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Indicators for effective partnerships: Organisational implications for measuring service to international, national and local communities

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ABSTRACT
Substantive university-community engagement activity is transformative. Within this activity, members of each organisation come to deepen their understanding of their and their partner’s work. The consequences of this activity often include reshaping organisational policy environments to support engagement. Deakin University’s next Strategic Plan 2008-2012 will be titled ‘Delivering Effective Partnerships’. In 2007 we conducted research to develop and test measures that could be used to assess the effectiveness of Deakin’s partnerships. Potential measures were explored through scoping interviews with key informants, an on-line survey completed by Deakin partnership coordinators, and partnership case studies. In addition to exploring a range of potential measures, our research also documented a high degree of organisational commitment to delivering effective partnerships. However findings also suggested that there were some gaps in relation to defining the nature and scope of partnership activity, and in adequately supporting the level of deep collaboration required for mutual reciprocity and transformation. Importantly, however, we also identified a range of contingent organisational issues that need to be considered when developing the Strategic Plan:

1. How to include the values and scholarship of engagement into policy and practice about partnerships;
2. How best to define what ‘partnerships’ can be, how they fulfil community engagement, and what an effective partnership would look like in various contexts;
3. How to ensure that Deakin’s corporate culture and practices support the notion that effective engagement is a two-way process that can – and must – result in transformation not only for the university’s partners, but also the university;
4. How best to ensure that the University’s governance, management and administrative processes support effective engagement:
   • How best to organise Deakin’s policy environment and activity across the university to support the delivery of effective partnerships;
   • How best to establish a coordinated knowledge management system across the university to support staff in their efforts to establish, monitor, evaluate and report on their partnership activity
   • How to ensure that community engagement is built into staff performance planning and review cycles, work plans, and promotion assessment criteria.
5. The resources that will need to be allocated to assist all staff to deliver effective partnerships

This paper will describe our research, and discuss the implications of these findings for all universities seeking to achieve substantive engagement with their partners.
INTRODUCTION

Universities have long been identified as settings for promoting health, wellbeing and a holistic notion of people as members of a civic society. Healthy partnerships are a critical mechanism for achieving cultural aspirations about the contributions that universities can make in shaping future societies. Partnerships are critical to the representation of the university as an active community member, engaged with its civic responsibilities (Tsouros, 1998). The ‘scholarship of engagement’ is an emerging field for universities and their communities that is paying attention to the maintenance and sustainability of partnerships through learning and engaging with communities.

During her time with Deakin University in 2006 as a Fulbright visiting senior specialist, Prof Judith Ramaley noted that university-community engagement has expression across multiple levels of analysis. At an individual level, engagement refers to how actively we are involved in learning and contributing. At an organizational level, engagement relates to how we work together and the extent to which we share expectations, goals, resources, risks and benefits with other participants. Across institutions, engagement denotes the extent of reciprocity, mutual benefit, shared agenda and goals, and generation of social, human, intellectual capital (Ramaley, 2006). Authentic engagement is transformational: it requires both the university and partnering communities to do things differently. Ramaley argued that deep engagement must require the establishment of transformational goals that are: intentional; deep; pervasive; consistent over time; and ‘institution-shaping. Whilst working towards achieving deeper levels of university-community engagement might be transformative, it need not be overwhelming: ‘Engagement is simply a different way of doing familiar things: learning differently, working together differently and making a difference’ (Ramaley, 2006, p. 14). Prof Ramaley encouraged Deakin and personnel from partnering agencies to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to show the extent to which our partnerships are meaningful, substantive, generating ‘currency’ that is useful to each organisation and the wider community, adequately leveraging resources, and ultimately enhancing community capacity.

Deakin University: ‘Delivering effective partnerships’

During 2007, consultation for Deakin’s new Strategic Plan (Deakin University, 2008) identified that Deakin plays a leading role in the arena of community engagement and partnerships. Titled ‘Delivering effective partnerships’, the new plan signifies that Deakin is part of an international trend for universities to find new ways to engage meaningfully with the local geographical communities in which their campuses are based, and also to engage with the communities of interest they comprise and serve – be they students, academics, general university staff, research participants, funding bodies, industry, business, philanthropy, art and culture, and local, state and national governments.

Our research aimed to assist the University to assess its efforts to fulfil its aspiration to be a ‘catalyst for positive change for the individuals and communities it serves’, and the outcomes and impacts of those efforts. The research was undertaken to:

- Develop and test measures that can be used across Deakin University to assess the effectiveness of its partnerships;
- Help develop tools to assist Faculties to report meaningfully and systematically against their community engagement targets in the next Strategic Plan; and
- Develop resources to assist staff to manage their partnerships more effectively, in terms of planning, resourcing and reporting.

In particular, our research aimed to explore the following issues:

- How can we include the values and scholarship of engagement into policy and practice about partnerships?
- How do we know an ‘effective partnership’ when we see one?
- How can partnerships become more reciprocal?
- How can we ensure supportive governance, management and administration
- What resources will need to be allocated to make this happen?
Given that our university was embarking on a quest to ‘deliver effective partnerships’, we first needed to engage Deakin personnel in a reflection on what a partnership is, and how to recognise an effective one. In their review and redevelopment of the Deakin University + Department of Human Services (Barwon-South Western Region) Partnership, Butterworth and Austin (2007) drew strongly on the Partnership Analysis Tool developed by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth, 2005a,b). A number of other frameworks were utilised to inform the variables of interest in this study. These included Carnegie Foundation Elective Classification Community Engagement Documentation Framework (2008), Talloires Network criteria (Talloires Network, 2008), as well as the AUCEA benchmarking framework.

VicHealth (2005a) noted that partnerships can range across a continuum of engagement, from informal networking through to formal collaboration with shared resourcing. Drawing on the work of Himmelman (2001), VicHealth’s Partnership Analysis Tool describes four levels that are descriptive of the level of collaboration in a partnership. Figure 1 illustrates the various levels. Networking is characterised by minimal involvement between parties, as well as minimal time and trust between partners. Only information is exchanged, and this information provides benefit to both partners. At the next level of engagement, Coordinating requires slightly more involvement, and involves both the exchange of information and mutual activities to work towards a common goal or purpose. Cooperating involves the sharing of resources in addition to exchanging information and modifying mutual activities. This type of partnership is based on a high degree of trust between partners. The deepest level of engagement, Collaborating, involves the highest level of information and resource sharing as well as the greatest time commitment. Collaboration also includes enhancing the capacity of the other partner for mutual benefit or a common purpose. One partner must give some of their resources to the other partner for the benefit of the partnership and the service they are providing.

It is at the level of collaboration that the deepest level of engagement and transformation occurs. Through collaboration, members of each organisation come to deepen their understanding of their and their partner’s work. The consequences of this activity often include reshaping organisational policy environments to support engagement.

![Figure 1 Partnership continuum (VicHealth, 2005a)](image-url)
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research process was designed to gather information on partnerships based on AUCEA’s national community engagement goals, in time for the adoption of the University Strategic Plan in early 2008. The approach taken is depicted in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 2 Methodological approach](image)

A Project Steering Group was established by the University, comprising the Director of Policy and Planning, key academic staff, senior executive, and members of the research team.

The research team worked to generate a substantive database of the various existing partnerships at Deakin. To enable this, the project team developed an on-line survey instrument and the necessary database for collecting the required information. The survey comprised 16 questions that sought information about a range of matters that are summarized in Figure 3 below. To ensure that survey responses would be representative of the university’s CE profile, a request to Heads of Schools and Directors of other areas to complete the survey was issued by the Vice-Chancellor’s office. Personal approaches were also made by the research team.

| 1. The partnership’s name, key parties and reason for being established; |
| 2. The partnership’s main activities (e.g. research, consultancy, teaching, etc); |
| 3. The geographical scale of the partnership; |
| 4. How long the partnership had been in existence; |
| 5. The temporal nature of the partnership (did it operate all year or only during semester, etc); |
| 6. The level of planning that had occurred, based on the Australian Institute for Primary Care’s tool for assessing the level of planning (AIPC, 2005); |
| 7. The depth of partnership engagement, based on the Partnerships Analysis Tool developed by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth, 2005b); |
| 8. Information about governance and management arrangements; |
| 9. Perceptions of the benefits of the partnership to both Deakin and the partnering organisation, in the short, medium and longer term; |
| 10. Perceptions of the level of current progress in achieving these benefits to both Deakin and to the partnering organisation; |
| 11. How progress was measured and to whom this was communicated; |
| 12. The level of resourcing that Coordinators felt they were receiving from Deakin University and other external organisations; |
| 13. The number of different types of members involved in the partnership (eg university staff, university students, members of the partnership organisation, members of the community) |

![Figure 3 Summary of on-line survey questions](image)
The request for support from the Vice-Chancellor's office served to generate a consultative dialogue with key senior stakeholders across the university that lasted throughout the research. Informal interviews, discussions and email communication with key informants across the University served to provide a rich source of qualitative information about the current status of the University, and ideas for improving the capacity of the University to deliver effective partnerships.

Survey respondents represented 40 partnerships comprising local, regional and international partnerships. The sample comprised partnerships from all faculties within Deakin University. Some partnerships were identified with one external partner, whereas others were more descriptive of clusters of alliances within one partnership umbrella.

RESULTS

1 Nature of Partnership Activity

Partnership coordinators were asked to nominate the proportion of activity in which their partnership was engaged, for example research teaching and learning, community building, commercial activities, strategic alliance activities, student / staff exchange and other (i.e. mainly described by participants as recruitment and branding activities). Many partnerships were identified by staff as operating in multiple spheres of activity. This is an important consideration, particularly when we are attempting to define what partnership activity is, and what should be counted as partnership activity. Therefore, for example, we cannot assume that a "research partnership" is not also engaged in other spheres of activity, such as teaching or community development. Participants’ responses suggest that the categories used to describe partnership activity are not mutually exclusive. This reinforces the view of the Carnegie Framework for the Advancement of Teaching (2007), which suggests that an engaged university is one where core functions such as teaching and learning and research have community engagement components, integral to the conduct of these functions rather than separate to them. Nevertheless, many participants did not emphasise or acknowledge the role of community building in the partnership activity. Only one partnership coordinator reported that 50% of partnership activity was related to community building.

2 Benefits of Partnership

Benefits of Partnership to Partners

Participants were asked to identify, from their perspective, what the benefits of their partnership might be for their actual partner. For Deakin personnel, partner organisations benefited through the increase of professional capacity (e.g. in terms of research capacity or better graduate entry employees); and improvement in quality of teaching and learning provision.

Benefits of Partnership to Deakin

The same question in relation to benefits to Deakin elicited different responses. Responses were more focused on direct increases in inputs and outputs achievable by Deakin, and their community impact (e.g., more students, better graduate employability, increased research profile, etc). Whilst these are important indicators that are indeed linked to Deakin’s strategic directions, they do not refer to any increased professional or organisational capacity that might be gained through a mutually reciprocal relationship with the partner. One is thus led to ask: Why do Deakin partnership coordinators not acknowledge or identify the improvement in the quality of research, teaching or learning that might be gained through their partnership?

3 Lead Indicators for measuring progress

Frameworks of partnership and community engagement used in this study suggested that Levels of Collaboration, Planning, and Resourcing might have application as lead indicators when applied to partnership activity. Findings for each measure are outlined below.
Level of Collaboration

Level of collaboration appeared to be a useful continuum for differentiating the nature of the partnership. Figure 4 below displays the number of partnerships that were indicated along the collaboration continuum. It suggests that a majority of partnerships appear to be placed at the upper levels of this continuum, between ‘cooperating’ and ‘collaborating’.

![Collaboration Level Categories](image)

Level of collaboration did not appear to be correlated with tenure of the partnership. It appeared that some respondents assessed their level of collaboration by the number of activities in which they engaged with their partners, and depth of communication with their partners.

Level of Planning

Participants identified how ‘planned’ their partnership was on a continuum from ‘opportunistic/organic’, to ‘strategic’, and on to ‘sustained routine activity’. As outlined in Figure 5 below, 32 partnership coordinators reported that their relationships were at least ‘strategic’, with 14 of these tending towards sustained routine planned activity. Only eight respondents, or 20% of the survey sample, indicated that their partnerships were tending towards opportunistic. Most respondents reported they had some form of agreement or contract in place.

![Planning Level Categories](image)

Figure 5 Level of Planning conducted by partnerships
Effective resources and marketing

Participants rated the level at which they perceived their partnership to be adequately resourced and emphasized in marketing materials. Whilst less than half of the partnerships surveyed believed their partnership was emphasised in marketing materials, more than half perceived their partnership to be adequately resourced.

Relationships between lead indicators and partnership outcomes

Partnership coordinators were asked to indicate progress to date from their perspective (Progress-Deakin) and from the perspective of the partner (Progress-Partner). These responses were then correlated with lead indicators using Spearman’s bivariate correlation analysis. Table 1 displays significant correlations between the variables of interest.

Table 1. Statistically significant relationships between lead indicators and perceptions of partnership outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead Indicators</th>
<th>Level of planning</th>
<th>Level of collaboration</th>
<th>Progress benefits for Deakin</th>
<th>Progress benefits for partner</th>
<th>Adequate resources to support partnership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of planning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of collaboration</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress - benefits for Deakin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress - benefits for partner</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate resources to support partnership</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership emphasized in marketing materials</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Spearman Correlation Coefficients

Note: ‘Progress’ = perceived level of current progress towards achieving stated benefits. Only significant Spearman’s Rho coefficients are included in the table p<.05

Results showed that, as expected, respondents’ estimations of partners’ progress were significantly and positively correlated with level of collaboration and level of planning. Thus, respondents’ perceptions of progress for their partners increased both as the level of planning increases and as the level of collaboration increased.

In contrast to perceptions of progress for their partners, Deakin coordinators’ perceived progress for Deakin was only significantly and positively correlated with level of planning. It was not significantly correlated with level of Collaboration. In other words, for Deakin partnership coordinators, perceptions of progress increase as level of planning increases. However, levels of collaboration have no bearing on perceptions of progress within the partnership for Deakin.

How do we know an ‘effective partnership’ when we see one?

Partnerships that had indicated a score of greater than 5 on the Planning Continuum and 7 on the Collaboration Continuum were explored in more detail due to their potential as exemplars of more ‘successful’ partnerships. Nine partnerships met these criteria. They were in diverse areas of science and health sciences and included international partnerships. They also comprised both research and teaching and learning activities.
In performing this analysis, partnership coordinators’ responses to questions about how they measured progress in their partnership were analysed according to measurement categories identified in the draft AUCEA Benchmarking Framework. Relevant examples of responses are provided after each AUCEA criterion.

- Number of forums, workshops or other events or issues of community importance that are product of joint planning and implementation between the university and the community (AUCEA 1.1)
  “This partnership has research, training and service provision and establishment of the clinic means that there is a functional joint service all year around.”
- Institutional strategic plans and their derivative plans including implementation and functional plans and reporting (AUCEA 1.2).
  “The progress of partnership is measured by whether partnership is achieving the plans.”
- Percentage of community leaders on university council and committees (AUCEA 2.1)
  “A steering committee exists between [our School] and each [service provider] network/organisation.”
- University community engagement is a criterion in course accreditation and review (AUCEA 2.2)
  “Signed credit transfer agreement in 2005.”
- Existence of a dedicated strategic manager and integrated community relationship manager (AUCEA 2.5)
  “Three people .... are collaborative appointments between the School and [the partnering organisation].”
- Existence of engagement in communication (AUCEA 3.2).
  “Visits each other frequently to ensure the program is done properly.”
- Number of publications (AUCEA 4.1)
  “In the next 12 months, this partnership allows the analysis of existing data out of which several reports and publications will arise.”
- Number of grants and consultancy funds received for projects undertaken in collaboration with industry and community partners as a percentage of all funded projects (AUCEA 4.2)
  “Partnership’s progress is measured by number of grants gained.”
- Number and type of courses providing experiential learning in the community (e.g. practical placement) (AUCEA 5.2)
  “[Our industry partner] collaborates on experiential learning for Deakin students”
- Number of formal agreements with other educational providers relating to facilitating learning pathways (AUCEA 5.3)
  “A formal agreement where Chinese university students come to study at Deakin.”

The range of responses to the AUCEA benchmarking framework suggests that successful partnerships reflect many of the measures of the AUCEA framework. In addition to AUCEA measures, partnership coordinators in this study also identified frequency of contact and communication as evidence for progress within a partnership. These measures do not appear within the current AUCEA Benchmarking Framework:

“Visits each other frequently to ensure the program is done properly.”
“Regular visits and check of progress.”

**DISCUSSION**

Our research produced important findings that are pertinent to the development of Deakin University’s new strategic plan. In particular, interviews, discussions and email communication with key informants across the University served to provide a rich source of qualitative information about the current status of the University, and ideas for improving the capacity of the University to deliver effective partnerships based on the scholarship of engagement.
How to include the values and scholarship of engagement into policy and practice about partnerships?

Inspection of consultation documents developed during the development of Deakin’s new Strategic Plan revealed a diversity of definitions of key concepts such as ‘partnerships’. Our research suggested that consensus had not yet been reached for an operational definition for what a partnership is and how to define it. The need for widely accepted operational definitions becomes more pressing when one considers the many issues that were raised during our consultations. For example, we cannot assume that partnerships defined primarily as ‘research’ are not also involved in other spheres of activity, such as teaching or service. A point was made during our consultations that ‘not all relationships are partnerships’, which suggests that further discussion is required to arrive at a conceptual framework that enables definition, description and comparison.

Some key informants challenged the theoretical validity of the types and levels of partnership outlined by VicHealth (2005a, b). However, to the best of our knowledge, this may be the first time that such a conceptual framework has been used across the university as a springboard for discussion. Certainly, our consultations suggested that many Deakin personnel were working from an expectation of partnerships based primarily on low-risk, low-engagement notions of networking, whilst others only see a partnership as being ‘real’ if it complies with deep levels of collaboration and shared risks and benefits. This is perfectly acceptable, of course, so long as the degree of engagement matches the purpose of the partnership and meets the expectations of all parties. We believe that the tools we have adapted for use in our survey (such as AUCEA’s benchmarking framework and VicHealth’s Partnership Analysis Tool) provide an opportunity for discussion, workforce development and adoption into a monitoring and evaluation framework.

Our on-line survey revealed the interesting finding that Deakin respondents were more likely to identify a range of transformational benefits for their partnering organisation than for Deakin. For Deakin personnel, partner organisations were seen to benefit through the increase of professional capacity (eg in terms of research capacity or better graduate-entry employees, and improvement in quality of teaching and learning provision). In contrast, benefits identified for Deakin did not refer to any increased professional or organisational capacity that might be gained through a mutually reciprocal relationship with the Partner. Levels of collaboration had no bearing on perceptions of progress within the partnership for Deakin.

These responses suggest that Deakin staff perceive partnerships more as a form of transacational exchange. In its crudest form, this might be expressed as: “what we can do ‘for them’ for which we can get a return?” However, Deakin survey respondents seemed to show awareness that for the community or industry partner, there is more of a transformational element to partnership activity, in that the benefits relate to increased professional learning and development of organisational capacity.

Of course, in practice, benefits to the partner would be likely to be felt ultimately by Deakin personnel. However, the clear emphasis given by Deakin staff was on exchange or transaction, rather than how engaging with partnering organisations might be able to transform their experience at Deakin. This finding confirms qualitative results that suggest that benefits for Deakin are not being seen in terms of deeper collaboration.

Given the wide range of views we observed about what a partnership is, and concerns that additional resources would be needed to support engagement activity seen as ‘additional’ to university core business, one perhaps can understand more readily why Deakin personnel have not yet embraced the notion that partnerships can be a mechanism for mutual capacity building – not just one way transfer of capacity.

We were then led to ask: Why do Deakin partnership coordinators not acknowledge or identify the improvement in the quality of Deakin research, teaching, learning or other capacity building that might be gained through their partnership? One possible explanation for this finding is that Deakin partnership coordinators may not see the mutual transformational benefit, or that because Deakin does not yet have a language for it, they identify with existing outputs in use to measure and monitor performance.

Perhaps, because of historical corporate values, or the limited resources historically provided to support mutually transformative engagement, Deakin staff members may consider that it is not important. In the
absence of a supportive organisational culture, with attendant language, symbolism and reward structure, staff simply may not be seeing it. Alternatively, they may be telling Deakin personnel what they think the University directors want to hear.

With current Deakin corporate rhetoric giving heavy emphasis to planning and outputs, it is possible that Deakin personnel may not feel free to discuss benefits and progress in terms of level of deep collaboration and mutual reciprocity / transformation. We suggest that if Deakin were to include some of this type of language in the Strategic Plan, with appropriate measures built into staff performance and promotional opportunities, then we might find that Deakin staff would be more likely to focus on ensuring transformative outcomes of their partnerships for themselves and the University, as well as their partners.

*How do we know an ‘effective partnership’ when we see one?*

Our research recommended that the university’s Strategic Plan needs to include appropriate language that reflects the intent of partnership development as reciprocal and collaborative (in the deeper sense) in the Strategic Plan is recommended to ensure transformative outcomes: (i) for partnership itself; (ii) for the University and (iii) for the partnering organisation.

Participants were able to articulate performance measures used to indicate the success of partnership activity, which were descriptive of indicators that are used in outcomes related to teaching and learning and research in general. However these outputs and outcomes tended to acknowledge ‘joint’ activity, such as ‘joint’ research publications and grant submissions, or ‘joint’ curriculum development. For new partnerships, the quality of relationships seemed to be a proxy of success. The level of commitment and cooperation within those relationships was critical to achieving longer-term goals. Many of the partnership coordinators described indicators of success that were derived from planning processes related to measuring outcomes. These findings may indicate that in relation to outcome measures, general measures currently used to indicate progress across core activities could also be used to measure progress in relation to ‘engaged’ core activities.

Frameworks of partnership and community engagement used in this study suggested that *Level of Collaboration, Planning, and Resourcing* might have application as lead indicators when applied to partnership activity. *Level of collaboration* and level of planning in particular appeared to be useful continua for differentiating the nature of the partnership.

Results appear to suggest that successful partnerships mainly reflect many of the measure of AUCEA framework. In addition to AUCEA measures, partnership coordinators in this study also identified frequency of contact and communication as evidence for progress within a partnership. These measures do not appear within the current AUCEA Benchmarking Framework. We encourage Deakin colleagues to continue working with AUCEA to align Deakin’s monitoring and evaluation framework with this emerging national framework. We also suggest that Deakin has much to offer AUCEA by virtue of the conversations happening across the university about partnership development and its measurement.

*How to ensure supportive governance, management and administration?*

Our research recommended that: (i) university divisions and faculties need to work together to improve communication of the policy framework for partnerships for all staff; (ii) heads of schools formally recognise partnership coordination role; (iii) that the overall policy framework of the university acknowledge and involve partnership coordinators in improving policy and procedures to facilitate partnership activity – for example more flexible student administration systems, faster contract development that recognises due diligence by partner organisations etc.

Our research also revealed that the management and coordination of information across universities needs attention if universities are to deliver effective partnerships. The research indicated that, as with other universities participating in AUCEA’s national benchmarking project, partnership records management systems across the university were uncoordinated; data typically could be compared or shared, and was thus of limited utility. Some kind of central coordinating mechanism and relational database, with an interactive user-interface, could be very
helpful to enable university staff to enter details of new or existing partnerships, and obtain real-time guidance about protocol.

We also observed that due to workloads, there was a lack of internal capacity to respond to knowledge management requirements. Deakin personnel variously have widely differing capacities even to enter data. This may reflect an overload of requests by central administration to provide process and output data. Our research may have been seen as too time-intensive for the time that staff had available. Many staff members were managing dozens of partnerships and did not have the capacity to provide survey data on each one. Again, having participated with a dozen other universities in the AUCEA national benchmarking project, we know that Deakin is not alone in this regard.

In tandem with the call for a centralised knowledge management system was a strong recommendation that the university not seek to impose central control on partnership development. Deakin participants stressed that to deliver effective partnerships, it is important to get the balance right between centralised support and centralised control (with attendant knowledge management implications). We are aware that as part of the development of the new Strategic Plan, there has been discussion of centralising some aspects of the management of the many partnerships across Deakin University. In order to lead the delivery of effective partnerships, Deakin needs to be seen to encourage a flourishing culture of partnership development that is seen as core to all aspects of university core business, where diversity and creativity in partnership development is encouraged. Here, a centralised, intuitive database can be used to support, monitor, evaluate and reward staff activity. Our research indicated that this is indeed possible: that a great deal of the goodwill exists to help Deakin deliver effective partnerships as part of a deeper commitment to substantive community engagement.

Therefore, we recommended that: (i) a knowledge management system for supporting partnership development and tracking effective partnerships (across all Divisions) be established as an ITS major infrastructure project; (ii) Faculties to consider ways of supporting partnership development and activity; (iii) that partnership coordination is recognised in workload calculations at the School level.

CONCLUSION

The experience of conducting action research often proves to be far more complex than originally anticipated. This research proved to be no exception. Although we had planned our research trajectory carefully, the research process was affected by several factors, including:

- Unavoidable delays in commencing the research;
- Delays experienced by AUCEA in developing draft performance measures (this process has been extended into 2008);
- The divergence of views and perspectives expressed by key informants across the university;
- The complexity of gathering and comparing data from different sources across Deakin University;
- The logistical challenge to Deakin University staff in completing the on-line survey.

Innes and Booher (1999) noted that indicator projects often focus on developing the numbers instead of considering how they will be used. Producing the indicator report is often made a priority, as opposed to considering how the report may be used, or how the community can learn from the process of developing indicators in the first place. They argued that it is the joint learning that can occur among stakeholders, and the changes in practices that can occur, that is considered more important than the indicators themselves. However what is learned and how practices may change depends on the way information is developed and who is involved. If it is collaborative and iterative, then the indicators can become part of the players' meaning systems. "They act on the indicators because the ideas the indicators represent have become second nature to them and part of what they take for granted" (p. 7).

One informant volunteered that this action research project has helped to encourage discussion and reflection about questions such as 'what is a partnership' and how to assess their quality. We agreed that our survey instrument would never be perfect, but that the process of developing it and sharing it with key personnel has helped to build Deakin's organisational capacity (awareness, knowledge, policies, procedures, performance
measures) to promote, sustain and evaluate partnerships and community engagement. We agreed that rather than focusing on ‘counting widgets’, the research is helping to focus collective thinking on ‘What are widgets?’ and ‘Why are we using them?’

REFERENCES