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# Social Partnerships: Practices, Paradoxes and Prospects of Local Learning Networks

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the formation, character and contradictions of social partnerships. We report on a specific initiative, the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) established by the Victorian Government in Australia in 2001, documenting the nature of this initiative and how it is playing out. We draw attention to some of the tensions that exist between different agencies, including different agencies within government. Through this detailed case study it is possible to identify parallels between LLEN and other social partnership initiatives developing in other parts of the world. This process of situating a specific Australian partnership within the wider trend to social partnerships permits a more contextualised analysis. It shows the way social partnerships are developing as a consequence of education reform shaped by neo-liberal governance and various patterns of compliance and resistance to this political rationality.*

Between late 2000 and 2001, the Victorian State Government established Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) on a regional geographic basis. The establishment process was organised in two phases so that now, in 2003, there are 31 LLEN covering the whole of the state. The LLEN were charged with two key responsibilities. They were required to engage in community building through reinvigorating local co-operative approaches to planning, community renewal and effective service delivery. They were also required to support and build shared responsibility of, and ownership for, post compulsory education and training, especially for 15-19 year olds.

In this paper we report on the development of the LLEN. Our purpose is, firstly, to tell the story of LLEN as a particular case in the wider global trend to social partnership and inter-agency working. Through this case, we suggest that there are different ways of thinking about social partnerships and what is entailed in partnership work. We highlight the paradoxes of partnership and consider their prospects.

The research reported in this paper draws on the data and analysis generated in two funded projects conducted between 2002-3. Seddon, Fischer, Clemans and Billett (2002) undertook an evaluation of the first round of LLENs. A snapshot of each LLEN was developed through an individual interview with the executive officer of each LLEN and focus group interview(s) with other participants in the LLEN, generally the LLEN committee of management. A longer term assessment of LLEN development was facilitated through follow-up contact by phone and through various workshops and meetings. In addition, the evaluation team conducted interviews (individual and focus groups) with other stakeholders. The analysis of data was consolidated in the final report which outlined the emerging character and challenges of LLENs and how their work might be facilitated.

The second project was an investigation of social partnerships within the field of vocational education and training (VET) which was funded by the National Research and Evaluation Committee (Seddon and Billett, 2003). This project entailed a nationwide desktop review of social partnerships relevant to VET. Forty social partnerships were followed up via a phone survey that obtained factual information about each partnership and more detailed stories about the way the partnership worked, its governance processes and the factors that contributed to success within the partnership. This broad review was complemented by 4 detailed case studies of social partnerships located in South Australia, Queensland and Victoria. These different sources of information were used to develop profiles of the partnerships.

## **The trend to social partnerships**

The development of social partnerships that understand and address local needs as a basis for service delivery is an increasingly significant feature of international public policy, particularly in Europe and the developing world (for example, Green, Wolf & Leney, 1999, CSBED, 2001). The trend is being actively promoted through the development planning of global agencies, such as the OECD, UNESCO and World Bank, as well as by national governments. This global policy trajectory seeks to devolve decision-making to the local level where action consequences are more immediate and more readily realised than in more centralised systems of government. Working to secure mutuality of interests and reconciliation of conflicting interests

among client groups is seen to be a hallmark of mature service delivery (OECD 1994a, OECD 1994b).

Such decentralisation has been a feature of education governance through the 1980s and 1990s, being particularly evident in the move to local school management (Caldwell, 1993). It is now being extended in the formation of new social partnerships that bring diverse local agencies together to support a range of economic and social development agenda in and beyond education and training. In education, these social partnerships exist beyond the formal institutions of education and training (ie. schools, TAFE Institutes and universities) and are commonly targeted to enhance learning opportunities for young people and adults who are seen to be 'at risk' of falling between the cracks of education, training and employment.

The promise of new social partnerships lies in their asserted capacity to overcome bureaucratic rigidities, address unfortunate consequences of market-based provision and provide solutions to social exclusion and the risks – individual, community and national – associated with poor educational participation and outcomes (Levitas, 1998).

This policy framing suggests that new social partnerships are characterised by:

- 1 Interest groups and stakeholders** The partnerships do not actively engage the established interests of organised capital and labour but draw on a diverse coalition of interest groups and stakeholders focused and organised at a more localised and individualised level.
- 2 Role of government** Government is to function less as a centralised decision-making agency and more as a coordinating and facilitating agency which steers policy by creating contexts for, and helping to build individual and organisational capacities that sustain localised decision-making within networks (Kickert and Klijn, 1997).
- 3 Management of decision processes** Decision making in these social partnerships requires careful management because the shift away from corporate organisation (large government, organised capital and labour) to smaller-scale localised interest group participation creates differentiated political systems in which there is considerable cultural diversity and many different decision-making centres (Rhodes, 1996). There is no single sovereign authority but a multiplicity of actors that are specific to particular policy arenas. This is a decision-making situation which is described as 'governance' rather than 'government' (Jessop, 1998).

There is now a growing body of research on social partnerships, their patterns of development and ways of working. While some of this research accepts this policy

framing, other work is more skeptical of social partnerships and their claims. These research approaches have been distinguished using, first, Grace's (1984) distinction between a more means-end and managerial policy science and a critical social science which draws on intellectual traditions within the social sciences and humanities, and, second, Dale's (1992) notion that most education research demonstrates a commitment to a 'project of social redemption/emancipation'. Dale used this phrase to describe the framing assumptions of so much education work: that education is good, more is better and change contributes to social improvement. This redemptive project encouraged a research focus which sought to identify and facilitate progressive education change. However through the 1990s, these simple assumptions about social progress through education were undermined by neo-liberal reforms, the reconfiguration of educational work as the contractualised provision of goods and services, and the eroding optimism about the possibility of a politics that seeks to install 'the good life'. While educationists retain remarkable optimism about education as a public good, there is a growing body of research that has relinquished the social redemptionist ideal and sees education more dispassionately as an instrument of neo-liberal governance.

Three broad approaches to research are outlined below:

### **Policy science perspective**

This research, often funded by governments as contract research or consultancies, has aimed to document the character of social partnerships, describe their patterns of development and evaluate their performance against policy objectives (eg. Seddon, Fischer, Clemans and Billett, 2001; Kilpatrick, Falk & Harrison, 1998). Such research accepts the policy framing of social partnerships as an engagement and decision-making that is negotiated between government and stakeholders or community. It provides rich descriptions of the activities within social partnerships, documents the challenges of partnership work, and highlights the common barriers to partnership working. Generally these studies 'tell it like it is' rather than contextualising the social partnership within a wider historical and social assessment or using such contextualisation to consider what the developments mean in the wider scheme of things or what they mean for people engaged in, or concerned with, partnerships.

From this perspective, social partnerships are shown to be developments of considerable complexity. They reveal that the rhetoric of 'partnership' sometimes masks complexities and tensions within localised decision-making processes (Ridell and Tett, 2001). Commonly these tensions are described in terms of conflicts between individuals or agencies. Reviewing literature on social partnerships, (Tett, Crowther & O'Hara, 2003) showed that there were a variety of different rationales for partnership and the processes of collaboration were shaped by:

- Fragmentation and non-coterminosity of boundaries;
- Differences in funding mechanisms and bases;
- Differences in aims, organisational cultures and procedures;
- Lack of appropriate accommodation and resources;
- Differences in ideologies and values;
- Conflicting views about user interests and roles;
- Concern for threats to autonomy and control and having to share credit;
- Communication difficulties;
- Lack of organisational flexibilities;
- Differences in perceived power; and
- Inability to deal with conflict.

(Tett *et al.*, 2003, p. 40)

### **Critical social science perspective**

This research adopts a more critical view of social partnerships and sees partnership working as a pluralist process involving the negotiation of interest groups with differential access to resources and rules. The policy framing of social partnerships is acknowledged but each party is understood in a contextualised and socially embedded way. There is still an emphasis on close description of particular social partnerships but the collection and analysis of these data are framed conceptually in ways that permit some consideration of the implications or meanings of the empirical developments. In some cases, such research speaks back to policy-makers (Seddon and Billett, 2003). In other cases, the research contributes to critical social analysis, drawing attention to the dissonance between partnership rhetoric and the complexities and tensions of partnerships in action (Ridell and Tett, 2001).

In this work social partnerships are presented as sites of political engagement where partners have unequal access and voice in decision-making processes (Rees, 1997). Partnership working entails making spaces for informal networking and building political alliances between many, often radically different partners in order to influence agendas (Griffiths, 2000). Conflicts of interest are seen to be endemic to partnerships and are treated as a feature, rather than an obstacle or barrier to partnership working (Jones and Bird, 2000). Different groups have different priorities and definitions of social or individual 'need' and embody a distinct organisational habitus, a set of dispositions, embedded values, which dictate what counts as 'ordinary ways of working' (Clegg and McNulty, 2002). These ordinary ways of working are rooted in the prior networking and cultural capital which are important resources for particular partners (Tett *et al.*, 2003) but they can also be a source of conflict between partners. Conscious or unconscious assertion of particular ways of working within partnerships can be experienced as a kind of professional or institutional imperialism which denies other partners' knowledge, routines and voice,

and creates patterns of marginalisation and exclusion. Organisational habitus is not just anchored in particular institutional or professional cultures but is embedded in broader social relations based in gender, ethnicity and class. These current and historical informal networks, gender dynamics and politics of difference amongst activists influence the broader context for partnerships, creating distinct historical traditions in partnership working (Kearns and Papadopolous, 2000). For example, Alexiadou, Lawn & Ozga (2000) show that the history and culture of Scottish resistance to English rule has created very different processes within partnership's localised decision-making.

### **Neo-liberal governance**

This critical social science research moves away from the idea that education is a means for social improvement because the question about what constitutes 'a good life' is not on the agenda in the current context. Globalised neo-liberalism privileges accumulation and profitability over human need and government endorses and supports this priority. The state affirms property rights over people rights, reducing collective protections through taxation and the welfare state, and asserting forms of individualised self-management which shifts responsibility and risk from the state to the individual. By documenting macro-level continuity and change in society and culture, and their implications in education, such research provides a wider canvas within which the meaning and significance of social partnerships can be assessed. It is skeptical of the notion of partnership, the rendering of society as stakeholders, and the claims that government can sustain partnership working.

From this perspective partnerships are seen as an instrument of neo-liberal governance, and as a means of intervening in society and culture to assert and institutionalise a marketised and individualised political rationality while minimising the social costs of this work (Marginson, 1997, Power and Whitty, 1999, Lawn, 2001). Mobilising volunteers is a way of reducing costs to the public purse by shifting costs to self-funded (or altruistic) individuals. The boundaries of partnership work are poorly defined and this means that there is no clear end to the responsibilities that individuals can take on to themselves. Meanwhile, governments continue to leave important social responsibilities to the vagaries of the market while centralising power and control through funding and reporting mechanisms. When there is market failure the state is put in a contradictory position because it cannot be seen to support centralised solutions to market failure without undercutting neo-liberal ideology (Robertson & Dale, 2002). Instead, failure is presented in localised terms and addresses through 'emergency measures', like targeted case management of individuals, replacement of the principal of a failing school with another who has demonstrated success elsewhere. The localisation and 'emergency' character of these measures suggest that they are necessitated by the ungovernability of particular

individuals and communities rather than acknowledging the structural and systematic character of problems like market failure or social exclusion. This way of framing problems encourages the view that local failures are appropriately tackled by emergency measures rather than by opening up political questions about neo-liberal social ordering.

Each of these perspectives offer ways of understanding social partnerships but in terms that are paradoxical and contradictory. Clarifying the purchase that each has provides a basis for assessing social partnerships and their prospects. We return to them in the final section of this paper

### **Social partnerships in Australia**

In Australia, the commitment to social partnerships in education was formalised in 1999 by then Commonwealth Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr David Kemp. Kemp affirmed that ‘three sector partnerships’ – government, corporate and community – were fundamental to Australia’s economic, political and social development. He stressed that ‘community partnerships’ have the capacity to carry Australia forward, achieving a great future and also tackling entrenched social problems. He affirmed community building through tripartite partnerships as a key Commonwealth government strategy for taking Australia into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a better, stronger and more cohesive society (See also Latham, 1998). Such working together, Kemp stressed,

...is a task that requires communication, consultation and partnerships among governments of all levels, industries and the community. It is clearly the way of the future if we want effective government that generates optimal outcomes for citizens, and achieves a better-functioning democratic society (Kemp, 1999, p.3).

This speech acknowledged that there was already a wide range of community partnerships in operation, based in business-community partnerships (for example, The Body Shop and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence’s Youth Retail Traineeship Scheme). Later these were followed by partnerships sponsored by government. The Commonwealth funded a series of industry-education initiatives through the Employment and Careers Education Foundation, for example, ECEF, 2001, a successor organisation to the Australian Student and Traineeship Foundation established by the previous Labor Commonwealth Government. Victoria sponsored regional Learning Towns, ACFE, 2001) through the Adult and Community Education sector and established LLEN.

In 2000, the then Victorian Minister for Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment, Lynne Kosky, uncompromisingly endorsed partnership working as a new approach in education reform:

I am confident this will be a watershed period in Victorian education and training. We will look back on it and recognise it as a period when Government, industry and community, together, began to face up to the impact of change upon education and training in the state. I believe these developments will give us national leadership in the area, as they constitute endeavours on the part of government, working in partnership with industry and the community to meet the new social and economic challenges for education and training (Kosky, 2000).

This Labor government, under Premier Steve Bracks, had taken office in late 1999 in an unexpected victory over the prior conservative government of Jeff Kennett. This political shift was locally significant because it marked a widespread but largely unremarked withdrawal of support from the previous government and its neo-liberal policies. The incoming Labor government moved promptly to establish a series of reviews, including the Kirby Inquiry in Post-compulsory Education and Training (Kirby, 2000), which collectively distanced the government from the previous unrelenting focus on market competition. Instead, they affirmed the importance of the public sector as an infrastructure for economic and social development in Victoria. This affirmation of the distinctive contribution of the public sector co-existed alongside an explicit and continuing commitment to balanced budgets and market mechanisms.

## **The development of the LLEN**

The LLEN were proposed by the Kirby Inquiry. Their starting point was not privatisation or the value of the competitive pursuit of individual advantage but, instead, the burgeoning evidence that education was failing a growing number of young people in Victoria. Through the 1990s Australia was the only OECD country where retention rates were declining (Spierings, 1999). Drawing on international benchmark data and local studies of retention, participation and outcomes (Dussledorp Skills Forum, 1998, 1999, Dwyer & Wyn, 1998), the inquiry emphasised the dangers of Australia's falling school retention rates and the social and economic costs of limited learning and social alienation. Reflecting on the inquiry, Chair, Peter Kirby, recalled that:

In a number of country areas networking [had emerged], as a strong assembly of local stakeholders, who were forging better pathways for young people and better correspondence between education and training and work ... It struck us as how odd it was that solutions were

being found that not only stalled any further fall in retention but actually increased retention rates. This had been achieved despite the system not because of it (Kirby, 2002, p.ii).

Building on this insight and international developments, the report emphasised the contribution of local stakeholders to solving problems of employment and education in their communities. Local planning networks, subsequently termed LLEN, were proposed as a means of improving education, training and employment outcomes for young people through community-building processes observed in the course of the inquiry. These local planning networks would build a local planning capacity based on inter-agency work at a local level and exercise that planning capacity by investigating and developing regional network planning and provision processes (Kirby, 2000).

Successful learning was seen to depend upon making a series of learning platforms available to young people, with associated knowledge, skills and qualifications. These learning platforms would provide a range of places from which young people, with quite different experiences and needs, could embark on their learning careers through life. This definition of the policy problem moved away from the traditional meritocratic model which sees education and training as a ladder to individual educational, social and occupational opportunity. The established post-compulsory provision leading to the end-of-school qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), was seen to be unattractive to some students, despite providing opportunities for vocational and academic learning, because it constituted a single continuum that fed into the process of university selection. The challenge, the report stated, is 'to provide an additional set of worthwhile programs for students for whom the current VCE does not represent an attractive pathway while not undermining its value to the large majority of the cohort' (Kirby, 2001, p 79).

Things moved quickly. By the end of 2001, the first 16 LLEN were established. Volunteers were asked to come together to form a committee of management. This committee had a specified composition to ensure that major stakeholders were represented. It was responsible for appointing an executive officer and beginning the work of establishing a regional planning capacity – undertaking an environmental scan, developing a strategic plan, reporting to government and building community networks which would support young people in the area.

### **The work of the LLEN**

Despite their relative infancy, and fairly short period of development, the LLEN are making significant inroads to their task of engagement and community involvement in decision-making in matters of employment and education for young people. The

following illustrations are drawn from executive officers and members of the 16 LLEN and provide an indication of the range, energy and inventiveness. One LLEN describes its positive experience in building effective relationships in the community:

The LLEN committee of management (COM) is well networked, an incestuous bunch, it would be a surprise if a new person turned up that they didn't know. The Kennett period sparked competition and now they are trying to break it down at the COM level. The first six months was spent extinguishing fires among the agendas. Now they can say it was that period. There is the same dynamic now among the membership and the broader community.

The principals were new to this and NGOs and had felt out of the reform process and the region. Now they have found collegial support. Local Government has been impacted too – the municipality has developed a youth strategy and youth officer as a result of the local government reps role on the COM.

In the beginning, all these people were on the LLEN because they had 'a watching brief', they were watching each other and the LLEN. All feared 'an education take-over'. All have now become energised. We have 6 working parties. All are chaired by COM members. Participation in the LLEN has increased. Now people want to be involved.

In other LLEN, pre-existing relationships and, sometimes, forced marriages across geographic or local government areas made LLEN development more difficult. In some LLEN, sub-committee structures were used to ensure that geographic sub-communities within the LLEN maintain their identities and also to contain undue dominance by particular networks.

There is some recognition that there may be a kind of life cycle for LLEN. It begins with the 'watching brief' noted in the first example when all the partners are new and do not know each other. As they engage with one another, differences emerge but, with careful management, the partners can build on these differences. As trust develops within LLEN, people become more confident in reaching out to new partners, building dialogue with other agencies and pursuing projects and initiatives.

Few LLEN have moved beyond these three phases. However, there are some indications that committee turn-over may be an issue as LLEN mature. The workload is heavy, especially for the chair and executive officer, and the LLEN environment also provides a valuable professional development context where people can learn the

skills of networking, relationship-building and change management which are highly valued and rewarded in other employment contexts. It also seems that LLEN vary in the extent and speed with which they coalesce as functional focuses for debate and action. In some regional areas, in particular, executive officers reported that it was difficult to mobilise community members and maintain their involvement. Sometimes the people who became involved did not have the expertise to do the work required. This meant that a lot of work fell back onto the executive officer. Similarly in the metropolitan areas, some LLEN found it hard to define their community. With no geographic basis for this definition, the community stretched out into a diverse array of networks and affiliations that reached well beyond the geographic locale.

Relationship building was seen as a critical priority in the LLEN and as a specific challenge in relation to some groups. Most LLEN identified employers as one of those challenging groups and they were developing a range of strategies for tackling this. Some only approached employers when there was a specific initiative under way that needed employer participation. Breakfasts have also been another way of encouraging employer participation. They have been popular with the employers because they offer good networking opportunities and with the LLEN because they encourage communication without being too resource intensive. One LLEN executive officer targeted a particular industry sector and phoned all the employers. Having a chat about the LLEN and about young people in the area was enough to bring a lot of these employers into the LLEN processes. Some were willing to employ a young person at risk. Others participated in larger scale projects and network activities. In one country town a special partnership has been forged with one of the larger companies. The company was having problems recruiting apprentices. The LLEN suggested that the company might participate in a pilot project aimed at developing a new certificate to recognise learning outcomes (the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) as a way of encouraging young people to take up the apprenticeships. A memorandum of understanding was signed which allowed three cohorts of young people – unskilled, apprentices and tertiary students – to do part of their training at the company.

LLEN are also developing different strategies for working with young people themselves. One LLEN appointed a number of young people to act as liaison officers, building relationships with youth in schools and TAFE, in jobs and on the street. In another LLEN a Youth Advisory Panel was established. The executive officer noted:

This made educationists sit up. Schools nominated 1-2 students to be involved in leadership training. They were not established leaders but ordinary kids who might benefit or have potential. Some were high functioning kids, others were illiterate. We organised a one week

training program, then invited kids to form the Youth Advisory Panel. A couple have fallen out but 17 kids are still in. We have invited them to nominate issues and establish working parties to work on issues. School - work issues were not significant. They wanted to work on drugs and teachers. They are preparing a brochure on what works with kids in relation to drugs. They want to do survey of drug use. They feel they don't get enough real information on drug use in the area. They are getting the police to talk with them. Its quite confronting having kids doing a survey of drug use in schools. It's threatening for schools. But we can't set up the panel and ask them to work on issues and then say it's not appropriate to work on that issue. This has been a huge achievement.

Overwhelmingly, the LLEN talked about the value of building relationships between agencies and individuals who previously never talked with one another. They acknowledged that this is not always a simple process. It involves quite risky work, meeting up with new people, trying to find someone in an organisation who is willing to engage with the LLEN and be enthusiastic and motivated even if their job description or performance indicators do not recognise this activity, and finding ways of talking to one another when the lexicon is slightly different to what one is used to. It requires the person building the relationship to be confident, willing to take risks, able to speak across institutional cultures, and be able to make mistakes and learn from them. The capacities of the executive officer and chair are critical. They cannot be disengaged but they must safeguard their independence. They cannot afford to be 'captured' by any particular interest group.

But they felt that the benefits of this work were obvious. LLEN committee members talked about the value of extending their professional networks, and of the challenges in tackling intractable problems facing young people. As a result of such dialogue unrecognised problems came to light and could be addressed – like the realisation that disengagement is not only a problem for some 15-19 year olds but also for some younger children and for adults. In other cases, dialogue opened up different ways of understanding existing problems. For instance, in one LLEN area on the metropolitan fringe retention was not good. As the executive officer observed:

Something like 38% of boys will drop out of school by Year 11. They won't do Year 12. We probably have amongst the highest level of disengagement from school in the state. This is an area that behaves like a regional area, not a metropolitan area. Yet it is treated like a metropolitan area, even though the metropolitan transport stops at the north of the area. Once the transport stops it doesn't matter whether you are 5 or 500 km away.

This issue of public transport provided a way of reframing the problem of young people's disengagement from education and training, and offered insights into alternative solutions, as a committee member describes:

Public transport is a big issue. It stops them accessing education and training. But I wouldn't have known about that if I hadn't been in the LLEN. Transport is aspirational. The kids don't think beyond what they can do on public transport. So now we are thinking about having 1<sup>st</sup> year TAFE and Uni subjects delivered locally to get round problems of transport. We wouldn't have done that without the LLEN helping us to see the issue.

### **The structural challenges arising from LLEN**

While LLEN reported achievements and benefits, it is important to remember that they have been enacted by government and inserted into a field of already well-established relationships, networks and communication channels. Schools have over 100 years experience in communicating with the Department. Schools and the Department can source and feedback intelligence through familiar contacts and informants. There is no practical necessity for them to work through LLEN. The same applies for other educational providers which have distinctive histories of working with bureaucracies and their own communities.

This insertion of LLEN into an existing relational field creates what might be termed the 'floating LLEN'. It presents certain challenges to all parties. For LLEN, the immediate challenge was to build interest amongst local agencies, to be able to offer something distinctive that would encourage the established education and training agencies, and the Department, to interface with them rather than simply using their familiar and routine networks. Some LLEN experienced this challenge as a top-down process. They saw themselves implementing policy determined elsewhere. Other LLEN resisted this view of themselves as mere implementers of policy and actively engaged in determining their own directions and agenda, and engaging in local policy setting.

For schools, the LLEN is an add-on to their existing activities. Involvement requires additional work with uncertain returns and without additional resources. Within the schools sector concern was expressed that the endorsement of LLEN as an agency supporting 15-19 year olds down-played the role of schools as the site where most of this age cohort was located. There was also some recognition that the endorsement of LLEN could be taken as a criticism of schools and a challenge for schools to step out of their familiar frames of reference. Equally, schools recognised that the LLEN have capacities for networking and inter-agency working which extends their own resources.

They potentially provide opportunities for schools to extend their provision into pathways which extend beyond schools themselves and to track students as they move beyond the schools. LLEN also have some financial resources which can be used to support cross-sectoral and pathway initiatives.

Among TAFE Institutes and adult and community education (ACE) providers, engagement with the LLEN seems more patchy. Some LLEN had active involvement of these education and training providers. Others did not. The focus on 15-19 year olds led some ACE stakeholders to feel marginalised. Yet equally, the LLEN provided a forum in which ACE could interact with other stakeholders in education and training. This revealed that disengagement from school is not just a problem for 15-19 year olds but also for 10-14 year olds. It encouraged attention to middle years schooling, as well as to later years learning and employment outcomes.

Other agencies, such as Local Government and other Government agencies including Centrelink which assists unemployed job seekers and Employers and Unions related to LLEN from outside established education and training. This means that there were greater cultural differences in relation to LLEN. These more distant relationships were reflected in variable experiences with the LLEN. Local Government had become actively involved in some LLEN, although this had not occurred in all LLEN. Relations with Centrelink saw tensions around their common employment focus, leading to some evidence of demarcation issues and competitiveness between LLEN and Centrelink. Unions reported marginalisation and ambivalence about how to connect and engage with LLEN. All the LLEN recognised that building relationships with employers was important but requires distinct strategies. Their engagement with employers was often project-specific, even individual-specific. There were instances where employers took on particular 'at risk' young people as a result of direct intervention and relationship building by the LLEN.

The Department of Education and Training's relationship with LLEN was complex. Education policy endorsed LLEN and so Departmental officers supported LLEN in principle. In practice, things were messier. There were mixed understandings about the role of LLEN and how they fitted into Departmental structures and authority relations. Information flows and communication were fractured by the division of the Department into Offices and other units. People knew that LLEN exist but in a rather 'academic' way. LLEN happened 'over there'. The implications of LLEN for practice were not immediately recognised. The recognition that the 'Centre's' policy development process would be paralleled by local policy development through LLEN seemed to come as a surprise.

## The cultural challenge of LLEN

The insertion of the LLEN into a field of established relationships confronts existing arrangements and creates new relationships. Many tensions around LLEN are a consequence of this insertion. While there was recognition of these tensions, there was also widespread acknowledgment that the LLEN principle – working together for young people – was a good one. Yet, these tensions have a structural basis in the way LLEN have complicated life for many agencies and stakeholders.

In practical terms, LLEN tackled these challenges by using personal and professional networks. The committee of management had representatives from a number of different agencies and this gave LLEN an *entre* to various organisations. There was evidence that many people who engage with the LLEN were professionals who saw professional benefits from participation because the LLEN enabled them to extend their professional networks and intelligence. The difficulty was that LLEN work took time, time which was increasingly scarce in many professional lives and which was not formally recognised by their employers through the performance indicators that they were working to. The Chairs of LLEN expressed considerable concern at the workload involved. One chair noted that he spent well over a day a week on the LLEN – a heavy demand when people are in middle management or senior positions in their own sectors (Chairs included employers in small businesses, school principals, senior managers in TAFE as well as civic figures and professional retirees). This time factor is a potential time bomb in the LLEN movement. Managing the volunteer economy in and around established employment practices was another potential problem.

The whole question of the status and authority of LLEN was a taxing one. Some LLEN personnel reflected on the way the authority of LLEN might be enhanced through making committee membership a Ministerial appointment or even paying an honorarium to the chair. Another executive officer said,

What does it mean to be a ‘network’? Imagine answering a phone. What sounds best – ‘hello, this is the Regional Local Learning and Employment Network? Or, this is the Regional Local Learning and Employment *Authority*? Some of the organisations we are working with, and attempting to effect cultural change in, have a budget that is bigger than our whole global budget. We are trying to bring about cultural change but need some authority for this. We try to back claims by moral authority and activity but, ultimately, the organisations can say, ‘go jump’.

This executive officer also felt that the LLEN would gain authority if they were responsible for allocating money to support initiatives on behalf of government. Yet, he reflected, the sort of money the LLEN received,

isn't real money. The real money is already allocated through established Departmental programs, like Managed Individual Pathways and Middle School. The schools and Department won't let us touch that even though we want to put young people at the core of education and training.

Within the LLEN, different agencies talked different languages and had different expectations. Negotiating these interests and expectations was a critical step in LLEN development. Finding ways of working across these different communities necessitated different kinds of strategies. Education people work in committees, employers get bored, the Department wants tangible outcomes and community development experts want to pin down structures and process. Working across these cultural differences meant acknowledging differences while also creating a productive patchwork which used expertise and ways of working to get things done. Creating this productive patchwork which brings expertise, information, and understandings together was constrained, in part, by the authority and resource questions that surrounded the LLEN initiative. It was also made difficult because people were located differently in relation to LLEN and this location shaped the way they see LLEN and imagine what it might become.

Yet there was considerable opportunity within this scenario. An enterprising LLEN could easily become a local broker working between these different agencies building relationships and mobilising resources for local communities, but this may also take them away from a specific 15-19 year old education and employment focus. This scenario presents scope for dissipation of effort, for sectional conflict, for co-option of LLEN to particular agendas. While LLEN were the invention of the education and training sector, a narrow focus on 15-19 year olds learning and earning could be seen as a particular co-option of community capacity that took human resources away from wider agendas relating to regional development which encompassed education and training.

### **Are LLEN successful partnerships?**

LLEN were established with a double expectation. At the local level they would improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people through building community networks and supporting local decision-making oriented to brokering solutions to the obstacles that young people face. In a more general sense

they would facilitate the Victorian government's broader policy commitment to community building.

What counts as success in relation to this double agenda was different for the 'Centre' and the LLEN. Given the diversity of LLEN, the danger was that Central conceptions of success would disregard local conceptions of what LLEN were achieving. The Department of Education and Training's 2002 evaluation of the first phase LLEN drew attention to this issue of conflicting conceptions of success (Seddon *et al*, 2002). It noted that the highly differentiated character of LLEN meant that 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to development, management, support and accountability were not just inappropriate but likely to be quite destructive of the LLEN initiative.

Yet there was evidence of a distinctive Central approach to the definition of success within LLEN. Performance measures were defined by the Centre in relation to administrative milestones within the phased establishment period and in the emphasis on tangible outcomes for young people. Between 2000 when the first LLEN were established and 2003, this emphasis on education and employment outcomes for young people was ratcheted up.

In May 2003, in a speech to the first LLEN conference, the Minister restated the government's commitment to 'providing an excellent education and training system for all Victorians'. Reminding participants of the government's goal of 90 percent of young Victorians successfully completing Year 12 or equivalent, she stated:

The core business of LLENs is to *improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people*. ... *The first challenge* is that LLENs must demonstrate it (sic) is achieving *tangible, sustained and measurable* improvements to young people's education and training outcomes. We have made a significant investment in each LLEN – and we expect you to deliver on this investment by demonstrating that you are making a real difference for young people (Kosky, 2003, emphasis included).

The gist of the Minister's message was that she expected LLEN to target specific groups of young people, to target 'pockets of poor achievement' in ways that would 'lift outcomes for young people'. The resources had been put in the hands of LLEN and it was now up to them. She concluded by saying that funding had been secured for a further two years and that she would seek advice about the gains that the LLEN had made. She continued:

These gains will need to be measured in improved education, training and employment outcomes. Some key questions ... will include:

- Whether there has been a significant improvement to educational outcomes?
- Whether the changes and partnerships forged by LLENs are self-sustaining?
- Whether full statewide coverage by LLENs is needed?
- And whether, after five years of operation, LLENs are the most effective means to improve outcomes at the local level?

(Kosky, 2003)

This speech created some consternation amongst conference participants who were largely engaged in LLEN work. They already knew that they had to deliver for young people but this was understood in the context of a broader community-building agenda. Suddenly their scope for action seemed to have been constricted – results for the young, within a two year time frame and on a modest budget in comparison to established schooling in schools and Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

At the local level, the definition of success had been less focused on youth outcomes. LLEN certainly worked for education and employment outcomes but they saw these achievements arising as a consequence of their broad community-building activities. Commonly LLEN executive officers commented that if they built relationships, the youth outcomes would follow. After all, there was overwhelming evidence that LLEN were seen to be a ‘good thing’ by almost everyone. They were described as an initiative that brought the best out in people, enabling them to set aside sectional and self-interest in support of young people. ‘Helping our young people’ was a powerful mobilising rhetoric which captured the imagination of people from quite different walks of life. It had enabled LLEN to support and advance a huge range of initiatives, as documented by Hull (2003).

The LLEN emphasised that relationship-building was core work. This meant that LLEN were focused more on community-building activities than on curriculum-based activities (ie. extending and adding to the things that individuals learned through programs or other activities). This may have been because the LLEN were at an early stage of development and needed to establish themselves within existing local networks. However, most LLEN saw their role more as a broker mobilising community resources rather than as a program deliverer.

They were concerned that the Centre’s accountability and reporting framework was focused in ways that did not align with the work of the LLEN. They were described

as privileging tangible outcomes – measures of performativity – rather than the kinds of outcomes the LLEN were being asked to secure. The key work of LLEN was seen to be about building confidence, forming partnerships, building trust, engaging with partners, overcoming an inherently competitive environment. However, these processes did not lend themselves to being measured except in superficial performativity measures (e.g. how many individuals, from what groups of stakeholders attended meetings etc). The verbs used to delineate the role of the LLEN are plan, collaborate, facilitate, link, facilitate and support, strengthen and enhance, monitor and provide advice but, as the LLEN noted, these activities are not best evaluated by quantitative measures.

What seemed to lie behind these concerns was a set of issues relating to the cultural dissonance between the ‘Centre’ and the LLEN. The ‘Centre’ had a historically bureaucratic and audit culture. It tended towards ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches, including standardised reporting formats which were not always alert to the nuances and concerns of LLEN. The LLEN were developing in divergent and often quite opportunistic ways, dealing with local and regional issues which were often quite unlike those in other regions, and were constituted by quite different sets of agencies and impulses. By and large, the slow work of relationship-building was not acknowledged as significant work within the LLEN accountability frameworks, yet it loomed large for LLEN.

The Department field officers and the LLEN executive officers were the front line in this cultural dissonance. Both groups talked of the difficulties they experienced as they negotiated the interface between the Centre and the LLEN. The field officers felt constrained by the requirements of their job, their history within a bureaucratic and audit culture, and their uneasiness about digressing from conventional ways of working in order to support highly differentiated LLEN development. After all, they were employed by the bureaucracy and the demands associated with supporting LLENs transgressed conventional expectations about their roles within the bureaucracy with potential career implications.

Given their emphasis on community building and initiative brokering, the LLEN face a serious challenge in demonstrating their specific contribution to outcomes for young people. In the long term, there may be evidence of increased youth retention and reduced youth unemployment that could be associated with the establishment of LLEN, although it would be hard to establish any direct cause and effect relationship between statistical trends and LLEN. In the short term, documentation of LLEN achievements is more likely to be associated with collaborative community initiatives rather than education and employment outcomes. For LLEN to claim credit for these initiatives runs against the principles of collaboration and partnership and may

undercut relationships between the LLEN and other partners. Yet as Hull (2003) asserts, LLEN cannot lose sight of outcomes because their future depends upon them showing that they are contributing to government expectations and targets. Outcomes for young people are particularly important because they are the lynchpin in government support of LLEN and they are critical in maintaining local support. As she states,

The aim of improving outcomes for young people is what rallies the LLEN Committees and broader communities. It is likely that the maintenance of that commitment and support will rely on the LLENs' ability to focus good will into effective action, and to demonstrate that over time they are making a difference for young people (Hull, 2003, p. 1).

### **Working together: prospects**

As this paper suggests, LLEN constitutes a complex field of policy and practice which can be understood in terms of pluralist and structural conflicts. Yet alongside these day-to-day politics of partnership there are more enduring tensions.

LLEN challenge individuals to work together to address and take responsibility for local issues and concerns. They challenge institutions to work in new ways and to operate as more open networks rather than as closed silos. And they challenge government to establish new relationships with individuals, communities and institutions on a regional basis. The policy of new social partnerships as a means to localise service provision is bearing fruit, but the practice of social partnerships is more complex than the logic permits. This means that the work required to mobilise localised collective action is both harder, more resource-intensive and slower than government accommodates. There is a disjuncture between abstracted policy imperatives and lived processes which must be resourced.

Within their own terms of reference LLEN are recording successes. Yet, when seen within the frames of neo-liberal governance, the LLEN do emerge as an instrument that promotes neo-liberal reforms and generalises neo-liberal rationalities. LLEN encourage individualisation of decision-making and of risk and responsibility taking. Costs of public provision are being carried by volunteers and by paid employees who each feel they are expected to do too much. LLEN work entails individualised and opportunistic networking which prioritises personal qualities over systematic organisational processes. Such ways of working are applauded in the name of flexibility and responsiveness but initiatives are fragile unless they get taken up by more established agencies. There is no back up for LLEN work. If an initiative falls over or if individuals meet an obstacle, the people just move on to new sites. There

is a disjuncture between the warm rhetoric of supporting young people and making a difference, and the actual impact of these initiatives which advance targeted and individualised strategies to support learning and address the risk posed by young people who do not fit the usual patterns of education and training.

Amongst people working within LLEN there is considerable energy and activity. They know they are breaking new ground and acting as a lever for change within formal schooling and its bureaucracy. Yet being a change agent is hard. It means constantly living on your wits, taking risks by breaking out of established codes of practice. It is exciting work but demands relentless imagination, patience and capacity to work beyond one's comfort zone. These individuals sit at the juncture of a new, neo-liberal social redemptionist project, a project that endorses self-responsible management of the self, and a pariah status as outsiders within education and training. The LLEN rhetoric and the reporting regime encourages a concern with proving the achievements of LLEN. This culture of proof goes hand in hand with a competitive edge which is concerned to demonstrate the achievements of 'my LLEN' relative to others. The effect is to set LLEN and their participants as a kind of front line in cultural change but without the supports that other professionals who sit in similar contradictory places experience. For instance school teachers have long held an ambiguous position as agents of the state and as advocates of the disadvantaged. But they have been supported industrially and professionally and have had carefully designed training to confirm their redemptionist commitments and their capacity for licensed autonomy as professionals. The LLEN participants have none of this. No employment security, no access to conceptual and practical resources, just a policy rhetoric that cheers them on.

These are just some of the disjunctures that mark social partnerships. They exist in addition to the simple tensions and everyday politics of interagency working. They are intractable contradictions that sit at the heart of the LLEN initiative. They are unlikely to be resolved without the reconciliation of neo-liberal governance to human need and sustainability.

## **Acknowledgments**

The research on which this paper was based was funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and the National Research and Evaluation Committee. We thank these bodies for their support.

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