership work

The case studies demonstrated that success in transposing these principles into practice is influenced by the size and complexity of the partnership, the character of and enthusiasm for participation, the partnership's capacity—through the strength of its identity and its relationships—to respond to threats, and its leadership and governance. The partnership in one of the case study sites—the Community Café—had a relatively straightforward structure, was focused on a single issue and had engendered sustained interest, trust and concerted effort in the local community. Consequently, when the continuity of this partnership was threatened, its size and lack of complexity meant it could respond quickly and effectively to the challenge confronting its viability.

- ✧ In terms of process, governance and service delivery, the day-to-day activities of the partnership towards its specified goals are assisted by timely and pertinent guidance and direction, such that participants also learn during the process. Good governance is facilitated by the development of clear and transparent partnership structures and inclusive partnership cultures. Furthermore, partnership activities need to be sensitive to the broad concerns of stakeholders.

While generally informing practice across social partnerships, the principles and practices of partnership work were found to be particularly significant at different stages of the partnership and in relation to specific decision-making activities. Crises forced two of the four partnerships in this study to take action to prevent their disintegration, prompting participants to reaffirm their goals and purposes, and emphasising the need for effective working relationships. It seems that smaller

and more focused social partnerships show greater adherence to all five principles of partnership work when confronting change and challenges.

Perceptions of partnership health

A participant's perception of the congruence between the ideal principles of partnership work and the actual workings of their own partnership provides a useful indication of its effectiveness. The self-evaluation tool developed during the Phase 1 research was useful here, in that it encouraged participants to reflect on the 'health' of their partnership. While the numbers of respondents were small, the levels of congruency were consistent with the data from the interviews and could be correlated with events (for example, threats) occurring in the partnerships. A more significant difference was noticed between the ideal principles and the actual practices in the two partnerships reported as struggling to form and progress as partnerships, confirming that close alignment between these practices and principles increases the capacity of partnerships to be sustained through changing circumstances and goals.

Sustainability of social partnerships

The sustainability of social partnerships is enhanced where certain conditions are met. These include an established structure and culture of partnering, committed sponsors, a supportive auspicing organisation, responsive partner organisations, and, where appropriate, government policy that provides both structure and flexibility.

Leadership is a critical factor in sustaining social partnerships because it mobilises, focuses and strategically directs partnership work. The case studies confirm that partnership health and sustainability is enhanced when leadership roles are clearly identified and distributed amongst the various participants enacting the partnership.

The organisational capacity of the partnership to build trust, implement inclusive governance and sustain the engagement of partners was a key aspect in the four diverse partnerships. Where there was insufficient organisational capacity, such that trust was underdeveloped or had withered, there were difficulties securing commitment, defining common purposes and sustaining activities, even when there were shared goals and concerns.

Using principles and practices in partnership work

The principles and practices of partnership work identified in Phase 1 of this research have been applied across the four case studies in Phase 2. We suggest that, having demonstrated their usefulness in partnership establishment and maintenance, they can be used as a resource or a framework in the VET sector to:

- ✧ capture and draw attention to the dimensions of partnership work widely recognised as important by participants engaged in VET partnerships. These dimensions, which were identified in Phase 1 of the project (cultural-scoping; connection-building; capacity-building; collective work; and trust-building) can support social partnerships or, by their absence, inhibit their development (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005, p.9)
- ✧ provide, using the self-evaluation tool developed from the principles, an indication of the health of a social partnership in VET, based on the degree of consonance between the perceived ideal principles and the actual practices in social partnerships
- ✧ guide participants engaged in VET partnerships by encouraging reflection on the important dimensions of their practice. This will ensure the consolidation of the partnership as a distinct organisational entity, establish it as an effective steering and learning mechanism, and maintain the relationships and build capacity to realise goals and lead to improvements in the way the partnership operates

- ✧ inform leaders and managers of partnerships, and sponsors and users, by focusing attention on the challenges and constraints inherent to partnerships and providing a framework for assessing and trouble-shooting the operations of social partnerships, particularly in relation to process and governance.

Social partnerships in VET

Social partnerships make a significant contribution to VET in Australia. However, this research has found they can be fragile. Ultimately, their sustainability relies upon the recognition that goodwill and individual commitment cannot replace:

- ✧ realistic funding of reasonable duration
- ✧ availability of personnel with appropriate skills to meet skill needs and succession
- ✧ authority delegated through government endorsement
- ✧ a democratic foundation that gives them legitimacy in their communities.

Background to study

Social partnerships: Working in a context of interdependence

Social partnerships link different agencies in order to establish collaborations that support the achievement of specific goals. They have been aptly defined as ‘networks with good intentions’ (Considine 2006, p.8). However, the process of building interdependencies between partners and working together is complex and challenging. It requires partners and participants to understand that effective social partnerships operate in specific ways—through what we have called ‘partnership work’. Partnership work entails distinctive work practices and work organisation that enable social partnerships to realise their goals. The nature of partnership work was investigated in Phase I of this project and published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) under the title, *Forming, developing and sustaining social partnerships* (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005).

Social partnerships in vocational education and training (VET) commonly link 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; Billett & Seddon 2004). Yet partnerships operate across diverse fields of social and economic activity and at different scales. They bring together particular mixes of individuals and organisations drawn from communities, governments, firms, civic organisations and global agencies, and they link agencies that work at local, regional, state, national and transnational levels. Creating this mix means forming a network of partners extending beyond traditional boundaries and cultures.

Working across different cultures and operational levels is not easy. Partners have different understandings of the various issues and goals, and what constitutes ‘success’. They presume different working rules and relationships, and have different motivations, communication patterns, and conflict tolerance. Forming a partnership involves working with this complexity to build relationships, developing patterns of working and learning, and organising interaction in ways that construct an organisational and decision-making context in which partners can engage in purposeful problem-solving. This partnership work consolidates the activities of the collaborative network, enabling it to guide and direct partnership processes; partnership work also enables participant learning.

The mix of agencies and the way goals are initiated mean that there are different types of partnerships. Phase 1 of this project identified various types of partnerships according to the mix of agencies involved and the driving force for collaboration:

- ✧ *enacted partnerships*, which are initiated by external agencies, but whose goals are of relevance to, or are shared by, the community
- ✧ *community partnerships*, which originate in the community to address local concerns, but work with external agencies to secure adequate resources and support for dealing with identified problems and issues

- ✧ *negotiated partnerships*, which are formed between partners with reciprocal goals to secure a service or support and depend on effective negotiation of interests and agendas.
(Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005, p.7)

The way in which the various participants work together also distinguishes partnerships. Mandell (2006) describes three types of networks.

- ✧ *cooperative networks*, which focus on sharing information and expertise, but only on an ad hoc basis (for example, as in professional networks)
- ✧ *coordinative networks*, which focus on working together to integrate activities for mutual benefit (for example, coordinated service delivery) by information-sharing and better coordination of activities
- ✧ *collaborative networks*, which focus on complex problems that cannot be solved by any one partner working alone (for example, the local learning and employment networks in Victoria).

The focus of this project is on collaborative networks organised through enacted, community and negotiated partnerships.

Partners and partnership work: Forming and maintaining partnerships

As we have seen, partnerships are formed when people/agencies come together, in a voluntary capacity, to identify and realise goals. The character and composition of partners varies across different partnerships (Cardini 2006). Partners include organisations with interests or involvement in the activities of the partnership or individuals who choose to participate in the partnership as citizens or as a consequence of their paid employment. Partnership activities therefore embrace a range of individuals. Some represent partner organisations and contribute to the partnership in addition to their regular work within their own organisation. Some are individuals in their own right with no representative responsibilities.

A partnership often operates in a context which is influenced by both central government and local community concerns. It sits at the interface of top-down (government) and bottom-up (community) pressures and demands. Partnerships are also influenced by the need for resources and a location for their activities. Their ways of working and activities are responsive to the requirements of sponsors, who can provide resources, and to the auspicing agency which hosts the partnership. Because both sponsors and the auspicing agency have an effective power of veto (that is, withdrawal of funds, or discontinuation of hosting arrangement), they can be very powerful voices in a partnership's affairs. The character and effectiveness of the partnership to guide and direct and to foster learning depends upon the partner's success in meeting and managing these different expectations (Seddon & Billett 2004).

Effective 'partnership work' establishes successful collaborative networks; this is an intense and interactive process of working together to identify, negotiate and articulate goals, and to develop processes for realising and reviewing those goals. Phase 1 of the project identified a wide range of processes that enable partners to work together. These are:

- ✧ maintaining shared purposes and goals
- ✧ developing mature and reciprocal relationships among partners
- ✧ identifying and accessing resources that can make a difference in realising goals
- ✧ supporting individuals who engage effectively in the community to secure partnership goals and to avoid the negative consequences of burnout and a high staff turnover
- ✧ focusing on the partnership goals, rather than operational measures, to foster close and trusted relationships among partners
- ✧ participating in, and maintaining commitment to, the partnership process by recognising achievements and seeking opportunities to demonstrate achievement

- ✧ welcoming, facilitating and sustaining commitment and trust within the partnership
- ✧ identifying a range of measures for evaluating achievement.

(Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005, p.23)

Mandell (2006) argues that working in collaborative networks requires partners to demonstrate a distinctive mind-set that is open to power-sharing and learning. Partnering means having a commitment to the whole collaborative agenda, despite conflicts between partners and/or partners' organisations. It also means respecting and recognising that partners have equal rights to speak. Partnering requires the development of new ways of behaving and interacting. Learning to work together requires time, trust, effort and the establishment of norms of flexibility and reciprocity.

Research affirms the importance of leadership and transparent governance in partnership work (for example, Kilpatrick et al. 2001). Yet, as Mandell (2006) argues, practices of leadership and governance rest upon the exercise of 'power to', rather than 'power over'. In effective partnerships, leadership depends upon building relationships and capitalising on them in ways that increase commitment to the overall project and encourage partners to share in leadership. It requires a kind of 'netiquette' (network etiquette) that embraces: good communication, respect for other's autonomy, limiting claims on scarce resources, reciprocity and negotiation, dialogue and conflict resolution (Mandell 2006).

Considine (2006) synthesises the factors that support the development of the partnership as a steering and learning mechanism by suggesting that effective partnership work rests upon firm partnership structures. These are:

- ✧ *Mandate*: this encompasses shared goals, clearly delineated boundaries, and with clear understandings about the kind of partnership and its ways of working, which are authorised through formalised procedures and commonly depend upon having a champion who has helped to create a space for local action within the existing institutional-bureaucratic configuration.
- ✧ *Structure*: this means an organisation and legal form that can realise the exercise of authority as a result of established relationships between partners, sponsors and auspicians; agreed decision-making processes; and representation and accountability arrangements between partners and with wider agencies, government and community.
- ✧ *Resources*: this includes a budget and budget process that govern the way resources are acquired and expended.
- ✧ *Activities*: these demonstrate the values embedded in the partnership and its commitments and include intelligence-gathering and analysis capacity to facilitate problem definition, processes and tools for planning and goal-setting by the partnership as a whole, and decision-making procedures to set priorities and allocate resources.
- ✧ *Impacts*: these recognise the need to establish local connectedness in order to develop capability as a partnership (that is, process and governance outcomes); impacts also apply to the outcomes of projects and activities in pursuit of the improved conditions or services (that is, service outcomes) established by the partners.

Policy and problem-solving: The wider significance of partnerships and partnership work

Global policy agencies, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the European Union, and governments around the world (OECD 2001; Green, Wolf & Lehney 1999) have endorsed social partnerships, describing them as a form of mature service delivery (OECD 1994a; 1994b). These agencies understand that, while simple problem-solving can be addressed through rule-governed hierarchical structures or market mechanisms, there are also complex problems that are not amenable to simple solutions and cannot be solved through the efforts of single agencies or through the operation of markets; these agencies

recognise that partnerships have the capacity to provide solutions to difficult social and economic dilemmas.

Problems such as regional de-industrialisation, structural unemployment, crime, youth disengagement and the challenges of social inclusion associated with disability and cultural marginality are examples of some of these complex problems facing contemporary societies. Governments are deeply involved in these processes of change and in the challenges of finding solutions. Since the 1970s, governments have pursued a range of strategies aimed at addressing these emerging problems, including decentralisation, market reform and new public management (Geddes 2006).

Solutions to these complex issues are difficult to identify and enact because the problems are intractable and cut across traditional ways of working and thinking, and across jurisdictions and institutional boundaries. Addressing them requires careful problem definition, as well as solutions which take account of interrelated economic, social and cultural issues. In these contexts, governments are encouraging community-building initiatives and other kinds of multi-agency partnerships which enhance capacity by mobilising local social capital and embedded cultural resources, like trust and know-how (Considine 2006).

As Giguere (2006) argues, policies since the 1970s have been heavily influenced by prevailing market-driven economic theories which encourage the use of contracts with precise terms and simple products on the grounds of efficiency. But such contracts are less appropriate for complex social and economic problems where agents require some room to manoeuvre in order to coordinate activities with other agencies and contextualise goods and services to local circumstances. Yet the need for coordination and cooperation also presents challenges. Managing complex networks (Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan 1997) in governance contexts (Jessop 1998) means there is no single authority but, rather, multiple voices, considerable cultural diversity and a variety of networked decision-making centres (Rhodes 1996).

Partnerships become a practical operational strategy for dealing with this policy dilemma of efficiency and coordination, because they encourage practitioners to find localised ways of dealing with complex stakeholder demands and problems. Partnerships create room to move, allowing actors in specific locales to develop their own idiosyncratic ways of coordinating activities and building synergies between interested parties in government, the public and private sectors and civil society (Giguere 2006). The processes of defining and identifying problems and the design and implementation of solutions are improved by agencies working together, sharing knowledge and designing innovative systems and ways of working suited to local circumstances. Involving communities in these partnerships means that those who will live with the solutions can be involved in making the decisions; negotiating the outcomes cooperatively therefore increases the likelihood that they will be acceptable, owned and used by local communities. This 'democratic anchoring' (Geddes 2006) underpins the legitimacy of the social partnership, as well as its activities and outcomes.

This kind of collaboration can also produce hybrid forms of government and community structures that minimise the disadvantages associated with collective action, such as partners freeloading on others' efforts or overusing shared resources at the expense of the collective effort. Yet all this depends upon the formation of an effective partnership, a 'steering and learning mechanism' that can mobilise and coordinate collaborative activity via an appropriate partnership structure, with a clear mandate, sufficient resources, and strategic activities for ensuring outcomes. The challenge is to build an organisational capacity that can generate processes, governance and service outcomes that contribute to solving complex problems (Considine 2006).

The significance of partnerships, therefore, lies in their capacity to focus and mobilise collaborative networks in ways that support innovative thinking and problem-solving. As Mandell (2006, p.6) notes, their task is to support knowledge-sharing based on 'strategic alignment among participants

that will eventually lead to finding innovative solutions ... by developing new systems and/or designing new institutional arrangements’.

The nature of contemporary government presents challenges of management and coordination, and partnerships represent a distinct development in this context. They offset significant transaction costs because they promise to combine economic efficiency and social justice through innovative institution-building and cooperative work practices (Geddes 2006).

Significantly, the capacity of collaborative networks is more important than their organisational form. Their form is defined by the process of partnership formation and collaboration and is a consequence of practical interactions in particular historical and cultural contexts—they occur through engagement between partners, sponsors, and auspicers, and as a result of the policies and steering and coordination mechanisms preferred by government (Seddon & Billett 2004). Partnerships can take many legal forms (Considine 2006), including stand-alone unincorporated associations, cooperatives and companies, or organisational units within a larger structure (for example, university-based research concentrations). The work of forming, maintaining and sustaining partnerships therefore is relevant not just to the kinds of ‘social partnerships’ which are the focus of this research, but also to those in a wide range of public, private and civil society settings.

Early research on partnerships indicated that they often generated innovative initiatives and were more effective when there was local community involvement (OECD 1993). OECD conducted a 14-country study of over 50 partnerships involved in local governance and employment between 1994 and 2004 and found that their major contribution was to governance. Summarising this research, Giguere (2006) notes that partnerships are effective as social instruments by coordinating activities around shared strategies by bringing different agencies and sectors together. They are particularly good at:

- ✧ helping individuals to articulate their needs and take up opportunities available through public service provision
- ✧ harmonising public programs and priorities at the local level so that local implementation is tailored to local needs
- ✧ encouraging synergies that increase the impact of different activities relative to resources.

Yet they are also limited because they:

- ✧ are idiosyncratic, are not readily replicated or scaled up, and frequently lose momentum once initial objectives have been achieved
- ✧ may move towards self-financed service delivery, which creates an alternative service structure and restricts information flows and cooperation
- ✧ cannot encourage wide-ranging coordination between service agencies, often because of their heavy dependence on personal commitment amongst agents with budgetary constraints
- ✧ use public mechanisms to achieve objectives, particularly by bringing users into relationship with services, but they generally do not have the authority to drive wider changes, particularly changes in the implementation of programs and service
- ✧ bring the public sector, private sector and civil society together, but often without clear representative processes, significant levels of participation, or impact on government or business decisions.

Partnerships and VET: What research reveals

VET is increasingly acknowledged as a key focus for localised capacity-building to support industry, individuals and communities in a globalised economy (Kosky 2000; ANTA 2003). This activity complements the long-standing role of vocational education in developing the skills and attitudes

necessary for work and providing second-chance learning opportunities for those who missed out on school and post-secondary education.

Social partnerships are a growing feature of both skills development and the community capacity-building activities of VET and have been encouraged, particularly since the late 1990s. They support industry development, address skill shortages and underpin innovation (Toner et al. 2004). They are also seen to be helpful in addressing the needs of young people and communities whose sustainability depends upon lifelong learning. Learning is seen here as a way of helping individuals and communities to deal with rapid social and economic change and to actively pursue initiatives—like getting a job, developing new skills, establishing viable enterprises—that will give them a more secure and independent future (Field 2006).

Regional analyses identify problems to be addressed and describe the way partnership initiatives are used to tackle them (for example, Garlick, Taylor & Plummer 2007; Vinson 2004). In so doing, the specific character and contribution of social partnerships involving the VET sector is highlighted. Buchanan's (2001) research on 'skill ecosystems' provides another approach that considers the changing organisation of work in specific industry sectors and the impact of supply chains, cost factors and heightened competition on skill formation. From this perspective, social partnerships (for example, a local learning and employment network) appear as specific nodes on wider industry-based networks and have a distinct knowledge-transfer and skills-formation agenda (for example, focused on managing youth and youth pathways).

The growing body of Australian research on partnerships related to VET echoes these findings and the insights drawn from wider economic, political science and sociological research.

Key findings from this research include:

- ✧ Partnerships make significant contributions to addressing complex problems, particularly those experienced by industry, individuals and communities, related to workforce development, community and regional development and youth transitions. They play a critical role in creating individual and community confidence about learning and its role in employment and social inclusion (Kilpatrick et al. 2001; Seddon & Billett 2004; Waterhouse, Virgona & Brown 2006; Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006).
- ✧ Social capital and trust are critical resources in networked social and business relationships. However, their effective mobilisation depends upon: the prevailing history of partnering; relations between partners, funders and sponsors; effective governance and leadership; and a strategic approach that is oriented towards results (Kilpatrick et al. 2001; Garlick, Taylor & Plummer 2007; Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006; Field 2003).
- ✧ Power and inequalities are as significant in partnerships as in any other social site. Communities, cooperation and collaboration should not be understood as inherently 'good' (Garlick, Taylor & Plummer 2007). Partnerships and networks have diverse bases, including ethnic affiliation, faith, professional expertise, personal friendships, disciplinary traditions and criminal activity. The nature of networks does not determine their social effects. Their organisational form may be turned towards positive or negative social purposes but, in each case, partnerships construct processes that create patterns of inclusion and exclusion, voice and silence, advocacy and persuasion.
- ✧ Partnerships can generate a culture that is supportive of knowledge-sharing and learning amongst partners, that creates ideas and innovations and new ways of thinking and acting. This is particularly evident when individuals demonstrate broad tacit knowledge and the ability to transfer and enact that knowledge in new and challenging situations. In the context of the VET sector, this finding endorses the importance of broad-based learning rather than a narrow emphasis on skills training (Garlick, Taylor & Plummer 2007; Buchanan 2001).
- ✧ Partnership processes can facilitate a broad-based learning culture by finding ways of enabling innovativeness, rather than constraining local groups by 'busy work' and red tape; it is easy for 'bottom up' processes to burn out local social capital and achieve little, except a plethora of

groups sponsored by government agencies that all argue for a role in regional development and program delivery (Garlick, Taylor & Plummer 2007).

Challenges of partnership work

Social partnerships are now widely seen as valuable public policy instruments. They facilitate coordinated action and innovative problem-solving. Yet they are commonly perceived in ideal terms, with little acknowledgment of the complexities and challenges inherent to the actual work of forming and maintaining partnerships as collaborative networks with good intentions that can realise outcomes.

Discussion of the ideal features of partnerships should also take account of the role of partnerships as an instrument of government in the context of the contemporary 'dispersed state' and 'decentred' education and training provision. This kind of assessment requires investigation of:

- ✧ the actual nature of partnerships, what they entail and can achieve, and when they are optimal as a policy instrument
- ✧ the factors that influence them as effective instruments and how their capacity to act with effect is shaped by prevailing conditions
- ✧ the conditions and practices that enable partnerships to sustain their operations over time and to deal with changing conditions.

Aims, phases and procedures

Project aims and goals

This report documents Phase 2 of a study of social partnerships in VET. The overall purposes of this project are to 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
- ✧ effective enactment of these principles and practices as shaped in different ways across four specific social partnerships
- ✧ ways in which these principles and practices are associated with establishing and developing social partnerships robust enough to manage changing circumstances, tasks and goals.

This project investigates partnership work by examining how partners with different values, agendas, practices and cultures come together and negotiate and reconcile these differences to achieve constructive working relationships through social partnerships. In doing so, it focuses specifically on the practices that constitute the principles, norms and behaviours within social partnerships. It also takes account of the kinds of work which enable partnerships to be effective in establishing their operations, and in progressing and successfully meeting the partnership's goals. By understanding how social practices come together in effective partnership work, it becomes possible to identify ways in which the provision of vocational education could be supported.

Phases of project

The project builds on and extends earlier research by the researchers, which indicated that social partnerships represented potentially significant developments in education and training and were able to sustain locally targeted service delivery in innovative ways. Social partnerships were found to be affected by local traditions and cultures, and to be vulnerable to internal tensions and resource constraints that undercut the careful work of building collaborative relationships. They were also significantly influenced by the sponsoring agency, which guided and funded the partnership initiative, as well as by organisations seeking to 'auspice' or host the social partnership (Seddon et al. 2002; Seddon & Billett 2004).

The process of investigation has entailed two main phases of activity.

Phase 1:

During Phase 1 of this project, participants in ten existing social partnerships identified what needed to happen to effectively form, develop and sustain social partnerships over time. This included necessary activities and approaches to be adopted by the social partnership and the sponsoring and auspicating agencies. The roles of sponsoring and auspicating agencies were found to be particularly important in shaping partnership work. Current and retrospective accounts of partnership work were gained through one-off interviews and were used to identify the dimensions

of partnership work, and the principles and practices underpinning that work. Tentative sets of principles and practices were returned to the ten social partnerships for verification and comment. These data were used to develop an instrument to assess the health of social partnerships. (See Billett, Clemens & Seddon 2005, p.36.)

Phase 2:

The specific aims of this second phase of the project were to:

- ✧ further verify the importance/applicability of the key principles and practices as identified in Phase 1
- ✧ evaluate ways in which the principles and practices are associated with establishing and developing social partnerships robust enough to manage changing circumstances, tasks and goals.

The principles and practices of partnership work identified in Phase 1 were applied in the Phase 2 investigation, with this report documenting how they were implemented in four social partnerships over a 14-month period. Two of these partnerships were in the early development stage (the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct and the Partnership for Community Care), while the other two are well-developed partnerships focused on remaining viable and active over changing circumstances and times (Western District Social Partnership and Community Cafe). Table 1 provides further details of these partnerships, indicating their governance structure and the kinds of participants involved, and providing some indication of the size of the partnership. These details are important for understanding the nature of the partners in each of the research sites.

Table 1 Site details, governance arrangements and interviewees

	Western District Social Partnership	Community Cafe	Pacific Bay Educational Precinct	Partnership for Community Care
Type of partnership	Enacted partnership	Community partnership	Enacted partnership	Negotiated partnership
Governance structure	Executive officer (paid position, 0.8 time)* Chair (voluntary position)* 20 members, representing partners in the partnership, including local community agencies, employers' groups, unions, education and training providers, youth agencies and Koorie organisations	Executive officer jointly with representatives of partner agencies Decision-making occurs on an ad hoc basis. No formal governance procedures Trust and common values inform decision-making approaches	An early-stage 3-partner partnership prompted by one partner's (government department) proposal and funding for precinct Generalised MOU between 2 remaining partners Working towards steering committee but withdrawal of funding halted governance work Continued dealings between MOU partners but reduced to individualised discussions	Executive officer* Board of 12 members elected, industry reference groups and regional networks representing partner organisations and target groups identified by the government in the service contract in the region (up to 12 members) Member of industry reference group*
Other participants connected to partnership	Organisational members* Community members Staff and trainees at related, skills-based projects	Organisational members Café consumers Community members Staff and trainees associated with Community Café*	Representative of creative industries* In early phase, property owners of projected site.	VET providers in the region
Employees	Administrative officer* Project officer	Executive officer* Administrative officer* Community development worker*	Full-time project officer – departmental officer* Part-time project officer* University representative in executive position*	Part-time administrative officer Part-time project officer* Manager (senior project officer)*
Ratio of governing body to members as a whole	Total organisational and active community membership base of 460	Total organisational and community membership base of 430	Precinct officers employed by partners and industry contacts, management of one partner	Regional network members, VET provider, project officer Board:12 members Total membership of more than 600

*Indicates interviewee

Partnerships as networks

Partnerships, rather than being closed entities with a finite and definable membership (like an enterprise, corporation or bureaucracy), are open-ended systems linking individuals and organisational units. This feature of 'borderlessness' makes the identification of partnerships and definition of membership difficult (Cardini 2006). For the purposes of this research, partnerships have been identified on the basis of their governance structure. A partnership exists if it brings together a range of different agencies (that is, discernable organisational entities), 'the partners', in some kind of actual or developing decision-making arrangements. This formal governance structure constitutes the partnership as a legal entity and defines the composition and responsibilities of individuals who represent or act on behalf of the partners.

The term ‘members’ is used in this project to describe individuals associated with specific partnerships; here membership is defined across a spectrum, ranging from active involvement (part of the formal partnership structure or involved in particular partnership activities, such as project work or service delivery), through to occasional contact.

Procedures

Three distinct data-collection techniques were used at each site: informal monitoring of partnership development; repeat interviews with up to four key informants; and an assessment of the congruence between informants’ understandings of the desirable principles of partnership work, as developed and validated in Phase 1 of this project, and the practices of partnership work actually being realised in each social partnership.

Monitoring partnership development

At each site, the development and maintenance of the social partnership was monitored over time. Special attention was paid to changes in circumstances and how the partnership responded to those changes. The procedure in this stage involved a mix of informal conversations, follow-up communication with partners, and observations, including observation of meetings and day-to-day activities within the partnership. This strategy revealed something of the life and culture of each partnership and their volatile and dynamic character.

Critical moments or events present particular challenges to the way any organisation works and must be negotiated through strategic decision-making and subsequent action. Critical events cause stresses in work relationships and may result in shifting work practices and work organisation. Interview data were analysed in order to identify critical moments and how the partnership dealt with these challenges.

Repeat interviews

Repeat interviews were conducted with up to four key informants at the four sites. The interview schedule was informed by Phase 1 research and also by the need to collect, validate and review data over time. The first interview documented the social partnership and its formation. Subsequent interviews began with a review of the data and initial findings from the previous interview and then addressed a new topic. Interviews were recorded and summaries prepared and used as the source in data analysis.

Assessing ideal and actual partnership health

The self-evaluation tool developed in Phase 1 of this project is based on five principles of partnership work required for the establishment and maintenance of social partnerships (see appendix A). These are building and maintaining:

- ✧ shared purposes and goals for and scope of partnership activities
 - ✧ relations within the partnership and with partners
 - ✧ the capacities for and values of partnership work
 - ✧ partnership governance and leadership
 - ✧ trust and trustworthiness
- (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005, pp.37–42).

The self-evaluation tool was designed to help partnership participants reflect on the practices of their partnership. For each partnership practice users can indicate what they think is the ideal practice (how important it is) and what they believe is the actual practice in their partnership (to what degree it is occurring), using a scale of 1 to 4. Users can then reflect on where there are

differences between the ideal and actual practices and think about how they might incorporate these further in their partnership.

Informants from the four case studies were asked to respond to this tool. The aim of this assessment was to identify informants' perceptions of the extent to which the desirable principles and practices of partnership work were being realised in each social partnership. The informants' ratings of their partnership, in terms of their perception of the ideal and actual dimensions of partnership work, provided an indication of its health and therefore of the effectiveness of partnership work in resolving complex community problems.

Issues of longitudinal research on social partnerships

Longitudinal research offers significant research insights because sites are observed and data collection persists over a period of time. Unlike one-off case studies, longitudinal research reveals a much more dynamic picture of, in this instance, social partnerships and partnership work, showing the way patterns of partnership work change over time, during crises, and with the ebb and flow in relationships and engagement—which are fundamental to effective partnering. Yet longitudinal research also presents problems related to data collection and inquiry, because social partnerships and their circumstances change over time, participants come and go, and maintaining research contact over an extended period puts a significant load on informants. It is our view that social partnerships are particularly susceptible to these kinds of instabilities because, without institutional status, they lack strong routines and resource buffers, as in bureaucratic or market-based organisations. There is also evidence of high levels of staff turnover and burnout (Seddon & Billett 2004; Geddes 2006).

These challenges related to longitudinal research have influenced this project in three ways. First, we replaced one of the initial research sites because of concerns about its viability. Its funding proposal was not supported and this had an immediate impact on the level of activity within the partnership and also on the commitment of partners. Second, the focus of another research site shifted during the course of the data collection due to the withdrawal of a major partner. This event undercut the partnership and limited partnership activity until the remaining partners identified a new focus and built relationships to support the new direction. Finally, a third research site was subject to changes in its operating environment due to a review in the relevant service sector, fuelled partly by political concerns. These developments had an impact on the capacity of some partners to engage in partnership work and also made it difficult for some informants to gain consent for participation in the study due to political sensitivities. While these external dynamics compounded the challenges of partnership work, they also presented challenges to this research.

Partnerships related to VET

The four research sites represent different types of social partnership, and each involves the VET sector. The four partnerships are the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct, the Western District Social Partnership, the Community Café and the Partnership for Community Care.

The Pacific Bay Educational Precinct and the Western District Social Partnership are *enacted* partnerships, initiated by external agencies, but whose goals are relevant to, or are shared by, the community; the Community Café is a *community* partnership, developed in the community to address local concerns, but liaising with external agencies to secure adequate resources and support for dealing with identified problems and issues. The Partnership for Community Care is a *negotiated* partnership formed between partners with reciprocal goals to secure a service or support and requiring effective negotiation of interests and agenda.

Profiles have been developed to give the following information about each of the partnerships:

- ✧ the kind of contribution each social partnership is making to VET
- ✧ critical moments in each partnership
- ✧ an assessment of congruence in informants' perceptions of ideal and actual partnership practices in each social partnership.

The detailed data that inform these profiles and provide evidence of how these principles and practices have been used to establish and maintain social partnerships are presented in the Support Document.

Western District Social Partnership, Victoria: Managing funding cuts

The Western District Social Partnership was formed as part of a state government policy initiative which established regionally focused social partnerships across Victoria. The Department of Education provided much of the initial impetus, funding and guidelines for the establishment of the partnership, but these initial frameworks had to be taken up and enacted by local community members to form the partnership. Like the other regional partnerships initiated by the Victorian Government, the Western District Social Partnership aimed to support young people in their transition from school to working life, with a particular emphasis on those who had fallen through the educational network and were at risk of social disadvantage and isolation. These were issues of concern at the local level in the community and were also being addressed at local government level. Improving opportunities for young people was a significant motivation for partnership members who volunteered their time and effort.

This social partnership was well established and can be considered as in the 'sustaining' phase of its life cycle. It was established in 2001 and has since grown to include over 500 organisational members and was involved, at the time of writing, with five projects relating to young people and employment. Yet it faced a major 'critical moment', with a significant cut of around 15% to its

budget (\$40 000) in the coming financial year. Partnership meetings and the associated decision-making were focused on ways of addressing these funding cuts. A number of the strategies adopted reflected standard approaches (for example, expenditure cuts), while some were innovative and required radical change within the social partnership.

Less extreme approaches to adapting to the funding cuts included narrowing the large membership base, since many members were no longer active. Savings were made by setting up an 'active member' registry and using email more often. Charging a membership fee was also under consideration. Staff whose contracts finished during this period were not likely to have them renewed and the position of executive officer was reduced from full-time to a 0.8 contract. The partnership also focused on accessing more project-based funding, which involved the executive officer working with others to apply for federal government funding to begin new projects and continue others.

More substantial savings were realised by relocating the partnership offices to cheaper premises. This saved close to \$30 000 to offset against the \$40 000 funding cut. Furthermore, this relocation was to a less affluent area and closer to the community whose needs reflect the purposes of the partnership. Considerable effort was put into the move to ensure that it became a positive process benefitting the partnership. Overall, the relocation was seen to be consistent with and central to the social partnership's business of securing good educational outcomes for young people.

The funding cut and subsequent efforts to manage the impacts of these cuts presented critical moments in the governance of the partnership. Despite these challenges, the congruence between ideal and real partnership practices in this partnership was revealed to be high. The principle with the largest difference between and actual was concerned with maintaining shared purposes and goals. One informant commented that

The only way I would know about accommodating changing goals is at a planning meeting, and I'm not on that meeting. I mean, we don't hear about those things in the rest of the social partnership and I don't know that we have the opportunity to change processes and goals—although I think it is important.

The lack of formalised induction processes and the expectation that participants will learn as they go along means that issues of communication and keeping participants 'in the loop' are likely to be exacerbated as new partners and participants join the partnership.

There was also some concern about maintaining relationships with partners. One informant highlighted the importance of participants recognising their shared responsibility in relationship-building. Her point was that there is reciprocity in the maintenance of relationships and the pursuit of shared goals, but reciprocity rests upon an 'assessment of what this partnership is worth to each partner—if too onerous, then it is not worth doing'. Nevertheless, she also acknowledged that 'Burnout would point to poor planning/implementation, poor sharing of work'. This is a potential issue when the partnership does not always build on its prior decisions and practices, a situation highlighted by some participants. Constant reinvention is time-consuming and can become onerous in terms of burdens on partners and participants.

The health of the Western District Social Partnership was generally assessed as positive; however, communication, induction, and the need to build on prior practices were flagged as issues possibly requiring attention.

In summary, the Western District Social Partnership presents an excellent example of the regional social partnerships model and is often used by academic and policy analysts as an example of a well-balanced social partnership. Rather than complicate their work practice, the partnership's involvement in this research project has had the effect of making the group's leading participants highly aware and self-critical protagonists. Challenges were defused by drawing on the resources of its members and networks, enabling straightforward responses (such as office relocation and reduction in operating funds) to fairly fundamental issues. In its new location, Western District is

ideally situated to approach issues of entrenched disadvantage in an area recognised as being of particular concern; it therefore meets issues of economic and social accountability. With the employment of several new staff members on new, shared programs, along with the partnership's recent participation in the Neighbourhood Renewal project, there is every indication that the Western District Social Partnership will be revitalised.

The Community Café, Victoria: Funding vulnerabilities in trusting partnership

The Community Café partnership was formed in 1981 and consisted of a partnership between four organisations, all of which had previously been providing programs to support the vocational education and training needs of people with disabilities. The partnership entailed collaboration between the four organisations to provide work-based and vocational training programs for this group in the local community through the Community Café. Participants also undertook an accredited hospitality program to facilitate their work readiness. As well as providing work-based training to learners in a non-threatening social space, the café fostered community and social engagement among café patrons in a region where unemployment and disability were high. The work of the partnership helped with these aims while subsidising the Community Café.

The Community Café social partnership was well established and can be characterised as in the 'sustaining' phase of the social partnership life cycle. However, both the level of funding available to the social partnership and its relations with local government were significant issues which challenged the continuity of the social partnership. The partnership operated on a precarious short-term (six-month) funding base, with partners repeatedly having to re-apply for contracts to sustain their partnership work. The threat of funding loss led to a groundswell of local community support among those who used and worked in the café. Ultimately, this 'critical moment' was brought to the attention of a number of state government ministers, who signalled their support and, as a result, funding for the next six months was assured. However, the challenge of funding is ongoing and is central to the partnership's continuity. Key organisations in this partnership span two local government areas, which complicates interaction with and support from local government. It makes seeking funding for initiatives difficult because funding is often tied to particular locations. It also means that partnerships have to navigate local politics in order to support the provision of educational opportunities for local community members.

Informants indicated a high degree of congruence between the ideal partnership principles and the actual practices of partnership work at the Community Café, suggesting effective utilisation of the principles. However, it is striking that some practices like 'rehearsing complexity' and 'remind partners of the overall project' are rated relatively low as important features. It seems that informants may not value the strategic planning models that are commonly endorsed in the policy and research on partnerships. Rather, what seems to be valued is informality, which means that expectations and procedures tend to remain implicit, and participants work things out on a one-to-one basis. This becomes particularly apparent around the question of leadership, which strongly endorses individual commitment to the project. One informant stated:

[Leadership] is influenced by my total belief in what we do here. Each year, I gain confidence of this and have more understanding so it is seen by others. I am more forthright with this. We now have a product that people are attracted to. This gives me confidence. It releases creative energy and collaboration among partners. We can think up new ideas. I am energised and productive. It has attracted so many who share the vision. Being open with people I meet is helping too. Having time to speak with people brings new opportunities. I spoke with a coordinator about our café last year and now she wants us to come and talk in her centre so she can replicate what we do here. I am recognising that I am absolutely in the right role — being a leader in a people-focused organisation is where I am meant to be. Devolving jobs to others allows me to work with my strengths.

Some ratings, however, suggest that participants may also be aware that meetings and maintaining infrastructure do have benefits in effective partnership work. The Community Café, it seems, is on a

roll, with clients, partners and resources coming on board and with the prospect of extending the project through redevelopment of the café itself. The extent to which these successes will be sustained with the existing patterns of partnership work remains an open question.

In summary, the Community Café project appears to have negotiated a particularly difficult moment in its life cycle because of the shared goals of the partners and their ability to convey the value of these goals to the funding source. The members of this partnership are faced with the evidence of the importance of partnerships and partnership work—of working collectively through processes that acknowledge and support shared contributions to sustaining the work of the partnership. Perhaps the scale of the partnership project and its single focus on the café and its development lie at the heart of the sustained interest, trust and efforts that are clearly evident in the social partnership.

Pacific Bay Educational Precinct, Queensland: Overcoming an impasse between partners

The Pacific Bay Educational Precinct was a partnership largely negotiated between a university and a major technical and further education (TAFE) institution. However, the establishment of the precinct also required partnership building with the community and local industry and so reflected the qualities of enacted partnerships. The precinct project focused on developing vocational capacities in a rapidly growing community sitting between two large cities. The provision of vocational education was designed to develop the specific skills required by local enterprises and also to facilitate the articulation of vocational education programs into higher education. The precinct promised to bridge two educational sectors that typically operate within quite distinct forms of certification, teaching processes, course content and student expectation. It was anticipated that facilities and teaching could be shared. Vocational education programs would respond to the needs of local enterprises and also add capacity to the local community, which is characterised by relatively low levels of education.

When the partnership was first proposed, it also included the state Department of Education, which owned the block of land on which the proposed precinct facilities would be built. But this partner withdrew in the course of forming the partnership and, in doing so, deprived the precinct of a designated location. The university and TAFE institute then worked with the state Department for Employment and Training to advance the precinct. However, this partnership is floundering because of resource issues, difficulty in securing an effective working partnership and the emergence of other kinds of partnerships. These issues resulted in the TAFE partner shifting its focus towards a marine industry precinct and a partnership with the marine sector, while the university also considered other kinds of partnerships and partners. The progress of this partnership has been inhibited by local factors, including turnover of strategic industry leaders and no activity during the reporting period. The partnership is at the ‘forming’ stage of the partnership life cycle, with the ‘critical moment’ for this partnership being the basis on which its ‘formation’ might proceed.

The assessment of the health of the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct indicates a considerable gap between the desirable and actual practices of partnership work. This divergence is most striking in relation to building shared purposes and goals and building capacities for partnership work. This accords with the issues identified by informants through interviews which highlight the difficulties experienced in consolidating a clear partnership agenda and the limitations of the infrastructure in supporting and building capacities for partnership work. As one commentator noted:

The greatest difference between ideal and real is caused by there being no opportunity to develop processes and [to] be consistent—it is stop and start to it—this is not the fault of either partner—university or TAFE. The timeline changes and the agenda—it is hard to fully trust as the situation changes but we believe we are not in competition.

Significantly, the ratings showing greatest congruence related to the importance of patience in partnerships, the need for appropriate leadership, and for being fair and transparent.

It should perhaps be noted that the partnership at Pacific Bay Educational Precinct included the largest partner organisations (university, TAFE institute and government department) of all the partnerships studied and characterised entities with quite different organisational cultures and traditions, although all had strongly institutionalised approaches to admission, teaching and assessment. Moreover, attempts to consolidate the partnership occurred in a policy context which endorses competition, through funding and other regulatory arrangements, and encourages hierarchies and status differences. These external drivers complicate internal work processes within organisations and may affect their capacity to build sustainable partnerships.

In summary, the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct is an example of an enacted partnership. However, in some ways the creation of such a partnership appears to lie outside the capacities and interests of the institutional partners themselves. A statement from government about the formation of this precinct during a state election appears not to have been supported by the provision of central infrastructure. Consequently, three partners with distinct purposes and goals attempted to negotiate a partnership in the absence of clear central government support or guidance. In other instances of government-enacted partnerships (for example, local learning and employment networks) there were clear guidelines and designated processes that brought partners together and shaped their formation and governance in ways that reflected the current political imperatives. These appeared to be absent in this project.

While other partnership work by the university has been considerable and successful, the precinct has not been the focus. Rather, the work has resulted in a web of unstructured partnerships across the regions, which have not been drawn together into an effective and focused partnership. This work, it is reported, would not have occurred had the creation of an educational precinct not been mooted in the state election campaign. At this point it is safe to say that the local industry appears to be waiting for the call to begin partnership work with both the university and the TAFE institute. It is possible that industry feels disenchanted and disappointed with the process and its potential demise. Some individuals in industry put their personal credibility at risk in supporting the precinct, and now feel disillusioned by the experience.

The lessons here are that the impetus for developing a partnership, the infrastructure necessary for partnership work, and the trust and processes of leadership and governance that need to emerge in partnership formation are unlikely to occur without a set of shared concerns. While partnership work may not require all these conditions, they are probably required to some degree if a successful partnership is to be built. Moreover, given the need for shared arrangements in the resourcing, management and teaching in the education precinct, the difficulty in negotiating these components suggests that the operation of the Education Precinct would be highly problematic.

Partnership for Community Care, Queensland: Forming capacity for partnership work

The regional Partnership for Community Care linked the industry training council and a collection of industry partners and training providers in the community care sector, a sector lacking the tradition of being consulted about workforce skills or engaging collaboratively in their development. The industry body sought to facilitate and empower its partners to meet the challenge of workforce development by focusing on the negotiated aspects of partnership relations. In this respect the partnership was motivated more along the lines of an enacted partnership, but demonstrated the practices characteristic of a negotiated partnership. The partnership was focused on developing workforce capacity by extending the use of nationally endorsed training packages to a widely dispersed workforce characterised by minimal participation in structured vocational education arrangements.

The Partnership for Community Care was moving through the process of ‘forming’ as a social partnership. The process whereby individual project officers became a team was well underway. A ‘community engagement model’ was utilised to build relationships to enable decisions about workforce development to be made locally, and involved members representing the target groups: volunteers, management committee members, direct service and administrative staff, parents and carers. This ‘negotiated’ approach to the partnership represented a departure from the existing model developed four years earlier with the state department responsible for community care. For more than a decade the state department had delivered training through a central unit. The government’s involvement with a regional partnership based in the industry training council was innovative in the sector.

The new partnership was being embedded in a mature partnership arrangement also based in the industry training council and involving a different state department. The shift towards a decentralised model required that the industry training council expand and restructure the existing regional approach and increase project officer support. A team-planning day was used to develop a common view of how the project would be organised and staged to meet contractual obligations, and the way representation and establishment of the regional networks would be managed. Project officers conducted planning activities in their appointed regions and explained the new ways of working in the partnership to staff. The Partnership for Community Care was focused on building workforce capacity through a reformed governance agenda designed to empower local partners in their regions. However, the partnership was experiencing challenges due to short-term funding and the negotiation of its relationship with an existing partnership.

The assessment of partnership health suggests there is a significant gap between the desirable and actual practices of partnership work in the Partnership for Community Care. The dissonance is more marked in the practices related to partnership relations by comparison with those related to the sponsoring agency. The interpretation of these ratings seems to be influenced by the positions of informants, who were dispersed across central and regional agencies and had differing perspectives as a consequence of their previous experience with partnerships and with broader planning processes.

The data suggest that, because of the history of partnership work within the state, the different ratings of ideal versus actual partnership practices are associated with some cynicism amongst partners. As one informant suggests, people are more cautious about partnerships if they have previously been burned by excessive demands for too little return:

We have to foreground this project in the light of a long history of poor partnership practice—both corporate and social. Many people feel it is not worth trying one more time—they have been burnt. Saying ‘Sorry it costs my agency much more than I gain’. This is especially the case in rural and remote communities. They have had bad experiences with training in this regard. The last unit never recalled the reference group as it did not want to hear any criticism.

The challenges in forming this partnership are compounded because it is being grafted onto an existing partnership, but without the level of resources necessary to support aspects of partnership-building that might overcome complex interagency relationships and the difficult history of working together. The partnership is further constrained by contractual arrangements that limit flexibility of response and by a statewide inquiry, which means that all agencies are cautious and particularly alert to accountability requirements. These conditions do not encourage the kind of unconstrained problem identification and problem-solving that was apparent at other partnership sites.

In summary, the development of the Partnership for Community Care can be seen as a developing partnership that is analogous to a negotiated partnership, although the negotiations underpinning its establishment were more along the lines of an enacted partnership. The evolving governance structure sets an uncertain agenda for reform. With the funding being only available just before Christmas and with only one meeting having taken place, the establishment phase has suffered. The

location of the partnership within the operations of the industry training council has not yet been clearly articulated to the stakeholders or the project officers, meaning that fears of its becoming unmanageable and ineffective have not been allayed. The development of the partnership infrastructure evident in other long-standing partnerships needs to be a priority here. It is this infrastructure that builds up shared goals, trust and trustworthiness and provides the kinds of leadership and government essential in a highly dispersed partnership such as the Partnership for Community Care.

Applicability of the principles and practices in social partnership

Overall, it was found that the five key principles for developing and sustaining social partnerships were applicable to these four different social partnerships involving the provision vocational education. All partnerships appeared to confirm the validity of the principles underpinning the development and continuity of social partnerships, as much as their absence inhibited that development.

The aggregated ratings for the two social partnerships at the forming stage of their life cycle and the two partnerships at the maintaining stage are provided in the first section of the Support Document. These data provide an endorsement of the five main principles of partnership work and the sub-elements of each of those principles, with each informant indicating that they are either highly desirable or desirable features of partnership work. In both data sets, trust is seen almost universally as highly desirable.

The applicability of the principles and practices to these partnerships involving VET was evident in the following ways.

First, informants in the two partnerships which had been operating for some time reported a higher degree of consonance between the desirable practices and their perceptions of what was being enacted. This suggests that close alignment between these practices and principles increases the capacity of the social partnership to sustain itself through changing circumstances and goals.

Second, the formation of two of the partnerships was shaped by the history of partnership relationships and this influenced the enactment of principles and practices within each partnership. In the Community Care Partnership, past relations between a number of the participating organisations and the sponsoring agency led to reluctance and caution among partners. In relation to the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct, relationships were being established through a slow and uncertain process, and this was shaping how partners conceived the purposes and value of the social partnership.

Thirdly, the data from the case studies demonstrated that the capacity to build trust, effect inclusive governance and sustain the engagement of partners was reinforced as a key aspect of partnership work.

The findings here identify the salience of the five principles of partnership work for building and sustaining social partnerships across a range of sites and at different stages in their development. They also reinforce the important role of sponsoring agencies in enabling and assisting with the development of the social infrastructure necessary to support and sustain partnerships. In particular, the need to build and sustain trust, effective governance and the capacity to communicate and engage partners stand as essential ingredients for the formation and maintenance of social partnerships. Where trust is underdeveloped or withers, there are likely to be difficulties securing commitment, common purposes and sustained activities, even when there are shared goals and concerns.

Effective partnership work

Enacting partnership work

As we have seen, partnership work is underpinned by five key principles which are evident both at the stage of forming partnerships and in maintaining partnerships. These are building: shared purposes and goals; relations with partners; capacities for partnership work; partnership governance and leadership; and trust and trustworthiness (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005). The informants in Phase 2 found these principles helpful in describing their partnerships and, using the self-evaluation instrument, evaluated the health of their partnership. The findings from the case studies are summarised below and given in detail in the support document.

The analyses of the four case study sites showed that the principles of partnership work can be used to identify some of the more significant practices adopted in the development and maintenance of these social partnerships; or, in their absence, inhibit that development. However, specific goals in partnership work and their importance vary according to the stage in the lifecycle of the partnership and as circumstances change. These differences are captured in table 2, which identifies the ways and degrees by which the principles of partnership work were enacted during key decision-making moments in each of the four social partnerships.

The enactment of the principles of partnership work across the four different partnerships appeared to be influenced by four factors:

- ✧ *Scale of partnership*: the size, scope, nature and level of institutional governance shape the prospects for the effective exercise of the principles. They seem more difficult to sustain in larger dispersed partnerships than they are in smaller and tightly focused and collaborative partnerships. Also, those partnerships with less immediate and accessible governance structures (strong management committee, governmental committee decision-making) appear to find it more difficult to carry the partnership work forward through building relations and trust with partners.
- ✧ *Active participation*: effective partnership rests upon active participation, which provides participants with opportunities to practise partnering and to get evidence that partnering and their efforts in partnering matter. Across these four partnerships, however, opportunities for participation varied, particularly in relation to decisions made about the partnership, and this had an impact on successful partnership work.
- ✧ *Crisis and consolidation*: the use and usefulness of the principles of partnership work were most pronounced when the social partnerships had to respond to threats about continuity (for example, external threats to funding, organisation and partner involvement). At these times it seemed that partnerships rose to the challenge and reaffirmed partnership identity by restating goals and purposes and addressing working relationships. The size and scope of the partnership influenced the character and the extent to which the challenge to the partnership was met. For instance, in times of crises, the smaller Community Café partnership exercised the five sets of principles to address the threat more fully than did the larger Western Districts partnership.
- ✧ *Embedded leadership of partnering*: embedded leadership—which is concerned with consolidating partnership identity and staying in touch with participants and ensuring their sense of connectedness—appears necessary to forming, maintaining and sustaining social partnerships. In

this respect, the principles of partnership work provide an embedded framework for leadership and governance that creates conditions for partnering. Embedded and trustworthy leadership in partnering and governing, rather than remote management, is essential for sustainable partnerships.

Table 2 Enactment of principles across four social partnerships

Principle/ Partnership	LLEN	Community Café	Pacific Bay Educational Precinct	Partnership for Community Care
Shared purposes and goals	Negotiating relocation of premises and rationalising its program caused reflection upon and revisiting the partnership's goals and purposes. These were only revisited by those participating in this process. Strong consensus may limit consideration of alternatives.	The explicit and shared values in this partnership are maintained through partners with common goals and their practices and purposes bring them together, despite having distinct organisation imperatives.	The failure to secure and get commitment to shared purposes made the formation of this partnership is very difficult. Arising from an initiative outside the partners, it was never fully embraced nor enjoyed solid commitment.	A set of common goals and shared concerns about addressing those goals between two key institutions and the needs of target groups were the source of initial impetus for the development of the social partnership.
Relations with partners	Relocation necessitated re-engaging with partners ('call in favours'), re-negotiating boundaries with partners and new partners being sought. It required crises to precipitate conscious re-engagement, negotiation and seeking new partners.	In times of threat, these partners have worked together to secure their goals, through joint activities directed towards common (overlapping) purposes and goals.	Relations with partners suffered from a lack of both clear purpose and alignment of key institutional interests, which served to marginalise other potential partners. There was a lack of mechanisms to build relations.	There were tensions between centralised goals and processes and the need to be locally responsive, which made the process of building partnerships problematic. The role of a central agency in facilitating relationship-building and support became important.
Capacities for partnership work	The size, open-endedness and duration of social partnerships can make sustaining the capacity for partnership work more difficult. Participants in an established social partnership may not be engaged in ways that inherently build the capacity for partnership work.	Capacity-building is enacted through the ongoing participation by partner members in formulating and enacting activities in response to shared concerns.	A lack of mechanisms to develop capacity for partnership work, along with institutional commitment, meant little partnership capacity-building occurred. Instead, individuals' efforts carried the initial partnership development	The nascent social partnership utilised an existing social partnership to initiate its development. However, there were concerns about grafting one set of goals and purposes on to a partnership which had different goals and agendas.
Governance and leadership	Strong leadership provides impetus and direction, but may make effective governance more difficult in an established and open-ended social partnership.	Here, leadership and government are premised upon shared sets of concerns, rather than power relations.	Institutional tensions about leadership and difficulty with collaborative governance made effective leadership and governance problematic for this nascent social partnership.	Much of the effective leadership has come from a facilitating agency, whereas government is constrained by departmental committees, despite this initiative being essential for these departments.
Trust and trustworthiness	The larger and more open-ended the social partnership, the greater the need to actively secure trustworthiness.	The sense of shared concerns and need for collaborative action are built upon trust and this is exercised through participants' activities.	Initial enthusiasm waned, as did trust among partners, particularly outside the key institutional partners. The efforts of individuals, rather than institutions may have eroded trust in partners.	The central agency's decision to develop local infrastructure to enact this initiative was important in developing trust within this partnership.

These findings from the case studies further indicate the relevance of the principles of partnership work identified in Phase 1 of this project and demonstrate their usefulness to informants in the four social partnerships in terms of assisting them to describe partnership practices and to reflect on the health of their social partnership in the light of perceptions of ideal and actual practices of partnership work. These two findings indicate that the principles themselves have remained relevant and over time and in changing conditions.

In assessing the ideal versus the actual practices of partnership work, we saw in the analysis of data gained from the self-evaluation tool that there was greater consonance between the ideal and actual practices in the more established and ‘successful’ social partnerships than in those struggling to build their partnership capability. In the Partnership for Community Care, where sponsor and partners were widely dispersed geographically and had differing experiences of decision-making, the assessment of actual practices of partnership work appeared to vary widely. This suggests that the nature of the data collected may vary according to the role/position of the informant, which is linked to their location within the partner organisations and their expectations for the partnership outcomes.

What makes a difference in partnership work

The detailed analysis of critical moments in the life cycles of the four social partnerships confirms previous research (Seddon & Billett 2004) showing that successful partnering depends upon:

- ✧ partnership factors—shared purpose; effective relationships; clearly defined indicators of success and appropriate management of accountabilities; clearly delineated scope and limits of the partnership; and trust and trustworthiness
- ✧ resource factors—people with relevant knowledge, skills and capacities; organisational resources (for example, systems, technologies, information processes, operational procedures and accepted routines); time and funding
- ✧ infrastructural factors—funding parameters consistent with expectations; workforce development; networked resource base which can be shared between partnerships (for example, organisational templates, models, information repositories, sources of advice); and policy endorsement and support.

The current case studies also highlight the importance of:

- ✧ good communication that keeps participants ‘in the loop’
- ✧ induction processes that facilitate the entry and rapid familiarisation of newcomers into the partnership’s ways of working and governance practices
- ✧ high levels of personal commitment and a creative approach to partnership work
- ✧ partner willingness to give partnership activities priority, and partnership activities that recognise the need for all partners to benefit
- ✧ embedded leadership that keeps things moving and maintains the impetus for partnership work
- ✧ the capacity for cross-cultural conversations and recognition and respect for different voices
- ✧ a willingness to work across established traditions and find new ways of organising and working collaboratively
- ✧ accommodation of the ripple effects of partnership work and innovative institution-building into the mainstream operation of partners
- ✧ serious commitment from sponsor/s
- ✧ an effective legal framework

- ✧ appropriate regulatory and accountability frameworks that provide participants with sufficient room to manoeuvre in building relationships, sharing knowledge, problem-solving and innovating
- ✧ strategies and resources to address prior negative experiences in partnerships
- ✧ mechanisms to support graceful exits from partnerships.

Partnerships: Steering and learning

The experiences of the four case sites indicate that effective partnership work consolidates and enhances governance arrangements within these social partnerships. Good governance enables the network of partners to work together effectively and to direct the operations of the partnership wisely. Good governance structures also enable participants to learn from their participation.

As the case studies show, when the optimum conditions for partnership success are met, partnerships function as effective steering and learning mechanisms, generating a virtuous circle, as the Western District Social Partnership and the Community Café demonstrate. With well-established processes of partnership work, it is possible for individuals to sustain less formalised procedures, because common goals, shared understandings, complementary expectations and established routines act as a kind of ‘auto pilot’, guiding and ensuring coherence within the partnership. However, when some elements of the established procedures are not in place or are ignored, a vicious circle emerges which undercuts the capacity of the partnership to sustain its momentum as a steering and learning mechanism, and hence its capacity to realise the desired outcomes. These virtuous or vicious circles facilitate or constrain social partnerships and future patterns of partnership work.

Partnerships accommodating changing circumstances

The longitudinal research design based on repeat interviews provides a window on the way partnerships negotiate changes in local circumstances and sustain themselves over time. The research suggests that a partnership’s capacity for flexibility is linked to the following internal and external factors, which shape the partnership’s structure and culture.

A culture of partnering

Some partnerships are formed, maintained and sustained in an environment where there is a tradition and culture of partnering. Others develop in environments where there is either no tradition of partnering or where cooperation has been rendered virtually impossible by the prevailing competitive ethos between agencies and individuals. For example, at the Western District Social Partnership and the Community Café there was a lived culture of partnering which enabled construction of an effective steering and learning capability. This sustained the partnerships, enabling them to weather changes in circumstances, albeit with careful planning, management of public perceptions and serious attention to supporting relationships. By contrast, in Pacific Bay and the Partnership for Community Care, less consolidated partnership arrangements meant that change was more challenging and more destructive of local connectedness. A virtuous or vicious circle of partnering creates a context for future partnership work: a virtuous circle tends to support this work, while a vicious circle tends to erode it or make it more difficult. The challenges presented by the prevailing culture of partnering appear to be accentuated in situations like the Partnership for Community Care, where a partnership is being grafted onto a pre-existing partnership. This situation seems to compound the inevitable ambiguities that arise in the negotiation of shared goals and ways of working.

Committed sponsors and authority relations

Sponsors provide resources to support social partnerships—most obviously, funding. Regardless of the way the funding is used, its allocation symbolises the sponsor's support for the partnership. The loss of funding can be destructive because, alongside funding reductions, which restrict activities, there is a loss of the sponsor's authorisation and legitimacy. At Pacific Bay, an election promise triggered a partnership formation based on the promise of resources (land). The loss of these resources undercut the partnership, not just because there was no physical location for the partnership, but because the rationale for the partnership dissipated with the election promise and with the retreat of the government department with the authority to legitimise the mandate and hence the partnership. The Western District Social Partnership also suffered a funding cut but, despite localised fears that this might have adverse effects, there was no government retreat from the mandate of these regional partnerships, meaning that the authority of the partnership was maintained.

Supportive auspicing organisations

The culture of a host or auspicing organisation influences the practices that emerge in social partnerships; the particular culture supports the partnership's operations by promoting the development of procedures and routines that shape resource requirements, in particular, ensuring sufficient resources to prevent burnout in participants. In some instances the existing culture of the auspicing organisation can facilitate partnership work and reduce the labour of innovation; in others, the culture may be toxic and undercut partnership work. In the Community Café, for instance, there is a distinctively informal, almost domestic, way of working that appears to derive in part from the host organisation and its character as an open and welcoming café space (Clemans 2005). The Western District Social Partnership was located in rented property, a decision made during the initial formation of the partnership and seems to reflect the business-like style of the partnership's operations. The Partnership for Community Care is framed by the central government's policy to decentralise service provision, and this has caused tensions at the regional sites.

Responsive partners

Participants who contribute to social partnerships are key actors in the processes of innovative problem-solving and ways of working, but they also provide a conduit back into the partner organisations they represent or belong to. Partnership work is enhanced when these partner organisations recognise the contribution their representative is making and understand the need for resources to enable them to contribute to the partnership. Partnership work also benefits when initiatives arising from partnerships are taken up in partner organisations and mainstreamed, rather than being marginalised. In the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct, for example, individual project officers who were charged with driving the partnership forward received no support from the partners, a factor in the ultimate disintegration of the partnership.

Government commitments and policy regimes

Governments at various levels play a complex role in partnerships. Government agencies are often present in partnerships as partners (for example, local councils), as sponsors (for example, funding networks), sometimes as auspicers (for example, through local councils or public agencies). They are structurally authoritative (as governments) but operate within governance spaces that depend on contractual relationships and accountability measures to manage coordination, risk, probity and their continuing responsibility for services. Finally, and because of their special character as the institutionalised authority in societies, governments set the policy frameworks that construct supportive or hostile environments in which social partnerships operate. Policy changes can shift the operating environment very rapidly and often unintentionally; for example, a policy shift in

another portfolio can produce flow-on effects in a partnership (Seddon, Billett & Clemans 2005). The complexities associated with government participation can have significant effects on partnerships and their sustainability over time. This is evident in the four case studies in terms of the following.

The impact of external political context

Social partnerships exist in specific policy contexts in which there are distinctive electoral and other politics that can significantly impact on the partnership. For instance, the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct and the Partnership for Community Care both confronted a difficult political context (respectively, the loss of political support, and a highly charged political inquiry with intense accountability pressures), which compounded existing challenges arising from the partners' entrenched cultures and traditions and soured partnership activities. By contrast, the Community Café faced political challenges in having to negotiate with more than one local council for funding, but was able to draw on local community support to improve relationships with local government. In this instance the community could put pressure on government to enable the Community Café to move forward. The politics confronting Pacific Bay and the Partnership for Community Care left no room for manoeuvre and no opportunities for negotiating alternative ways forward.

Accountability and coordination

Policies of decentralisation and the encouragement of market reform have changed the way governments manage their workforces and their contractual relations with service providers. There has been a simultaneous loosening and tightening of control, with a focus on outcomes, targets and clear accountabilities. The case studies suggest that these developments can both facilitate partnership sustainability and erode it. The state government in Victoria provided centralised templates relating to legal format, governance, representation and planning process and these were helpful in guiding the formation of the Western District Social Partnership. By contrast, the political inquiry into the work of the Partnership for Community Care had tightened accountability to the extent that the partners and partnership work became constrained.

These examples highlight the dilemma facing governments which pursue a partnership strategy. On the one hand, governments encourage decentralisation and diversification of education and training provision through the training market, but this creates challenges of coordination and planning. On the other hand, governments remain responsible for education and training outcomes, as illustrated by government responses to current concerns about skills shortages. Yet social partnerships enhance local governance, which increases localised but diverse participation and inclusion in decision-making. To work effectively, partnerships have to make their own decisions and find ways of bringing local agencies together to realise improvements in services; and governments have to find ways of loosening tight accountability that rests upon close specification of contracts. Trust is a significant issue for both partnerships and governments.

The benefits of partnerships, such as capacity-building as an aspect of realising outcomes, justify some re-negotiation of accountability processes and the softening of rigid public management approaches based on program 'outputs' (Seddon et al. 2002; Geddes 2006). Our research suggests that the sustainability of partnerships is enhanced with an accountability framework that provides real decision-making opportunities for local partners and participants, that gives them room to manoeuvre through partnership work, and that recognises the need for and the inevitable innovative and unexpected effects of capacity-building in partnership activities and outcomes. However, Geddes suggests that in the United Kingdom there is now a re-tightening of control, with traditional patterns of centralism and bureaucratic behaviour re-emerging (Geddes 2006, p.24).

Government policy regime

Social partnerships are for addressing complex social and economic problems in a policy environment that has departed from centralised planning. In this context, innovative problem-solving is critical, and partnerships provide a way through the dilemmas presented by contemporary government and social adjustment to new times. Yet social partnerships are also fragile. They depend upon sophisticated partnership work that constructs and mobilises collaboration, mutuality and reciprocity to achieve outcomes. The participants who engage in this partnership work are largely volunteers motivated by their commitment to a cause and who may also see benefits in networking and relationship-building. Paid employees are generally on short-term contracts and often not well paid. This makes social partnerships a cheap option for government: a way of using local community resources to offset resource outlays. The Western District Social Partnership, for instance, received \$200 000 as base funding from the state government and the paid executive officer had just taken a 0.2 cut in employment in order to respond to funding cuts.

The sustainability of social partnerships depends upon governments recognising their value in policy terms, but also their fragility. From a bureaucratic perspective, social partnerships hardly register, given their limited public funding, their small scale and fluidity, and their dependence upon largely invisible partnership work, often undertaken by women with sophisticated capacities for relationships. The danger is that their low profile and limited resource demands are translated into neglect of the critical resources necessary for partnership sustainability. Goodwill and individual commitment will only go so far in sustaining partnerships. Ultimately, partnerships cannot be sustained in the absence of realistic funding of reasonable duration and without personnel with appropriate skills to meet skill needs and succession, the authority delegated through government endorsement, and the kind of democratic anchoring that gives them legitimacy in their communities. As the four studies show, without these resources or the capacity to build them through partnership work, social partnerships become non-viable.

Leadership

The sustainability of social partnerships rests upon partnership work which is responsive and also innovative in changing conditions, but the way such partnership work is mobilised, focused and strategically directed is also a critical factor. This point is made consistently in the research literature and is evident in the case studies. In the Western District Social Partnership, the role of the executive officer was identified as particularly significant in giving direction to partnership activities. In the Pacific Bay Educational Precinct, the absence of effective leadership, underscored by the loss of political endorsement, dispersed the focus and momentum of partnership formation.

What is distinctive about leadership in these social partnerships is not the presence of a leader per se, but the construction of a legitimate and authorised leadership capacity amongst the partners and with the sponsors, local community and government. This role may be focused on an individual or an executive group, but equally it can be a shared capacity across the partnership.

Leadership in social partnerships 'relies first and foremost on recognizing the differences between working through a single organization and working through a network' (Mandell 2006, p.16). Within networks, leadership cannot operate through command and cannot assume that there are 'followers'. Rather, it develops through participant acceptance and consent, albeit underwritten by broader political endorsements and authorisations. Leadership capacity entails horizontal relationship-building amongst participants, who are recognised and respected as equals (whether or not they are equal in practice), and the consolidation of an effective decision-making structure that can generate agreed and endorsed strategically directed activities. Geddes (2006) describes this as 'collaborative capacity'. Such leadership requires sensitivity to developments internal to the partnership and also in the wider external context (Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan 1997). Integrating these contextual dynamics into the purposes, shared goals and capacities of the partnership provides a basis for framing strategic activities into tangible tasks, projects and products.

Using principles and practices in partnership work

The findings from the case studies indicate that these principles of partnership work:

- ✧ capture significant aspects of partnership work that are widely recognised as important by participants engaged in partnerships in VET
- ✧ provide a useful guide for participants engaged in the practices of partnership work, because they: highlight the importance of establishing processes which address the cultural and relationship work needed to consolidate the partnership as a distinct organisational entity; establish the partnership as an effective steering and learning mechanism; and maintain the relationships and build capacity in ways, such that partnership goals and aspirations can be realised
- ✧ through the self-evaluation tool offer an indication of the health of a social partnership, because they encourage, or can be used by, participants to reflect on the important dimensions of partnership work as ideals and as actual practices of partnering
- ✧ can be used by those who lead and manage partnerships and their activities, and by sponsors and users to focus attention on the challenges and constraints of partnership work. Using the principles of partnership work in this way provides a framework for assessing the operations of social partnerships and for facilitating problem-solving, organisational development and ongoing innovation within a partnership.

In summary, a social partnership is an organisational form different from both enterprises and bureaucracies, although it shares characteristics of each. The strength of social partnerships lies in their flexibility, their openness to stakeholder input and localised problem-solving, and their capacity to innovate. Their limitations are the result of the inherent challenges of partnership work and the substantial dependence on people and their relationships with one another.

Social partnerships are unique in their ability to form a strategically aligned network which takes on the role of a steering and learning mechanism and where innovative thinking and problem-solving can occur; the partnership becomes more than the sum of the roles or purposes of the particular collaborating agencies. The formation and maintenance of the partnership is a critical goal in partnership work and lack of success in building the strategic alignment into an effective steering and learning capacity inevitably means little success in terms of other outcomes.

In defining the particular outcomes for a partnership, it is, therefore, important to acknowledge process and governance outcomes, as well as service delivery outcomes. Geddes (2006, p.14) clarifies these as follows:

- ✧ process outcomes: working more closely with partners, sharing information and staff resources and financial collaboration via pooled funding of activity
- ✧ governance outcomes: development of a collective vision and agreed strategy, widening the range of interests involved in local decision-making, creating a stronger local voice, improving the perceived legitimacy of local governance and exercising more effective influence locally and nationally
- ✧ service delivery outcomes: progress in service improvement, delivering services that conform to local community strategic plans and meeting local community needs more effectively.

The principles and practices of partnership work identified in this project contribute to the achievement of these different kinds of outcomes by directing attention to the importance of building and maintaining social partnerships, including trouble-shooting and strategic planning. They also provide a framework for improving, investigating and understanding partnerships, their operations and distinctive features.

Social partnerships in VET

In this project we have shown that social partnerships are used by various levels of government to address current social and economic issues associated with the work of government and public administration. As we have seen, social partnerships construct strategic alignments of partners and, through their increased guiding and learning capacity, enable the solving of complex local problems.

Social partnerships in VET are a sector-specific application of the general partnership model. Partnerships involving VET contribute to service delivery and generally focus on the two primary objectives of vocational education and training:

- ✧ the development of skills and attitudes necessary for work and the provision of second-chance learning for those who missed out on school and post-secondary education
- ✧ the development of local capacity to support industry, individuals and communities during changing social and economic conditions.

This project has shown that social partnerships in VET have the potential to make a significant contribution to realising the goals of the sector in Australia at local and regional levels. Partnerships involving VET are beneficial when an effective strategic alignment and collaborative capacity can be constructed amongst the partners, sponsors and the auspicing agency which hosts the partnership. As the case studies have demonstrated, the formation of effective partnerships, based on solid partnership structures, and their maintenance over time does not always occur. The construction of a partnership entails sophisticated partnership work, which as we have shown depends upon a number of factors, including appropriate partners, sufficient resources and supportive infrastructure in a context that is conducive to partnering. In the absence of any of these conditions, partnerships are likely to founder, with their potential unrealised.

During Phase 1 of this project an instrument was developed designed to test the 'health' of the social partnership. Its usefulness for this purpose has been confirmed in Phase 2: the four case study organisations used this tool to measure their partnership's wellbeing. This instrument offers a simple and user-friendly way of assessing social partnerships. The use of a self-evaluation tool such as this will always raise questions about those who respond, their perspective on the desired outcomes and their views on 'ideal' partnerships. Nevertheless, this instrument, based on the ideal principles and practices of partnership work, has been useful in both monitoring the health of partnerships and enabling participants to reflect on their own partnership and partnership work.

Issues for further consideration

Social partnerships undoubtedly have a wide range of applications and roles in the VET sector. However, given the many complex areas to be negotiated in the formation and maintenance of social partnerships, we offer the following issues for further consideration.

When are social partnerships in VET best used?

While social partnerships are costly in human terms, they are less so in financial terms. This suggests that partnerships may not be justified in situations where traditional bureaucratic or market mechanisms operate effectively, where problems are simple and where innovation is not an issue. In this context, clarifying the circumstances when partnerships in VET are most useful and sustainable, taking account of existing structures, is obviously the first step. Understanding how their use is influenced by wider trends in industry-specific skill ecosystems (Buchanan 2000) may also prove helpful in determining the best applications and use of partnerships in VET.

What could VET partnerships learn from other settings about partnerships and partnership work?

The focus of this project has been on social partnerships and partnership work in VET—some successful and some not. However, there are substantial numbers of partnerships in other sectors, particularly in community development, urban renewal, health, and local government, as well as a substantial body of research that documents the contribution, character and constraints of these social partnerships and what makes them sustainable. Reviewing this work would provide a comparative basis that would help to clarify the distinctive features and challenges of social partnerships in VET; future partnerships in the VET sector would also benefit from the experiences of partnerships in other sectors.

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Appendix A: Self-assessment tools for social partnerships

Self-evaluation tool for social partnerships in the *development* stage

This self-evaluation tool has been designed to help partnership participants reflect on their practices. For each partnership practice listed below, users should indicate what they think is the ideal practice (what is important) and what they believe is the actual practice in their partnership (to what degree that practice is occurring). Users can then reflect on where there are differences between the ideal and actual practices and think about how they might incorporate the ideal practices into their partnership.

Scale for ideal practice		Scale for actual practice	
1	Inappropriate	a	Not practiced at all
2	Partially appropriate	b	Occasionally practiced
3	Desirable	c	Practised frequently
4	Very desirable	d	Standard and indispensable practice
N/A	Not applicable	N/A	Not applicable

Building shared purposes and goals for and scope of partnership activities

The social partnership, should aim to:	Ideal practice	Actual practice
identify the scope of and depth of shared purpose within the locale or partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
consolidate and articulate that purpose	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
reinforce the value and values of collective action by exemplification	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
acknowledge the diversity, yet be inclusive of, partnership needs and contributions	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
identify and champion both short term and long term goals and bases for achieving them	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency, should aim to:		
encourage, but not overly specify, an inclusive approach to articulating localised concerns	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
reinforce the values and valuing of collective action and advice	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
champion the contributions of partners and partnership work in meeting partners' needs and shared goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
permit social partnerships some scope in nominating goals for its success and the timelines for meeting those goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Building relations within the partnership and with partners

The social partnership should aim to:	Ideal practice	Actual practice
be responsive to partners' concerns and open about differences in their needs and goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
engage partners in deciding the kinds and scope of the partnership arrangements and the conduct of partnership work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
be consultative in forming partnership goals and processes, including its governance	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency, should aim to:		
enact administrative arrangements that are accountable, yet whose processes and outcomes can be negotiable and tailored to partnerships' goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
encourage social partnerships to determine their means of governance, processes and determining their outcomes	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
be tolerant of ambiguities in processes and outcomes	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Building the capacities for and values of partnership work

The social partnership should aim to:	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
build the skills and dispositions required for partnership work through collective, shared and supportive action	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
accumulate infrastructure and procedural capacity for partnership work and fulfilling partners' needs	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
support the building of localised capacity for collective (partnership) work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
engage with social partners in building partnership infrastructure	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
recognise that capacity building will differ in scope, nature and duration across social partnerships	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
exercise patience in the achievement of demonstrable outcomes	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Building partnership governance and leadership

The social partnership should aim to:		
enact its partnership work through the fair and consistent application of agreed principles that are closely aligned to its purposes, yet can be transformed as required through changes in purposes or agendas	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
exercise governance that both balance inclusiveness with practical processes	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
demonstrate openness and trust in communication and practice	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
identify and organise leadership most appropriate to the social partnerships' stage of development and/or urgent goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
evaluate partnerships' progress on process outcomes (e.g. measures of inclusiveness, trust building and consultations) as much as program goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
support the development of governance appropriate for the partnership's goals, practices and stage of development	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
align support with processes and goals identified by the partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Building trust and trustworthiness

The social partnership should aim for:		
processes that engage, informed and are informed by participants contributions	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
a history of partnership work and time for trust to evolve among partners	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
processes that aim to overcome conditions and tensions that militate against building trust through partnership work (i.e. competitive environment)	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
engaging individuals locally to address partnership goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
explicitly and deliberately focused activities on an area of important and common concern: the partnership's goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
work to build trust in its relationship with partners	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
be fair and transparent in its dealings with the social partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
be flexible with its own imperatives and requirements	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Self-evaluation tool for *established* social partnerships (maintenance stage)

This self-evaluation tool has been designed to help partnership participants reflect on their practices. For each partnership practice listed below, users should indicate what they think is the ideal practice (what is important) and what they believe is the actual practice in their partnership (to what degree that practice is occurring). Users can then reflect on where there are differences between the ideal and actual practices and think about how they might incorporate the ideal practices into their partnership.

Scale for ideal practice		Scale for actual practice	
1	Inappropriate	A	Not practiced at all
2	Partially appropriate	B	Occasionally practiced
3	Desirable	C	Practised frequently
4	Very desirable	D	Standard and indispensable practice
N/A	Not applicable	N/A	Not applicable

Maintaining shared purposes and goals of partnership activities

The social partnership should aim to:	Ideal practice	Actual practice
maintain and renew partnership goals and processes through constructive reflection, and by focusing on core business	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
actively champion partnership successes	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
rehearse the complexity and importance of sustaining commitment to the partnership's work and goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
accommodate changing views, processes and goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
acknowledge, support and accommodate the task of maintaining shared interests and partnership performance over time	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
acknowledge the successes of and contributions of the social partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
be tolerant of social partnerships' changing processes and goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Maintaining relations within the partnership and with partners

The social partnership should aim to:		
rehearse and remind partners of the overall project	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
fulfil some of the partners' expectations and habitually acknowledge their contributions	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
build productive relationships with sponsoring agency as a partner in a shared project	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
exemplify how partnership work has achieved its goals	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
manage the burden placed upon partners and avoid burnout of volunteers	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
manage the recruitment and induction of new partners	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
The sponsoring agency, should aim to:		
acknowledge the partnership's contribution and that of its partners	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
have productive and reciprocal engagement with the social partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
demonstrate how partners' (and in particular volunteers') contributions have been acknowledged and enacted	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
draw upon the partnerships' experiences in establishing and developing further existing partnerships	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Maintaining the capacity in and values of partnership work

The social partnership should aim to:		
attract and retain partners and resources capable of continuing partnership work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
maintain the infrastructure required to fulfil effective partnership work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
manage the turnover of staff and partners to secure continuity of the partnership's work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
direct support to each social partnership strategically in ways to assist its continuity	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
assist in processes of support for the induction of new partners	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
identify and provide strategic infrastructure support to the partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Maintaining partnership governance and leadership for continuity over time

The social partnership should aim to:		
maintain trust and openness as key principles for partnership governance	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
manage the diverse contributions to avoid both over and under representations	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
locate and select effective leadership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
maintain the effective provision of meetings and communications across the partnership	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
respect and acknowledge the preferred mode of partnership governance	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
acknowledge the importance of openness and trust in partnership work by accepting advice and valuing its contributions		
advise about alternative governance strategies for long levity	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
encourage and support meetings and communication processes	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Maintaining trust and trustworthiness

The social partnership should aim for:		
demonstrate trust and openness through partnership work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
welcome and encourage partnership input	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
actively and openly appraise the level of meeting partners' expectations and needs	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
emphasise the achievements and effectiveness of the partnership's work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

The sponsoring agency should aim to:		
demonstrate continuing and growing autonomy as the partnership matures	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
demonstrate an openness to criticism and reform of its processes and goals as result of partnership feedback		
acknowledge and identify the partnership's contributions	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A
continue to champion the effectiveness of partnership work	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – N/A	a – b – c – d – N/A

Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Sustaining effective social partnerships—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1985.html>> and contains:

- ✧ Assessing partnership health
- ✧ Analysis of principles in changing circumstances in each social partnership



The National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program is coordinated and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

This program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

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