

Learning Partnerships: Mindsets, Strategies and Models that Engage Stakeholders

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a three-year study that examined the emerging notion of 'learning partnerships'. As the study of such partnerships is a new research field, no single definition has yet emerged in the literature. However, within an uncertain and rapidly changing global context, two strategic initiatives have been identified that will support individuals, communities and organisations in their transition to a knowledge-based economy whilst building capacity for change and renewal. These two strategies are fostering learning communities/regions/towns and developing learning partnerships between multiple stakeholders. The term 'learning partnership' has appeared in a wide variety of literatures including those of adult learning, management, social science and education. Working papers and in-progress case reports identify a diversity of applications and a range of operational models or configurations that link multiple stakeholders. Learning partnerships have been associated with vocational education and training, innovation and research, lifelong learning, organisational learning and knowledge cultivation. These literatures reveal a paucity of Australian research to explain how multiple stakeholders form and develop these configurations, particularly in the Queensland context.

The purpose of this study was to build deeper understanding of the meaning of a 'learning partnership' in the Australian (and more precisely) the Queensland context. A working definition of a 'learning partnership', adopted as the basis for the research, indicates a strategy designed to foster continuous learning, collaboration, innovation and renewal in response to the demands of the knowledge-based economy, and knowledge and learning societies. The research focused on organisational arrangements in order for the researcher to gain deeper understanding from the key stakeholders in their work environments. Three diverse situations were selected for detailed exploration of their issues, relationships, activities, processes and working knowledge.

With a view to contributing to emerging theory, an organisational case study methodology (Flyberg 2004; Hartley 2004; Merriam 2002) was adopted to identify and explore the nature of the relationships and issues confronting the key stakeholders in three Queensland-based learning partnerships. An interpretive theoretical framework draws on the social theory of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) and 'systems thinking' underpinning general systems theory (Ackoff 1999; Laszlo 2001; Mittleton-Kelly 2003). An interpretivist perspective (Merriam 2002) influenced the case study research strategy and guided data collection, analysis and reporting. These findings are reported as three separate in-progress models to address the interrelated research questions. The case reports explain complex and inter-connected organisational arrangements — evolving, adapting and responding to internal and external tensions. While there is considerable activity that could be regarded as representing learning partnerships, there is no cohesive policy framework to support such partnerships, and much ambiguity, 'muddy' definitions and unclear terminology.

The study shows that like ‘herding cats’, coordinating and managing the interrelationships at the organisational intersection take time, resources, vision, processes for interaction, individual willingness and in-kind support. In the emerging ‘models’, there are opportunities for linking disparate groups to cross-fertilise ideas, working knowledge and information — ‘intellectual horsepower’ and synergies of interrelationships that enable multiple stakeholders to build leverage from joint projects for mutual benefit. There is also the potential to cultivate a knowledge and learning ecosystem (a fertile compost heap for knowledge generation and an innovative learning system). Such configurations may also derail, realign or stagnate. The paper proposes conceptual models as particularly useful in interpreting the dynamics of ‘shifting systems’.

On the basis of this research in ‘learning partnerships’, it would appear that a more robust or resilient paradigm is emerging with interconnected, blurred boundaries and much ‘talking and thinking’ about more sustainable futures. However, the case reports show that Queensland has not yet prepared integrated policies for the knowledge and learning age. Key stakeholders are finding it ‘hard work’ to develop cohesive strategies and new organisational models for the 21st century. To recap, the abstract has outlined the focus of the research and the case study methodology. A brief literature review introduces the contemporary context of ‘shifting systems’ which is a constant backdrop for the paper.

Keywords

Learning partnerships, sustainability, knowledge and learning age, knowledge-based economy, lifelong learning, knowledge and learning ecosystems, shifting systems

Introduction: The emerging 21st century — an Australian context

“We can already see the future taking shape. But I believe that the future will turn in unexpected ways. The greatest changes are still ahead of us. The society of 2030 will be very different from today’s society and bear little resemblance to that predicted by today’s futurists... The central feature of the next society will be new institutions, theories, ideologies, and problems.”
(Drucker 2004, p. 3).

With Drucker’s comments in mind, a brief literature review sets the scene from an Australian context where stakeholders are making preparations for the changing economy and society — as systems shift, adapt, learn and realign. Nations like Australia are making preparations for transitions; stakeholders are ‘talking and thinking’ about the impact of a globally competitive knowledge-based economy; and considering future sustainability for organisations, communities, regions and towns. As conversations about lifelong learning, skills development and innovation unfold (Kearns 2004a), Australia is facing complex challenges: increasing longevity and rising welfare costs; an ageing workforce and the anticipated exit of experienced skilled workers and senior managers as the ‘baby-boom’ generation reaches retirement age; changing demographics of regions/towns; a declining birth rate and the shrinking size of the workforce with skills shortages in some industries (see discussion in Kearns 2004a; Rolland 2004; Selby Smith and Ferrier 2002). For many workers, there are more work pressures and longer hours. However, a large section of the workforce is employed in casual/temporary jobs with uncertain career pathways (Buchanan et al. 2001).

In the resource-based economy, Australia built wealth from wool, wheat, gold, coal, steel and labour. In Australia’s robust domestic economy, there are continuing employment opportunities in industrial-

manufacturing industries, engineering, mining and resource exploration, building construction, service and not-for-profit sectors, rural production, tourism, retail, food processing, hospitality services, the professions and personal services, government sector, information communication, small business development and the tertiary sector (see discussion in Maglen 2002). Global competition and the take-up of new technologies means production systems and work environments are constantly changing. Email, mobile phone technologies, e-commerce transactions, broadband Internet installation and interactive media have changed the way business and government deal with clients.

In this rapidly changing context (see discussion in Productivity Commission 2003), concerns have been raised about inclusion and social cohesion (Kearns 2004b). Unequal access to information communication technologies and lifelong learning opportunities (Selby Smith and Ferrier 2002) may extend the gap between the 'learning rich' and 'learning poor' (Kearns et al. 1999); and the changing pattern of wealth distribution could widen the gap between the 'haves and have nots' (Buchanan 2002). In this decade, government leaders, scientists and rural producers contend with climate change (El Niño), weed management, salinity, water shortages and periods of long drought (see discussion in ANTA 2003). It seems likely that debates will continue about greenhouse gas emissions and uranium mining. Thus, global competition, new technologies, skills shortages, changing workforce demographics, and complex environmental issues are being discussed in relation to future sustainability.

As the economy shifts, organisations are generating wealth from creative resources (Florida 2004) (media, film, television, video games), innovative design and intellectual property assets (patents, copyrights). In these fields, Australia has the capacity to draw on its rich diversity of its multicultural origins, and our Indigenous cultural heritage and traditions. When reporting our social capital, stakeholders could include the 'fair go' attitude, sporting achievements, the spirit of volunteerism (recognised in the Sydney Olympics effort), and human compassion (extended to neighbours in the aftermath of the tsunami). In addition, when reporting natural capital, indicators could include the diversity of ecosystems (Great Barrier Reef, deserts, rainforests and urban landscapes), Australia's natural beauty, the variety of plants, animals, minerals, energy resources and sunlight (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). Intellectual capital assets could include entrepreneurial spirit, workforce skills and knowledge, creative talent, the collective capacity for innovation and cooperative research, and willingness of individuals to contribute to constructive debates and meta-conversations (evidenced in the 'Engaging Communities' conference agenda).

With recent 'free trade' negotiations, there appear to be opportunities for new jobs and new markets. At the same time, there is the potential for redundancies and under-employment as jobs in manufacturing and information communication industries may be relocated off-shore, and the take-up of innovative technologies impact on work environments and production systems. From an alternative position, stakeholders could also point out the frequent reporting in the media about unfair treatment, domestic violence, suicide, youth alienation, drug abuse, disengagement, obesity, child abuse, rising household debts and credit card spending. In this changing economic and social context, it seems future employability depends on organisational capacity (and individual ability) to reskill, continuously learn and adapt. That also means implementing strategies to foster inclusion, collaboration, innovation, and renewal (Kearns 2004a) — to prepare comprehensive strategies for transitions.

As Australia prepares for the globally competitive knowledge economy, concerns have been raised about the 'brain drain' to overseas organisations, low investments in research and development (Wood 2003), the rapid exit of experienced-skilled workers this decade, and a paucity of cohesive policies to prepare for the knowledge and learning age (Kearns 2004a). In recent times, federal and state governments have initiated a range of initiatives — such as the federal government *Crossroads* higher education review (Nelson 2002), and Queensland's Smart State policy. Under the ANTA frameworks, the national vocational education and competencies agenda has promoted opportunities for work-based learning, skilling and training (ANTA 2003).

While policy debates and restructuring continue, the different federal/state/territory/local jurisdictions and separate government portfolios have initiated numerous ways to prepare for the knowledge economy and societies. For example: investment in infrastructure and communication technology (broadband Internet access); public–private research and development projects (biotechnology, nanotechnology and innovation); national consultations/forums about the future workplace training needs; state-wide curriculum reviews; the promotion of vocational training/skilling; pilot programs and community renewal projects. However, unless cohesive strategies are advanced, Kearns warns that there is a risk of Australia being left behind in the knowledge and learning age (Kearns 2004a, 2004b; Wood 2003). Whilst there are social, environmental and economic imperatives to foster an inclusive and innovative learning society, Australia has not yet developed cohesive and comprehensive policy frameworks to foster lifelong learning for all, in the 21st century context (see discussion in Kearns 2004a).

To summarise, the previous discussion has established the context for learning together and working together. The next sections discuss how nations (and states) are developing strategic initiatives and comprehensive policies — to foster innovation, organisational learning, reskilling, community learning, and lifelong learning — for sustainable economic development, social well being and future employability.

The global knowledge economy: Catalysts and driving forces

From an international research context, the emerging economy and society have been described as the 'knowledge society' and 'learning nation' (Faris 2001, 2003), 'learning cities' (Longworth 1999), the knowledge economy of cities and regions (Cooke 2002; Dvir and Pasher 2004; OECD 2001), the 'new learning economy' (OECD 2001), the New Economy (Cooke 2002), and the 'next society' (Drucker 2004). Florida argues that we are witnessing economic and social transformation with 'the rise of the creative class' (Florida 2004). Whilst the future is uncertain, from a management perspective, Drucker (2004) believes that technology, innovation and knowledge have contributed to the driving forces of the New Economy. "This transformation is the shift to an economic system based on human creativity" (Florida 2004, p. 15), and from a North American perspective, "our economy is moving from an older corporate-centred system defined by large companies to a more people-driven one" and "new forms of economic infrastructure" have evolved (Florida 2004, p. 15).

From a global perspective, it appears there are several complex driving forces which are contributing to the rapid pace of social and economic change. World leaders are preparing to discuss global concerns about international terrorism, the control of AIDS, outbreaks of bird 'flu, global climate change, poverty, and the uneven distribution of wealth between rich and poor nations (evidenced in the G8 2005 Summit discussions).

Stakeholders are also considering interrelated 'big picture' catalysts and driving forces of the new economy, which include:

- globally competitive markets, international business interactivity and the demand for innovative solutions or customised products (ANTA 2003; Cooke 2002; Giddens 2001)
- the rapid expansion of trans-disciplinary knowledge and collective learning (Faris 2001, 2003) that contribute to knowledge obsolescence and the shorter 'shelf life' of knowledge and skills
- the recognition and valuing of applied and interactive knowledge — working knowledge and 'know-how' in organisations and networks (Barnett 2000; Davenport and Prusak 1998) — and the capacity for institutions to link these networks across national borders
- the promotion of lifelong learning in communities (Faris 2001; Kearns et al. 1999; Longworth 1999), and collaborative learning environments for sharing, exchanging and integrating knowledge, such as 'communities of practice' (Wenger et al. 2002) and collaborative online learning environments
- technological advancements that are enhanced by interactive information communication technologies and web-based information systems which contribute to the exchange of information and new knowledge across organisational boundaries.

To summarise, the previous discussion suggests there are global, social, demographic, environmental and economic catalysts that point to the emerging knowledge economy and society (Kearns 2004a; Kearns et al. 1999) – the knowledge and learning age. As individual learning, and organisational learning and innovation seems crucial to economic performance, the emerging economy is also referred to as the 'new learning economy' of cities and regions (OECD 2001). To prepare, it means finding ways to foster lifelong learning, organisational learning, innovation, creativity and community engagement. It also means developing strategies to build synergies from inter-relationships and 'intangibles' (Kaufmann and Schneider 2004), and social capital (Kearns 2004b). In short, decision-makers are considering how to encourage individual capacity to learn and unlearn — to be prepared to continuously learn, relearn, reskill and adapt.

Building capacity for lifelong learning, innovation and renewal

Within Australia's different state/territory, local and federal government jurisdictions, stakeholders (for example, economists, educators, policy-advisers, not-for-profit organisations, industry and community leaders) are considering how to:

- foster lifelong learning, cooperative research and innovation for competitive advantage
- prepare the next generation for uncertain times
- support existing workers to reskill and develop skills for future employability
- help all Australians participate in the knowledge and learning age
- encourage organisations and business sectors to renew, reposition and innovate
- build economic resilience and social cohesion across communities, regions and towns, while retaining the traditions and cultures of the past
- prepare for global competition and technological changes as the driving forces of the knowledge economy impact on industries, jobs and markets.

(See discussion in Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services Secretariat 2003; Buchanan 2002; Kearns 2004a, 2004b; Maglen 2002; Marginson 2001; Rolland 2004; Selby Smith and Ferrier 2002; Wood 2003.)

From the international scene, to build capacity, Canada is fostering lifelong learning, 'learning communities' and 'learning partnerships' (Faris 2003), and European Union countries (including the United Kingdom) are developing lifelong learning partnership strategies and 'learning regions/cities' to prepare for the globally competitive knowledge-based economy in the present decade (Longworth 1999, 2002; Wallis and Stuart, 2004). In the context of restructuring, European steel industries have adopted 'partnership-based approaches to learning' (Wallis and Stuart 2004). Similar strategies have been reported from Australian communities (Kearns 2002), institutions and industries (Ferrier et al. 2002; Kearns et al. 1999; Reghenzani 2002).

Two significant strategic initiatives have been identified which will support individuals, communities and organisations in their transition to a knowledge-based economy and society whilst building capacity for innovation and renewal (Costley 2001; Faris 2003; Kearns 2004a; Kearns et al. 1999; Longworth 2002; Por 2001; Wallis and Stuart 2004). These strategies are: (i) fostering learning communities/shires/regions/ towns and cities; and (ii) forming and developing learning partnerships between multiple stakeholders. (For further explanation of the concept of 'learning communities/regions/towns', see Faris 2003; Kearns 2002, 2004a; Longworth 1999, 2002.) Given the conference limitations, this paper now focuses on 'learning partnerships'. A *working definition* of a 'learning partnership' adopted as a basis for the research indicates a strategy designed to foster continuous learning, collaboration, innovation and renewal, in response to the demands of the knowledge-based economy and knowledge and learning societies (Peirce 2004a, 2004b).

Operational models and applications of 'learning partnerships'

In the Australian context, working papers and emerging case reports identify a diversity of applications and a range of operational models and configurations that interconnect multiple stakeholders in partnerships (Kearns 2004a; Smith 2002). Learning partnerships have been associated with skilling, Indigenous cultural learning, vocational education and training, innovation and research, lifelong learning, organisational learning and knowledge cultivation (Peirce 2004b; Reghenzani 2002; Smith 2002). Contemporary Australian literature explains at least six emerging models and configurations:

- work-based learning partnerships (Balatti 2001; Boud 2001; Evans 2002)
- community/education/training/industry and enterprise partnerships (ACTSS — Alliance of Charters Towers State Schools 2001; Shimeld 2002)
- Indigenous community enterprise and training partnerships (Cape York Partnerships 2000; Smith 2002)
- Industry/technology cluster and cooperative research centre with partnerships that link technical and further education, higher education and industry research sectors (Ferrier et al. 2002)
- a cooperative campus model where links are forming across training, higher education, industry and enterprise, with public–private partnership arrangements (Queensland Government 2003)
- higher education–community–industry–government and research partnerships with links forming across regions, government departments, professional associations and industry groups (Caboolture Community Campus 2002; Reghenzani 2002; Thomas 2003).

To summarise, working papers and in-progress case reports mention how multiple stakeholders are forming links, sharing ideas and working knowledge within learning partnership configurations. In the Australian

context, the diversity of operational models suggests a growing momentum to form such partnerships (see discussion in Kearns 2004a). However, there is a paucity of research to inform those who may be considering ways to develop learning partnerships, and how multiple stakeholders form inter-connected configurations, particularly in the Queensland context. (The next section reports 'in-progress' models.)

Reporting three 'in progress' models (Queensland cases)

Case study methodology

On the basis of the working definition, three diverse situations were selected for detailed exploration of their issues, relationships, activities, processes and working knowledge. Organisational case studies (Flyberg 2004; Hartley 2004; Merriam 2002) of three 'in progress' models allowed the interpretivist researcher to gain deep understanding of the complexity, nuances and dynamics as multiple stakeholders form interconnections and interact. Within the separate case studies (from May to December 2004), data collection methods included observations, informal meetings, site visits by the researcher, synergetic focus groups, semi-structured interviews, diary notes, researcher memos, and documents (company reports, progress reports to funding bodies, and working documents). From these multiple data sources, the researcher was able to assemble three case files. The inductive process for within-case analysis for the case reports, and later, cross-case analysis, integrated as a form of constant comparison technique (Hartley 2004; Merriam 2002), was used as a basis for presenting findings.

As exploratory research in a nascent field, multiple organisational case studies were guided by three inter-connected research questions. [As an illustration, to show the cross-section of key stakeholders who contributed to synergetic focus groups and interviews, individual participants included: business leaders, company directors, portfolio workers, managers of registered training organisations, senior state government representatives, industry/employer representatives, public sector policy advisers, program coordinators, administrators, higher education representatives, adult community learning facilitators, volunteers in board governance roles, and community-based volunteers. Some of these individuals drew on working knowledge from combined roles — as a volunteer in governance and as a portfolio worker, or as a government representative and company director.] The next section outlines three snapshots of the complexity of partnerships, and illustrates the interrelationships at the organisational intersection — as multiple stakeholders are 'learning together and working together' in the establishment of partnership strategies. The 'snapshots' include excerpts and quotes from the separate case files.

Case A: Cooperative campus: public/private partnerships, 'strategic cooperative alliances to support partnerships for learning', and strategic partnership visions

According to key stakeholders, much of the passion for incubating the original concept can be traced to the 'heads and hearts' of founding fathers (visionary leaders from industry and state government) who formed a strategic partnership agreement in 1994, to work together across sectors. In the formation of the concept, the state government and industry became joint shareholders (50/50 shares) in a company that oversees the strategic direction of the cooperative campus, as a legal entity in the corporate governance. The board of directors share public accountability and fiduciary responsibility (under Australian company legislation). Guided by the strategic vision, a CEO has managed the establishment of the strategic partnership concept and the interrelationships at the cooperative campus (with a 'memorandum of understanding' between the key stakeholders).

Project funding to renovate buildings and establish this co-operative campus infrastructure was initially financed through state government investment, with much in-kind support, entrepreneurial investment and individual donations from industry stakeholders during the establishment stage. The company that oversees operations is not a registered training organisation; however, it facilitates joint innovative projects, incubates ideas and has been building a reputation as a 'one-stop shop' for project management referrals, industry-focused training, employment contacts, and customer/supplier networks. The cooperative campus is located in a metropolitan industrial suburb where core activities at this site include the provision of industry-related training and skills development programs with many mature age workers, apprentices and trainees accessing the 'centre' facilities. Although the centre acts to facilitate, broker and project manage; registered training organisations deliver the training — for example, workplace health and safety training, apprenticeship training and work skills. At this site, the core training providers and numerous independent tenants operate separate businesses (some with external offices), and this adds to the complexity of inter-relationships and links in this configuration.

As the cooperative campus model moves from the establishment to implementation stages, it is evolving and changing, but the original concept of strategic partnership remains. The board comprised of industry, employer and government stakeholders has reviewed the strategic direction, and it has recently facilitated a strategic agreement to initiate joint projects and develop niche markets — cooperating to compete. According to key stakeholders, 'much learning has happened' as the concept was established. Directors and senior managers have confronted complex interrelated issues when developing partnerships between the public and private sectors. With changes to corporate governance legislation, directors on the board are mindful of fiduciary obligations and risk management issues. It is not easy working together — 'you learn from herding cats' — and it is 'hard work' managing the interrelationships — 'you learn from the experience'. During its evolutionary development as board members change, the 'documentation' and 'corporate memory' of the place is not easily transferred, and there have been some misunderstandings about the original concept. In the strategic cooperative alliances (also referred to as strategic partnerships) there are emerging opportunities: to build leverage from the 'intellectual horsepower' and trusting relationships, to share working knowledge and ideas in the 'community of practice', and fast access to customer/supplier networks. Key stakeholders note that there is the ability

to develop collective responses and pilot programs in public–private partnerships and ‘cooperative strategic alliances to support partnerships for learning’.

Some of the interrelated issues that key stakeholders have confronted: purchasing the site, forming the company to oversee the strategic partnership, legal processes; establishing the concept and building commitment; learning from the experience in the hard work as the public–private partnership evolves; unclear expectations and changes in representation on the board (loss of corporate memory); having processes to identify potential conflicts of interest; negotiating the complexity of ‘working together’ and the slowness of the bureaucracy (in decision-making); developing a long-term agreement between the key stakeholders; income generation (reviewing the cost-recovery model); initiating joint projects and pilot programs; managing the inter-relationships and the different stakeholder interests, reviewing progress and replanning; managing risks in the changing context of corporate governance legislation.

Interconnections and links: In this model links have formed across the sectors: government, industry, ‘big business’, unions, registered training organisations (public and private), sole traders, employer organisations, local industry groups, suppliers in the domestic market, and research centres. However, according to key stakeholders, the establishment stage has been ‘like the gestation of an elephant’, and ‘you learn from herding cats’. It has been hard work managing the interrelationships. Key stakeholders agree that it has not been easy to develop cohesive strategies for mutual benefit.

Case B: Strategic partnerships: a MOU and local ‘steering committee’, industry cluster networks with an ‘in progress’ regional partnership model (evolving as a regional forum)

Since 2002, with local government seed funding, there has been a formal ‘memorandum of understanding’ to develop a strategic partnership — a mutual commitment from industry/enterprise/business, local government and the state government stakeholders. The evolving model has been overseen by a local steering committee that has involved multiple stakeholders (with fiduciary responsibility overseen by an auspicing body). Although the regional partnership strategy to develop a regional forum is not yet clearly defined (and was still being discussed), individual stakeholders describe the ‘in-progress model’ as supporting joint initiatives and local promotional strategies — with a whole-region focus. From individual stakeholder perspectives, it means fostering:

- a regional forum that is responsive and proactively encouraging local economic development, industry productivity, new export markets, business development and job creation through localised industry clustering projects and local industry networks
- a ‘civic engagement’ model that enables learning pathways — through schooling, VET (vocational education and training), technical and further education, and higher education — where the relationships through the steering committee have fostered links across the wider community, government organisations, education sectors and industry networks (and the economic development strategy has also supported ‘school–industry–community clusters’, school-to-work prevocational programs, career education and employment opportunities)

- interconnecting with a whole-region focus to foster economic development and community sustainability (liveability, industry regeneration and environmental sustainability)
- a conduit — working together at ‘our table’ where multiple stakeholders share ideas, network, collaborate and exchange information across the invisible structures of government, industry, academia, vocational training and community sectors.

The ‘steering committee to develop the strategy’ has involved the ‘right people and personalities’ who are working together at the ‘right level’ — with support from committed bureaucrats and business people who are willing to ‘make it happen’. The committee has mutually agreed long-term aims; however, it has also been responding to program objectives and balancing the priorities of multiple stakeholders (within timelines negotiated in short-term grant applications). With the support from a project coordinator and part-time administration officer, the steering committee meetings and local forums/expos have become a conduit for information, introductions to key contacts, and a place for sharing ideas across sectors (joint marketing, publicity opportunities, local newsletter articles).

Issues that key stakeholders have confronted in the establishment stage: seed funds but a lack of long-term funding for working together across sectors; unclear definitions and ambiguous terminology; finding ways to report the in-kind effort of volunteers and the intangible benefits/outcomes; preparing reports within funding grant timelines; promoting the agreed aims and building commitment to the economic development and community development strategies; organising large public forums/consultations; coordinating the different agendas/interests of those with the long-term expectations and individuals who seek short-term objectives; the need for project coordination and administrative support (for busy volunteers who work on the steering committee projects); attending regular meeting of the steering committee; developing joint projects and local research to inform the stakeholders; maintaining existing projects and refocusing as a regional forum while establishing a local governance structure; regular reporting and ongoing grant applications.

Interconnections and links: During the establishment stage, the activities and processes that link multiple stakeholders include — local consultations, regular monthly steering committee meetings, sub-committee discussions, facilitated forums (involving wider community, education, government and industry sectors), trade expos, industry cluster seminars and discussion groups (organised by the steering committee). These activities, workshops, consultations and forums have enabled key players to interact and network. For example, public sector managers, educators, researchers, community leaders, media representatives, local politicians, sole traders, service sector managers and industry champions coming together in local consultations/expos. To date, the steering committee to develop the strategy has been sufficiently flexible in its structure to encourage the participation of multiple stakeholders such as civic entrepreneurs, representatives from education/training cluster, business managers, local business leaders, public sector managers (local, state and federal government representatives), community service organisations and individuals who offer in-kind support and voluntary commitment. In 2005, as the proposed regional forum is formed with an autonomous governance structure, the mix of representative stakeholders may change (with federal government funding for regional partnerships and local industry cluster networks).

Case C: Forming collaborative learning partnerships and strategic partnership approaches to support adult learning, community-based learning and lifelong learning opportunities

The learning partnerships in this emerging model are being facilitated by the board of a peak body that promotes lifelong learning, adult community learning opportunities and collaborative partnership approaches. Key stakeholders on the executive committee have been seeking a strategic partnership with the state government, however, no formal agreements have been negotiated. The peak body is reaching out to facilitate internal, external, temporary and ongoing collaborative partnership arrangements. Although there appear to be opportunities through community engagement initiatives, the key stakeholders point out the paucity of government funds for the adult/community learning sector, and the lack of a cohesive policy framework to implement the broad objectives of lifelong learning and adult community learning in Queensland. (Key stakeholders contend the present Queensland policies 'privilege' accredited training, skilling and formal learning, and do not support the wide range of informal, non-formal, and community-based adult learning programs.)

The adult community learning sector (also referred to as adult community education/ACE) has formed links with the government sector through joint community training initiatives and joint projects such as the celebrations for Adult Learners Week in Queensland. Individual members continue to build relationships with other peak bodies, like-minded non-government organisations, and the government sector in a 'working together' approach. The activities and processes, which suggest learning partnerships are being formed, include: 'round table discussions', collaboration across organisations to develop self-reporting tools (for program reporting/evaluation), strategic planning discussions with multiple stakeholders, inter-organisational knowledge sharing, suggestions for joint research proposals, and collective policy advocacy to foster lifelong learning. In this process, the peak body relies on the busy volunteers who are also involved in external projects (and careers); key stakeholders point out there is a risk of 'burnout' (or withdrawal) as individual volunteers expressed the need for a work/life/community/career balance, and the frustrations of policy advocacy — 'hard work'.

As an incorporated body, the board meets its obligations under legislation (Australian Business Number, regular meetings of the board of directors, agreed constitution, public accountability, audited reports, annual general meeting process, review of constitution and membership applications). The peak body has reciprocal membership with like-minded organisations and has developed links to self-help groups, an Australia-wide network of adult learning professionals, a 'community of practice' for adult community practitioners, and other peak bodies in the non-government sector. The peak body facilitates services for members/ member organisations (in a collaborative partnership approach). It is not a registered training organisation; however, it has established informal partnership arrangements and has formed links with another community-based registered training organisation for the delivery of accredited short courses and community-focused training programs. One such program has focused on sustainability, risk management and income/grant application writing, so the program has enabled like-minded organisations to reach out and link (to spread the benefits across the wider community). In these activities, the peak body relies on in-kind support and voluntary effort and has not secured long-term funds from government to support its policy objectives. With common concerns about public liability

insurance costs and risk management, the governance committee has negotiated with an insurance broker to offer a 'group insurance scheme' that members can access.

Issues the key stakeholders are confronting: the lack of an integrated policy framework, and mindsets of bureaucrats who do not support collaborative partnerships; the 'selective drip-feeding of programs' and 'drive-by funding' (one-off, and not supporting ongoing implementation, maintenance and development); the turnover in public sector managers; building relationships across the sectors and the potential for conflicts of interest; the competitive tendering market and the potential for 'bidding wars' between community organisations; unclear definitions/terminology and the need to find a 'common language' to link disparate groups; finding ways to report/evaluate the outcomes of adult community learning programs; changing group interrelationships with new members in governance.

Interconnections and loose links: The governance committee is comprised of a group of volunteers with maturity and experience from a wide range of work environments. The diversity of members who have contributed to workshops and 'learning conversations' have included local government administrators, public sector managers, government policy advisers, facilitators of lifelong learning programs, small business operators, managers of community adult learning programs, trainers and professional teachers, volunteer tutors, university academics, project managers in 'community renewal' and community development consultants; and it has formed web-based links across the community of practitioners (online-links to publications, policy discussion papers, research reports).

To summarise, the separate case snapshots explain complex and interconnected organisational arrangements as in-progress models — evolving, adapting and responding to internal and external tensions. While there is considerable activity which could be regarded as representing learning partnerships, there is no cohesive policy framework to support such partnerships, and much ambiguity, 'muddy' definitions and unclear terminology. In these interconnected arrangements, it appears that a new breed of knowledge-worker is emerging — linking, networking, interacting, exchanging — to work across organisational intersections.

Some lessons from the establishment stage of 'learning partnerships' (in Queensland)

The case reports from Queensland show unique configurations which serve different functions. Although it is not intended to generalise from three in-progress models, for those policy makers and practitioners who may be considering forming learning partnerships, the cross-case analysis has identified several activities and processes that appear to contribute to the establishment stage, and so are worthwhile considering.

Activities and processes that have contributed to the early establishment stage

- seed funding and investment from all parties to encourage the strategic partnership approach
- formulation of agreed goals (memorandum of understanding or strategic partnership agreement)
- fostering a deliberate strategy to link, interconnect, interact and share ideas
- recognising the different ideologies and stakeholder interests (at the negotiating table)
- administrative support and ongoing funds to coordinate the 'working together' activities
- planning sufficient flexibility in the structure to review and refocus as the strategic partnership evolves

- having agreed processes for open dialogue, feedback, questioning, review, and reflection
- collaborative planning activities to engage a mix of key stakeholders (strength in the diversity)
- facilitating cooperative strategic planning discussions and having processes to declare potential conflicts of interest (and where interest and altruism lies)
- agreeing to cooperative processes for partnership building (principles of operation, pre-nuptial agreement, group problem-solving and review) — to manage interrelationships and conflicts
- building the commitment of individuals who are willing to ‘make it happen’ and involving key stakeholders with the ‘right attitude’, ‘at the right level’ in the decision-making process (entrepreneurs and champions)
- initiating risk management strategies while being mindful of fiduciary responsibilities in governance roles
- recognising the potential mutual benefits from ‘intellectual horsepower’, in-kind support and voluntary effort (and finding ways to report intangibles and wider community benefits)
- promoting short-term objectives and long-term aims, and triple bottom line outcomes for mutual benefits (value-adding, leverage to extend projects, and fostering social capital benefits)
- encouraging trusting relationships and entrepreneurial thinking (leverage from intellectual horsepower)
- organising social activities to engage multiple stakeholders in relationship building and open dialogue (including senior bureaucrats, practitioners and industry champions)
- being prepared to learn together and work together in the evolutionary development — individual goodwill — and being aware of the ambiguity and potential risks (personal and professional).

These topics have not been prioritised, and the separate case reports show the complexity of interrelated issues that may enable new initiatives to develop, or have the potential to constrain future sustainability, and/or lead to burnout of individuals (or withdrawal). Although strategic partnerships are being developed, several key stakeholders have raised concerns in relation to the lack of an integrated policy framework to support the implementation of broad lifelong learning goals, and the paucity of long-term funding to support community-focused partnerships (Case A, Case B). Stakeholder perspectives are now discussed.

Discussing the complex interrelated issues that confront key stakeholders

It is not easy to build capacity for change and renewal. In Case A, the establishment of the cooperative strategic alliance and public–private partnership concept has been described as like ‘herding cats’ and it has been ‘hard work’, where ‘the wheels have turned slowly’ ... “because overarching interests of the key strategic partners have not been congruent” (Case A, synergetic focus group discussion, 17 June 2004).

“It’s been like the gestation period of an elephant – lots of dust and noise and trumpeting – takes ages to produce a result...”. (Case A: Key stakeholders in synergetic focus group, 17 June 2004)

The complex interdependencies are explained in these remarks from a board director who points to potential risks when a new member enters an established partnership arrangement:

“You can’t go to the local uni or TAFE and do a course in ‘partnering’ easily, and often they fall to pieces because even though the goal might be great, people can’t accommodate the issues that you have to deal with along the way to make it work... and (you) need some skills [like] negotiation and compromise.” (Case A: Interview with key stakeholder, 30 June 2004).

This also raises issues in relation to selection, preparation, succession planning and transfer of 'corporate memory and documentation' in strategic partnerships, when individual board members transfer or withdraw.

In the discussion about unsuccessful partnership efforts with the public sector (Case C), key stakeholders from the adult community learning sector (Case C), believed a 'mindshift' was needed:

"That certainly would be one of the key ones because when the traditional model that we've discussed is the business type model - that government has with anyone outside government, which is time-constrained and output conditioned - that's the entire way in which they have any sense of dialogue."
(Case C: Synergetic focus group on 3 August 2004)

"So I'm hoping there's going to be a big mindshift... big paradigm shift ... in a sense. When suddenly there's a collective 'ah, ah' from over in George Street and things are a little bit different. But I suspect that is going to be a few years away yet". (Case C: Synergetic focus group, 3 August 2004)

The difficulty of mindshifts and managing the complexity of changes were also raised by a senior bureaucrat who explained that it means finding new ways and moving from:

"the sort-of traditional western 50's hierarchical style management system to a loose collaborative model where nobody is the boss and everyone sort of works with everybody else and they come together and then they move off and they come together and move off, according to the need — is quite a difficult shift." (Semi-structured interview with key stakeholder, Case A, 30 June 2004)

When discussing community sustainability, it was suggested that fresh approaches are needed to work together as a whole region — 'triple bottom line' thinking — as illustrated in these remarks

"because we live in a world which has largely been based on individuality, and that sort of thing which has been emphasised. And yet nobody can live really as an individual and independently without masses of interdependence ... that 'inter-dependence' is necessary...I mean, you've got services; you've got shopping and you've got childcare... everything is a whole 'inter-dependency' yet you think you're living an independent life." (Case B: Interview with long-serving 'steering committee' member, 3 August 2004)

During data collection, key stakeholders have mentioned emerging challenges and discussed potential problems in relation to long-term funding and the ongoing support for volunteers in governance positions. In 'future a major problem' (Case B) relates to the 'level of volunteerism and maintaining the same level of volunteerism from business/industry stakeholders' (Case B: Synergetic focus group on 1 July 2004). An industry/business representative believes:

"and this is where the Government is going to have a real big shock soon, because all of a sudden (they'll see it initially at 'meals-on-wheels' level I reckon). But it's going to come down to organisations like [Case B committee] where, if we don't get business-volunteerism to a certain level, the Government will have to start paying big-dollars for employees that I don't think will be as 'hands-on' or as 'switched-on' possibly because they're not entrepreneurial. And for that reason some organisations are going to have problems. And it's going to cost the Government a lot of money to keep these efficiencies they have through these Bodies. [If] the volunteerism doesn't continue at the

same level, it's going to cost the Government big money.” (Case B, Interview with key stakeholder on 13 August 04)

Similar concerns were discussed in the synergetic focus group in Case C, in relation to the lack of government funds and resources to support the voluntary effort and collaborative partnership initiatives.

The ‘mutual benefits’, ‘intangibles’, ‘value-adding’, ‘voluntary donations’ and ‘in-kind support’ were identified as interrelated issues in relation to performance measurement and reporting of outcomes (Case B), and program reporting (Case B, Case C). For example, it is difficult to report ‘social capital’ outcomes and how collaborative partnerships can ‘build leverage for wider community benefit’ and sustainability (Case C discussion on 3 August 2004, and individual stakeholder interviews). Similarly, in Case B, stakeholders have noted the intangible contributions to the steering committee such as donations of individual expertise and knowledge, links to industry networks and fast access to key players, voluntary effort and in-kind donations, and the ability to build leverage from joint projects (to lift the standard and extend projects) by not duplicating and working together. When reporting outcomes in Case B, the key stakeholders have documented a total dollar amount for intangibles and in-kind donations in reports to funding bodies in 2004. Similarly, in the strategic partnership in Case A, there is the potential to value-add for joint projects, and emerging opportunities from the interrelationships — to build leverage from the ‘intellectual horsepower’ of the ‘whole’ for mutual benefit (Case A: Key stakeholder interview on 19 October 2004).

When forming collaborative learning partnerships, it is difficult to measure outcomes and achievements, and the group in Case C agreed it was:

“...very hard area in which to begin to map where that rippling of networking processes goes on, and is in fact a very, very key part of the success of long-term partnerships”. (Case C: Synergetic focus group with key stakeholders on 3 August 2004)

In the discussion in Case C, adult community learning/ACE sector stakeholders also raised the issue of ‘power relationships’ that are often implicit in partnerships:

“... we are often disempowered because we feel we are very small entities, swimming against a very strong tide that is dominated by say a VET agenda and competency-based training agenda, and a big-end-of-town agenda, yet collectively we're not small.” (Focus group, Case C, 3 August 2004)

When developing funding proposals for collaborative projects, a common concern was ambiguous terminology and unclear definitions (Case B, Case C). For example, although the focus group in Case C endorsed the working definition of a learning partnership, the issue of ‘muddy’ terminology is illustrated in these remarks:

“I think you have to sign up and it is back to the beginning — whether we use the word ‘learning partnership’ or we use the word ‘learning community’ — you actually have got to say, what are the core criteria or values that we're talking about here, so you get your definition.” (Case C: Synergetic focus group with key stakeholders on 3 August 2004)

In Case C, the key stakeholders discussed the need to build a knowledge-base and proposed joint research projects (Case C discussion on 3 August 2004) to support community-based initiatives. The gaps in

Queensland policy frameworks (Case C) and the need to find a 'common language' for adult community learning and lifelong learning, point to the complexity of emerging challenges:

“And that brings us right into the realm of cognitive psychology because, if people aren't actually sharing the conceptual stuff cognitively, then their growth in terms of ideas and innovations doesn't happen. They're too busy trying to deal with the dynamics of 'what do we really mean here' all the time...”. (Case C: Synergetic focus group with key stakeholders on 3 August 2004)

The case reports show that much learning is happening as the strategic partnership models evolve — individual, workplace, inter-organisational and group learning. Some of the activities/processes that have facilitated cross-sector interactions have included strategic planning meetings, industry/community consultations, seminars, round-table discussions, learning conversations, industry cluster network gatherings, regular face-to-face meetings, submissions for pilot programs, the sharing of working knowledge in the development of joint research proposals, proposing collaborative responses to consultations, and cross-sector collaboration in grant applications and proposals for innovative projects.

'Systems thinking': Meta-issues and emerging challenges

From a 'systems thinking' perspective, the cross-case analysis identified meta-issues and emerging challenges that can be categorised around five main themes — 5 P's:

- Processes and structures
- Preparation and replacement
- Performance measurement, reporting 'intangibles' and outcomes
- People, personalities and potential risks
- Policy frameworks — funding, terminology and definitions.

Rather than forming generalisations from the three case reports (Flyberg 2004), the above topics could be starting points for critical debates and deeper conversations about the meaning of learning partnerships in the 21st century Australian context. For example, as organisations prepare for the retirement of the 'baby boomer' generation, an emerging challenge relates to preparation for new entrants and succession planning to support new members who join well established boards. That means finding 'the right people and the right personalities' (comments in Case B), while being mindful of the risk of withdrawal of key individuals (such as industry champions and community volunteers), and the difficulty of transferring documentation and 'corporate memory' (noted in Case A). In addition, the research findings report a wide range of in-progress community-focused learning partnerships arrangements, which have the potential to foster community engagement initiatives and regional partnerships, but there appears to be no central database (or government agency) that tracks such community-focused partnership models.

Making sense from three 'in-progress' models: Interpreting and conceptualising

From a systems thinking perspective, the in-progress models show a wide diversity of catalysts, different make-up (function, stakeholder mix, funding sources and staffing arrangements), evolving stage of development, and a complex web of links and inter-connections (such as government, industry, employer organisations, training organisations/tertiary institutions, and community stakeholders). Although the case snapshots have explored three separate bounded systems, in each of the in-progress models, organisational

boundaries appear to be blurring as knowledge-workers form links, interact and build interconnections between entities — in cooperative strategic planning activities, joint projects and learning conversations. Multiple stakeholder interrelationships and virtual networks contribute to the web of inter-organisational links and interconnections. However, the parties/stakeholder organisations also maintain separate identities and interests. Thus, at the board level, although the organisations may form strategic alliances/partnerships, key stakeholders may also compete in the marketplace (with separate tenders or niche markets).

Given the case reports and the cross-case analysis, the conceptual models in the next section are particularly useful for interpreting the meaning of learning partnerships:

- the concentric — interpreting the dynamics, inter-relationships and interconnections
- the centripetal — interpreting the tensions of working in the present frameworks (suggesting constraints and inertia) and forming interconnections sectors to cooperatively plan and adapt for sustainable futures.

Drawing on systems thinking, the next section proposes different ways to make sense of learning partnerships in the context of a rapidly changing economy and society.

Conceptualising the dynamics: Interrelationships and interconnections

Learning partnerships have the potential to create inter-connections across organisations and in the in-progress models, key stakeholders appear to be working together and learning together to foster three agendas: lifelong learning, sustainable economic development and social well being. By drawing on 'systems thinking' (Laszlo 2001; Mitleton-Kelly 2003) and emerging theories of complex adaptive systems (Laszlo 2001; Mitleton-Kelly 2003), the model below illustrates the intersection of the relationships between multiple stakeholders in the learning partnership. In the concentric model (the dynamics of inter-relationships), the researcher draws on the cross-case comparison and emerging theories to interpret the models as complex adaptive systems (Laszlo 2001; Mitleton-Kelly 2003) that are evolving and responding to internal and external tensions of 'shifting systems' (further illustrated in the centripetal model). As a fluid movement, the concentric model interprets the complex interdependencies as key stakeholders come together at the committee table (converging at the nucleus).

As the learning partnership models evolve, individuals on the governance board may contribute to collective learning, working knowledge and innovative solutions. Without specifying an actual model, at the nucleus in this type of configuration, the 'dots' could represent different parties/entities/organisations that form the strategic partnership agreement (Figure 1). Thus, the concentric model is a way to unravel the dynamics of interrelationships. It interprets how key stakeholders are finding ways to adapt and learn — learning together and working together — cooperating to compete as a whole, but maintaining separate organisational boundaries and niche markets. (The intersection could represent a board, steering committee, or incorporated body where multiple stakeholders collaborate, problem-solve and share ideas during strategic planning discussions, and open dialogue in committee meetings.)

For example at the board level (or steering committee), in this type of configuration, individual representatives could work in across-sector collaborations and form strategic partnerships, such as:

- a senior public servant may be representing the corporate soul of government
- a company director may be representing labour unions and employer organisations
- an Indigenous leader may be contributing ideas for community-based leadership programs
- a higher education representative may be reporting back to a research team
- a director of a registered training organisation may be interested in developing joint proposals
- a business leader or civic-minded entrepreneur may be representing the interests of the commercial sector and small business operators
- a local government administrator may be coordinating learning programs for senior learners
- a representative from the not-for-profit sector may be forming community development initiatives
- a small business representative may be interested in entrepreneurial ventures
- a senior government policy adviser may be developing 'community engagement' programs
- an entrepreneur may be initiating joint ventures and innovative research projects.

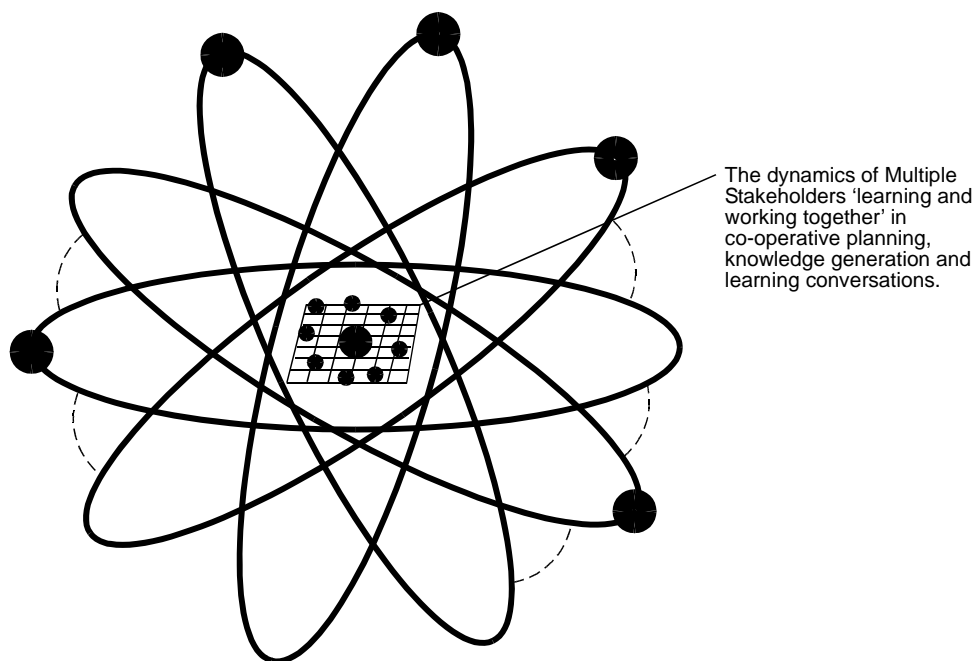


Figure 1. The Concentric Model: the dynamics of interrelationships (copyright Peirce 2005)

The concentric model interprets the dynamics and synergies as individual stakeholders work together, learn and interact. So the orbiting movement illustrates the constantly moving state of dynamic energy and gravitational force — not static or stable. It symbolises the diversity of mindsets at the negotiating table, and also shows individual stakeholders coming together around a central nucleus or core (in learning conversations, strategic planning discussions and workshops). As multiple organisations come together, however, key stakeholders may not always work in formal partnership agreements, and may prefer to work behind the scenes in informal coalitions or strategic alliances (represented by the dotted lines and loose links behind the formal structure).

In this visual interpretation, the core or intersection of the orbiting dots represents a flat-top and multi-dimensional organisational structure where interconnections are formed at the governance level. This is a way to visualise the entities/parties to the strategic agreement or memorandum of understanding coming together — building synergies and leverage for co-operative advantage and mutual benefit. The model suggests collaboration, cooperation and competition; it also interprets the 'hard work' of managing the inter-relationships and coordinating different agendas — the complexity of inter-relationships and the strength in diversity. This means multiple stakeholders learning together and working together in strategic planning activities, group problem-solving and collective learning. The orbiting movement could also symbolise the synergies of diverse thinking — business, government, not-for-profit, academia, industry and small business — as stakeholders cross-fertilising ideas, working knowledge and information for mutual benefit. In this type of model/configuration, there is the potential to cultivate working knowledge, innovative thinking and collective learning in a rich knowledge and learning ecosystem (a fertile compost heap for knowledge generation, 'intellectual horsepower', learning conversations and new thinking). Such configurations may also derail, realign or stagnate.

To summarise, the concentric model interprets the intersection where individual stakeholders have the capacity to form links and build synergies of intangibles and inter-relationships (represented as dots orbiting around the nucleus and drawing on the external environment). In such a model, stakeholders have opportunities to cultivate a rich knowledge and learning ecosystem — the dynamics of interrelationships. The concentric model also interprets how an individual stakeholder could return to his/her own organisation when the monthly meeting concludes. At the intersection, it suggests a constant link with other stakeholders through cooperative processes — at the organisational intersection. The previous model also illustrates how individuals may have 'feet in both camps', and interprets the tension of adapting to changing roles as bridges are built across sectors (during the activities that inter-connect organisations at a 'peak body' level, or in strategic partnership discussions). The concentric model also interprets the fluid nature of working knowledge and organisational learning as links, interrelationships, and interconnections that may blur boundaries between the organisations. The model below proposes a way to interpret 'shifting systems'.

The centripetal model — the tensions of shifting systems

From a systems perspective, the case reports show there is much talking and thinking (across the sectors) about future sustainability. It seems the stakeholder interactions and creative tensions in the organisational dynamics (the motion of bodies or matter under the influence of forces) are contributing to 'shifting systems' — as complex adaptive systems learn and adapt (Mitleton-Kelly 2003). The case reports suggest the synergies of relationships and 'intellectual horsepower' have the potential to value-add and contribute to knowledge cultivation, organisational learning, adaptation and innovation. So the centripetal model interprets the constant tension between moving forward (adaptation and renewal) and the constraints of the external environment (gravitational pull and inertia) — the push and pull (Figure 2). As the systems shift, the interconnections bring together different agendas — lifelong learning, sustainable economic development and social well being. The centripetal model further illustrates the dynamics of learning and working in partnership, as complex adaptive systems are evolving and adapting. However, there is the 'push and pull' as the movement forward is constrained by existing compliance frameworks and the lack of cohesive strategic policies for such partnerships. This tension, between existing and future, is represented in the

inward and outward arrows, suggesting the pull of the confining boundaries around the interconnected system.

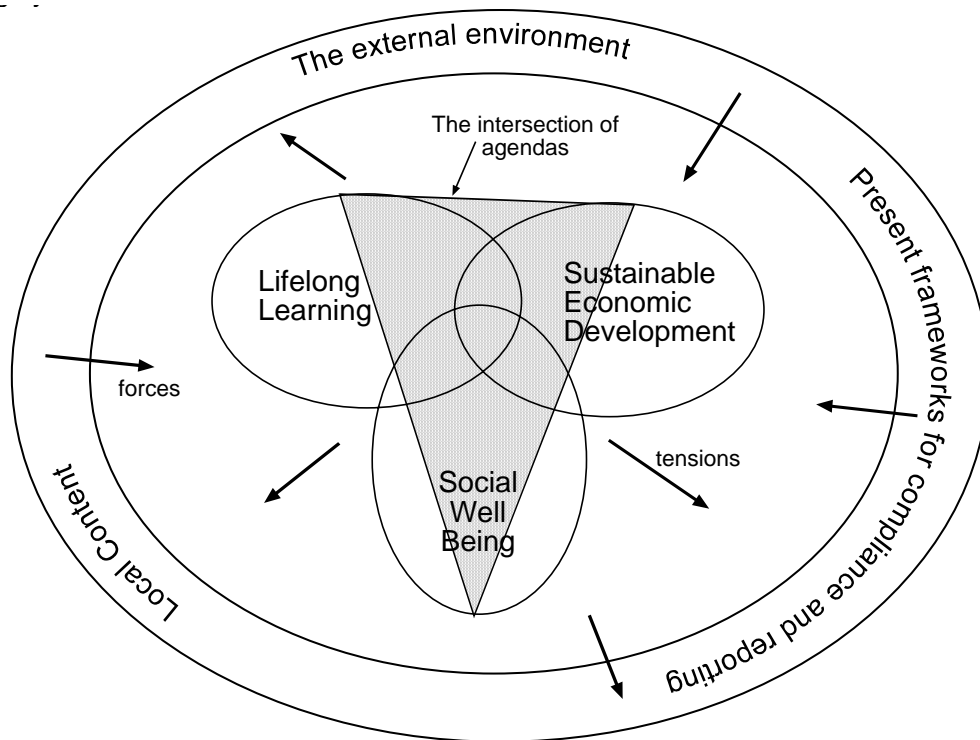


Figure 2. The Centripetal Model — the tensions of shifting systems (copyright Peirce 2005)

The centripetal model interprets complex systems that are responding to and learning to adapt. It illustrates the tensions with multiple stakeholder interrelationships. The model suggests the inertia of existing frameworks and tension of compliance frameworks. In interpreting the tensions and the pull in 'shifting systems', the arrows represent the push outwards to 'shift systems', and the pull together to move forward to adapt and evolve by working together (as forces and tensions). Thus, as stakeholders consider sustainable futures, the model suggests a 'shift of mindsets' to bring together the agendas of lifelong learning, social wellbeing and sustainable economic development. In turn, the centripetal model illustrates Drucker's thinking in relation to the 21st century society (Drucker 2004) as new organisations emerge and adapt. So the centripetal model also interprets the shifting systems as stakeholders interact, adapt and learn to survive.

To summarise, the previous models are useful to interpret learning partnerships as interconnections, interrelationships and interdependencies. The fluid motion and flexibility of the concentric model shows how individuals (or key stakeholders) may orbit around the nucleus (which could be visualised as the board of directors, or as a steering committee that meets regularly). The hub of the interconnected organisation has a flat-top and multi-dimensional structure (and may be supported by an administrative team that coordinates the functions and maintains the project reporting). However, the key stakeholder organisations (and individuals) may also work separately and have the capacity to form informal coalitions, cluster networks, strategic alliances and communities of practice (suggesting multiple layers of interrelationships). The concentric model interprets the 'dynamics of complex adaptive systems [that] are complex and largely

unpredictable' (Lewin and Regine 2003, p. 169). In short, the tensions, pressures and external constraints have been interpreted in the previous models.

Conclusions

The research study has outlined a movement towards cross-fertilisation of thinking and the sharing of knowledge and know-how between disparate groups where links and interconnections may blur organisational boundaries. In the process, as organisations interconnect, the interrelationships create complex adaptive systems (Bennet and Bennet 2004; Mitleton-Kelly 2003). Such in-progress configurations appear to be crucibles for innovation, knowledge cultivation and learning. In turn, the notion of 'shifting systems' is consistent with the ideas that:

"Knowledge exists in ecosystems, in which information, ideas and inspiration cross-fertilise and feed one another" (Por and Spivak 2000, p. 4).

It seems that inter-organisational connectivity and interdependencies (Mitleton-Kelly 2003, pp. 3-50) in emerging learning partnership models cultivate a social ecosystem that provides mutual support and sustenance (Mitleton-Kelly 2003, p. 31) for multiple stakeholders. Building on the work of Por and colleagues (Por 2000, 2001; Por and Spivak 2000), the in-progress models of learning partnerships, appear to be cultivating cross-sector interactions, working knowledge, 'intellectual horsepower' and learning conversations that contribute to collective wisdom (Por 2001), relationship capital, and synergies of intangibles and tangibles.

It seems the in-progress models of learning partnerships have the potential to engage communities in the next society — the age of knowledge and learning (Faris 2003; Kearns 2004a; Peirce 2004a). The groundswell of collective action points to eruptive forces and a movement towards shifting paradigms and new organisational structures (as suggested by Drucker 2004). However, there is still much to learn about enabling infrastructures (Mitleton-Kelly 2003) — as systems evolve and adapt. From a 'systems thinking' perspective, future research questions could ask:

How can organisations and communities build leverage from 'intellectual horsepower', collective expertise, shared learning and inter-relationships?

How is knowledge and 'know-how' transferred in 'learning partnerships'?

How are the value-adding outcomes, synergies and 'intangibles' measured and reported (within existing accounting and reporting frameworks)?

What policies and enabling infrastructure are needed to support 'learning partnerships'?

On the basis of this research it would appear that a more robust or resilient paradigm is emerging with interconnected, blurred boundaries and much 'talking and thinking' about more sustainable futures.

The study shows that, like 'herding cats', coordinating and managing the interrelationships at the organisational intersection takes time, resources, vision, processes for interaction, individual willingness and in-kind support. It is 'hard work' and 'you learn from the experience'. In these in-progress models, there are opportunities for linking disparate groups to cross-fertilise ideas, working knowledge and information — 'intellectual horsepower' and synergies of interrelationships that enable multiple stakeholders to build leverage from joint projects for mutual benefit (economic and social). There is also the potential to cultivate a

knowledge and learning ecosystem (a fertile compost heap for knowledge generation and an innovative learning system). Such configurations may also derail, realign or stagnate. It is individual stakeholders who form the relationships, interact, share ideas, and build networks; and it is the individual who maintains the relationships, engages in the process and learns from the experience. Therein lies a paradox between the strength of diversity of the collective (synergies) and their weakness as the relationships may be compromised by a single individual who withdraws or transfers. Drawing on a computing analogy, this could be akin to a corruption in a system which may not be sufficiently robust to tolerate ambiguity, or a system that is too inflexible to survive threats while maintaining the momentum to adapt and renew.

In conclusion, the case reports show that Queensland is not yet prepared for the knowledge and learning age. Although there are many grassroots initiatives, there is a lack of an integrated policy framework to support learning partnerships. Key stakeholders are finding it difficult to develop cohesive strategies to respond to the complexity of the 21st century knowledge economy and society. Perhaps the 'Engaging Communities Conference' will be the catalyst for deeper thinking.

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