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The efficacy of partnership evaluation and its impact on Alliance transformation: a case study - 12 months post evaluation

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Abstract

Partnerships involving higher education, governments, and industry have been recognised as important vehicles for engaging community, leveraging knowledge, and sharing potential resources. The critical need for these partnerships in rural and regional locations has been of particular note. Partnership evaluation can serve a critical function of informing continuous improvement and may therefore assist the evaluated agencies to work towards responsive transformational change. The ability for a partnership to adapt and change may aid in their sustainability. Despite the potentially important role of partnership evaluation, the development of tools that measure partnership are at an early stage. Partnership evaluation is rarely reflected upon in the published literature. Moreover, benefits and reflections of the efficacy of evaluations 12 months post analysis is rare in the published literature. Therefore, a brief review of partnership approaches and measurement tools are presented. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the efficacy of an evaluation conducted 12 months previously of a partnership between Deakin University, the Department of Health and Department of Human Services (Barwon South West Region), known as the Deakin/DH/DHS Strategic Alliance. This case study reviews several tools/metrics utilised. The efficacy of the evaluation tools is discussed. Those metrics, underlying the tools which contributed to positive change in partnerships are discussed.
Keywords:

Partnership, Alliance, Evaluation, Transformational change, Reflection

Introduction

The ability of organisations to engage in inter-organisational alliances and partnerships is highly valued. Inter-organisational alliances may facilitate the capability and capacity of knowledge sharing, stimulating and creating new ideas and processes. Such alliances have been afforded significant currency as strategies for improving the competitiveness of regions, nations, sectors, and organisations (Huggins, Jones, & Upton, 2008). Planning and evaluation are critical processes that support the continuous improvement of such partnerships. Despite the importance of these partnerships, the tools available for their evaluation are limited. It is possible that this limitation is the result of the context-specific nature of each partnership, or that the particular stage of a partnership's evolution influences the selection of tools. This paper provides a broad but brief overview of partnership evaluation. A case study is presented in which various evaluative tools are utilised. The way in which the outcomes of the evaluation contributed to the continuous improvement of the Deakin/DH/DHS Strategic Alliance, 12 months later, is examined. The efficacy of evaluation tools is reflected upon, 12 months after the evaluation took place. Reflections on the efficacy of the outcomes from evaluations are rarely published.

Partnerships

Increasingly, partnerships are recognised as positively impacting on community health (Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). A partnership or alliance can be defined as a working arrangement between partners who are otherwise independent bodies, collaborating to achieve a common objective (Audit Commission, 1998). As such, partnerships enable various stakeholders to work together and share relevant resources, risks, and rewards. The aim is to implement strategies that may address issues of mutual concern.
(Granner & Sharpe, 2004). Lasker, Weiss, and Miller (2001) have suggested that partnerships with a high level of "synergy" are better able to meet targets and are thus more effective. The level of synergy in a partnership is the "extent to which the perspectives, resources, and skills of its participating individuals and organisations contribute to and strengthen the work of the group" (p. 187).

VicHealth (2005a) noted that partnerships may be viewed along an engagement continuum that ranges from informal networking through to formal collaboration, with the latter representing the deepest level of engagement and synergy. This model for the various levels of partnership engagement is depicted below in Figure 1.

Universities are often identified as having a key partnering role, particularly in developing regional communities. They are a source of knowledge and ideas that can address issues of importance (e.g., public health concerns). They can work closely with the community (Butterworth & Palermo, 2008; Huggins, Jones, & Upton, 2008; Ramaley, 2005). The engaged university is committed to interacting directly with communities through
jointly beneficial exchange, examination, and use of the expertise and resources of all those involved (Ramaley, 2005). University alliances are vital to the representation of a university as an active and engaged member of society, and they can also help develop the social and physical infrastructure required to promote healthy and thriving communities (Tsouros, 1998).

It is acknowledged, however, that such partnerships can be difficult to sustain (Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). This may be partly due to the need for greater knowledge concerning the managerial and organisational factors which are necessary for effectiveness (Einberger, Robertson, Garcia, Vuckovic, & Patti, 2000). An effective evaluation may provide accountability to stakeholders, improve strategies, highlight community awareness of the partnership, and inform policy decisions (Butterfoss & Francisco, 2004), although partnership evaluation is not necessarily easy (Milward & Provan, 1998). This is of concern, considering that evaluation should ideally contribute to partnership endurance.

**Partnership evaluation**

Research suggests that partnership evaluation should involve an assessment of whether key targets have been reached (Dowling, Powell, & Glendinning, 2004). This poses challenges, however, as some strategies implemented by partnerships are only realised in the long term and due to the nature of partnership engagement are difficult to attribute solely to the work of the partnership (Dowling et al., 2004). Consequently, much of the research on partnership evaluation has examined the internal functioning of the partnership (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001; Zakos & Edwards, 2006). This methodology attributes effectiveness to the ability of the partnership to function as an entity (Pope and Lewis, 2008). Such evaluations have highlighted common factors which may be important for partnership functioning. An evaluation conducted by Pope and Lewis (2008) which assessed ten partnerships within Victoria found that having a good facilitator to assist in building relationships within the partnership, having the right decision-makers involved who were committed, having a clear purpose,
having good processes, and ensuring motivation were all important for partnership success. Zakocs & Edwards (2006) conducted a literature review of research which had evaluated partnerships. They discovered that the factors important for partnership effectiveness included strong governance procedures, active participation of members, strong leadership, member diversity, collaboration among member agencies, and group cohesion. Similarly, in their literature review, Dowling, Powell, and Glendinning (2004) noted that partnerships with a clear purpose, high levels of trust, reciprocity and respect, good accountability arrangements, and good leadership and management were believed to be more successful. Shortell et al. (2002) found that high performing partnerships had the ability to manage size and diversity, to attract and rely on multiple components of leadership, to maintain focus, to manage and channel conflict, to recognise where the partnership was sitting in terms of its life cycle, and to be able to modify its resources and assets when required to keep up with various changes. Furthermore, factors of partnership functioning which may contribute to high levels of synergy include having sufficient resources (money, goods, and skills); seeking and retaining members with good resources; ensuring a good mix of members; building strong working relationships among partners through encouraging trust, respect, and having strategies for managing conflict and power differentials; having the right leadership, flexible and supportive administration and management, formal governance procedures, efficiency, and a community welcoming of partnership; and having minimal public and organisational policy barriers. The research findings also suggest that communication is important (Scott & Thurston, 1997), as is the equitable involvement of all partners (Casey, 2008). However, while there is research concerning the evaluation of partnerships and the factors important for partnership success, partnership evaluation tools based on such research are lacking (Pope & Lewis, 2008). This makes evaluation more difficult.
Measuring performance of collaborations

Performance improvement has resulted in increased university and industry partnerships. There is an identified need to develop an improved understanding of how to optimally manage collaborations. A brief review of the literature revealed different approaches to evaluation.

The supply chain management approach. Bhagwat & Sharma’s (2007) analytic hierarchy multi-criteria decision-making tool provides a systematic approach to assessing performance at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. Simatupang & Sridharan (2005) developed a collaboration index, which includes the interrelated dimensions of information sharing, decision synchronisation and incentive alignment. Giannakis (2007) measured the performance of supply chains relationships which are based on the number of perception gaps. Alfaro, Oritz, and Poler (2007) focused on the development of a process-based approach which seeks to relate supply chain performance at the activity level through to the enterprise level. They established individual parameters at each level of data collection. Collectively these studies highlight the importance of social interactions as well as the need for rigorous process-based approaches and consequently the development of performance metrics for collaborations.

The information flow approach. It had also been noted (Philbin, 2008) that performance measures of collaborative activities should take into account information generation and dissemination. Critical to the successful performance of partnerships is the recognition of information flow. Sampson (2007) proposed efficiency and effectiveness of information flow as a key metric, taking into account such things as the number of activities and ideas generation (Cohen, Nelson, & Walsh, 2002), as well as the number of publications and informal social exchanges (Thursby & Thursby, 2001).

Cooperative process approach. Social psychology and structural role theory have informed measures of co-operation, through
considering collaboration and coordination as distinct (Philbin, 2008). Measurement of cooperative processes has been reported to be complicated by relational characteristics (Hurmelinna, Blomqvist, Puimalainen & Surenketo, 2005). Hurmelinna et al, (2005) suggested that role asymmetry as related to resources, capabilities, power and cultural parameters are important metrics in the measurement of collaboration.

The balanced scorecard approach (Kaplan and Norton, 2001, in Philbin, 2008) was introduced as a further approach to performance measurement, to reflect improved performance metrics as universities become more accountable to stakeholders. It was based on four complementary areas of measurement: financial perspective, customer stakeholder perspective, internal process perspective, and learning and growth perspective.

All of the above approaches to evaluation appeared to have something unique to offer the evaluation. Consequently, a multipronged approach to evaluation was conducted where multiple tools were utilised. The partnership evaluation tools were selected on the basis that, together, they were inclusive of the approaches noted above.

Case study context/organisational context
Deakin University (DU) and the Department of Human Services (DHS), Barwon-South Western Region (BSWR) identified shared concerns about regional and rural health needs. It was recognised that both organisations could work towards building capacity to meet such needs given that they share the same geographic region, similar academic and professional interests, and worked in a shared environment of broader reform. During 2006 and 2007, a Business Plan was developed for the DU + DHS (BSWR) Partnership, with the aim of achieving greater university-community engagement. In December 2009, the name of the Deakin + DHS Partnership was changed to the Deakin / DH/ DHS strategic Alliance (BSWR)
The vision of the partnership is that it... will be recognised as a leading innovator in brokering and conducting relevant research, fostering a skilled workforce, and improving the overall vitality... of the BWSW Region by engaging the health and human services sector. The mission was... to protect and enhance the health and social well-being of all people living in the BWSW Region. The University and Department of Human Services, 2007, p.2). This Business Plan has provided greater strategic direction to the work of the alliance.

Further incremental changes to the activity of the Strategic Alliance included the addition of a new work plan for three additional projects in 2009, the Beacon Projects. These were identified as:

- Farmer Health, working with the newly established National Centre for Farmer Health in Hamilton, South Western Victoria;
- Teaching and Workforce Development; Research and Evidence-Based Practice; Health and Well-being; Health and Community Services; and Public Health Forums. The Advisory Group had developed significantly, evolving since their inception as part of the initial business planning process. There was now an 18-months of data from the Advisory Group activity to review and their membership had also evolved during this period. It was also identified that it would be timely to review the Core Membership of the alliance, which had grown significantly, to ensure that it reflected and matched the current direction of the Strategic Alliance.
• Neighbourhood Renewal in the Corio/Norlane areas of North Geelong, building a research base to underpin key activity, and harnessing Deakin University expertise; and

• Workforce Development priorities for the Barwon-South Western Region.

Background to the evaluation

The need for an evaluation of the Strategic Alliance had first been initiated following the launch of the Business Plan in 2007 (Deakin University and Department of Human Services, 2007). A mid-term evaluation was identified as an important process to be conducted in 2009, to gather the most relevant data at the mid point of the implementation of the Business Plan. This was to ensure the collection of early evidence to inform the Strategic Alliance through 2010 and onwards and to inform any subsequent evaluation.

The evaluation was opportunistic as there was a small amount of additional funding available and the School of Psychology, Deakin University, was available to conduct the evaluation, stepping aside from any involvement in Strategic Alliance activity.

In addition, the evaluation was implemented following considerable staffing change within the Strategic Alliance. Within a nine month period there had been staff changes to two of the three key dedicated Strategic Alliance positions and two of the four senior members of the executive of the Alliance had also changed. With the movement of new staff members into their roles working within the Strategic Alliance, there had been some opportunity for informal and ongoing critical reflection on the work program including an informal review and appraisal of active processes and projects.

The approach to the evaluation of the DU-DHS partnership

The mid-term evaluation consisted of two parts: a mapping exercise and a survey.

The mapping exercise was carried out with the Advisory Group co-chairs. This exercise was obtained from the VicHealth
Partnership Analysis Tool (VicHealth, 2005b). The purpose of this exercise was to identify the existing relationships among the agencies involved in the Alliance, and the strength of those relationships. These findings would provide an indication of where particular relationships could be strengthened to benefit the Alliance. All co-chairs provided input and were provided with the opportunity to review and comment on the linkages and relationships identified as part of the mapping exercise.

The second part of the evaluation requested all Alliance members to complete an electronic survey. This survey contained several sections:

Section A obtained demographic information from participants. Section B focused on the importance of partnerships and consisted of qualitative questions on members’ perceptions of the importance of the Alliance. Several of these questions were adapted from the VicHealth Partnership Analysis Tool (VicHealth, 2005b).

Section C consisted of statements referring to characteristics of successful partnerships. Members were asked to rate the Alliance against each statement to indicate whether such characteristics are evident within the current Alliance. This exercise was obtained from the VicHealth Partnership Analysis Tool (VicHealth, 2005b).

Section D required members to rate the current success of the Partnership and to list both barriers and facilitators to Alliance functioning. The rating scale for current Alliance success was obtained from the Nuffield Institute for Health’s Partnership Assessment Tool (Hardy, Hudson, & Waddington, 2003).

Section E required members to complete a resource-use template to highlight where and how time is spent on the Alliance. This template was obtained from Melbourne University’s UCAN2 Evaluation materials (The University of Melbourne, 2009).

Both qualitative and quantitative information was collected and analysed (see von Treuer, Mills, Johansen, Earl, & Loughnan,
2010). The results informed the findings and generated several recommendations, as set out below.

**Findings and recommendations generated from the evaluation:**

Some of the main findings were:

1. One-third of all core members had not yet attended an Advisory Group meeting.

2. The Health and Well-being Advisory Group and the Research and Evidence-Based Practice Advisory Group were largely functioning at the coordinating stage.

3. Nearly all participants reported that they were still interested in the Partnership.

4. Partnership likes included the collaborative effort and the people involved in the Partnership, whilst the most commonly reported Partnership dislike was insufficient resources, particularly referring to lack of time. To improve the Partnership, many respondents commented that more resources were needed.

5. Ninety-five percent of participants surveyed believed that there was a clear need for, and commitment to, the Partnership.

6. Forty-four percent of respondents seemed to be unsure whether the roles and responsibilities of the partners are clearly defined and understood by other partners.

7. Thirty-nine percent of participants responded *Disagree*, while 28% responded *Not Sure* to the statement: *There is an appropriate investment in terms of time, personal, materials or facilities.*

8. Forty-four percent of participants responded Not Sure to statements assessing whether (a) differences in organisational priorities have been addressed and (b) there are strategies to ensure that different views are expressed within the Partnership.
9. Half of all respondents were unsure whether or not there were processes in place to add or remove Partnership members, while 39% were unsure whether or not there were processes for recognising collective and individual achievements within the Partnership.

10. Eighty-nine percent of participants agreed with the statement: The Partnership is achieving its aims and objectives. The main barrier to Partnership performance was insufficient resources, while the key facilitators to performance were (a) clear objectives and mutual goals, (b) sufficient resources, (c) commitment and support from those involved and (d) the Partnership executive.

11. The majority of time devoted to the Partnership was spent on General Activities; however the amount of time spent on these activities varied considerably.

In light of these findings, recommendations were made.

**Recommendation 1: Investment of time and personnel, resources**

1a) Additional resources be added to the base funding in a sustainable way to ensure the current staffing fraction can be increased to better align with the current scope of key Partnership activity.

1b) The scope of Partnership activity be aligned to this revised resource base.

**Recommendation 2: Core activities**

2a) The Partnership clearly defines a maximum of three key priority areas for each Advisory Group.

2b): The number of Beacon Projects be limited, and milestones clearly marked, to ensure that the Partnership Team can appropriately meet the expectations that are raised through Partnership activity. This will also help ensure that the outcomes on each of these activities can be successfully delivered within the appropriate timeframes.
**Recommendation 3: Membership**

3a) The process of adding, removing or changing the status of Partnership members be formally reviewed. In particular, core membership should be reviewed to ensure that these members attend and are actively engaged in Partnership activity.

3b) Advisory Group membership should be continually reviewed and reinvigorated, identifying organisational gaps and targeting key stakeholders. The present Partnership focus on increasing regional TAFE representation is an example of the importance of ongoing membership review.

3c) The Partnership should seek better representation from the South-West of the region.

**Recommendation 4: Time Allocation**

4a) It is recommended that Partnership engagement activity/project work be listed among key performance activities of both Deakin and DHS staff. At present it is more often not a core activity of staff and there is no time allocation or allowance for participation in Partnership projects. Partnership engagement and activity need to be officially recognised as an integral part of job specifications. Time should be allocated to this process, not found as an optional extra.

**Recommendation 5: Acknowledgement**

5a) It is recommended that the Partnership implement and/or review processes and strategies for recognising the individual and collective contributions of members.

**Reflective practice workshop:**

In addition to the formal mid-term evaluation, an opportunity for reflective practice arose which also served to inform the partnership. During 2009, Deakin University hosted Professor Judith Ramaley, President of Winona State University, Minnesota, USA. An internationally-renowned authority on designing regional alliances to promote educational cooperation, Professor Ramaley has published extensively in the areas of community engagement, building academic communities, higher education
reform, large-scale institutional change, and research engagement. Deakin University and the Strategic Alliance had benefited greatly from Professor Ramaley's reflective insights during her prior visits to Australia. In 2009, the Alliance Team conducted a workshop and a public forum in conjunction with Professor Ramaley, building on her previous engagement with the Alliance. This included the opportunity for an intensive workshop with the Alliance team to comprehensively review progress and address future objectives. Furthermore, at the conclusion of 2009, each Advisory Group had been meeting for almost two years and Beacon Projects had been in place for one year. Core membership had also been increasing incrementally in response to Advisory Group needs without any formal review of the membership. Consequently it was timely to also review each of these aspects of the Alliance.

Together with the evaluation results, each of these factors was considered in refocusing and reshaping the model for 2010 and beyond.

How the evaluation informed the partnership progress

Building on this suite of activity, four key elements were proposed in moving the activity of the Alliance into 2010 and beyond. These included:

1. The development of a revised and refreshed model of Alliance engagement that embedded the Alliance into the mainstream, whole of government approach to regional planning (see figure 2);
2. Strengthened governance to include appropriate representation from Departments of Health and Human Services and Deakin University (in the south west of the Barwon-South Western Region) and to build stronger linkages with Alliance Advisory Group Activity;
3. Refreshed and revitalised Advisory Groups focusing on the three key priority areas of Community Capacity Building, Research Evidence and Evaluation and Workforce Development, with newly developed terms of reference and refreshed membership; and
4. Revised Alliance Executive and Team meeting schedule to more effectively link to enhance appropriate and strategic reporting opportunities.

The Alliance between Deakin University and the Departments of Health and Human Services thrives to enhance and protect the health and social wellbeing of all people living in the Barwon-South Western Region. The Alliance members continue to work to support each other in conducting each organisation’s core business (see, Deakin University and Department of Human Services, 2008). The underlying focus will continue to be a health equity approach focusing on disadvantaged populations in line with the Victorian Government’s key social priority of reducing inequality and disadvantage.

The renewed themes of the Advisory Groups are underpinned by key national, state, and regional policy and planning frameworks (see Figure 2). Underpinned by the World Health Organization’s Healthy Cities approach, this model is connected into the mainstream, whole-of-government approach to regional strategic planning recognising the key regional priorities as well as the broader determinants of health and wellbeing (see, Barwon-South Western Region, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2009).
Summary of evaluation tools and their impact on the partnership evaluation:

The following table (Table 1) displays the tools utilised and how they did and did not inform the evaluation and outcomes 12 months post evaluation.

Table 1 Evaluation tools and the impact on the Alliance 12 months on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool used</th>
<th>Reflection on evaluation findings at the time of the evaluation completion.</th>
<th>Response: The impact of the evaluation on the partnership evolution, 12 months on.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The mapping exercise conducted with the Advisory Group co-chairs.</td>
<td>The mapping exercises provided validation that the Alliance is well connected to key regional organisations.</td>
<td>The importance of local connections and networks is pivotal to Advisory Group activity and has continued to be a primary consideration in establishing new Advisory Groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section A of the survey obtained demographic information from participants.</td>
<td>The low response rate may have captured the core members who are actively involved and</td>
<td>A review of the core membership has been conducted in line with refreshing and renewing the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 Deakin/DH/DHS Strategic Alliance Model for 2010.
| Section B focused on the importance of partnerships and consisted of qualitative questions on members’ perceptions of the importance of the Alliance. | motivated participants, rather than the large number of members who are not active AG members. | approach of our Advisory Groups and the membership has been revised accordingly. | responsibilities of members. Additional areas of concern included the staff time allocated to the Alliance and the funding base. | important, as the work program is implemented that the responsibilities of members in each of the Advisory Groups are clearly articulated in implementing the work plan. The need for additional resources has been identified across each Advisory Group and at the Executive level. |

| Section C consisted of statements referring to characteristics of successful partnerships. | Findings are consistent with foundations of the Alliance and continue to be relevant to our work. Partnership dislikes relating to lack of time are consistent with the team’s impression of workload at the time. | These findings continue to underpin the way we work with our partners. The new Model aims to be more sustainable in its focus with fewer priorities and a better alignment of activity to the current staffing base. | Variation regarding celebration of collective and individual achievement. Respondents could be Alliance Team or those working in other organisations in which case differing responses would be required. The need for additional resources was also identified as a concern. | Opportunities to celebrate collective and individual achievement can be facilitated at all levels of Alliance activity. |
Discussion

The continuous improvement of alliances can be seen as a transformational process. Tools and metrics that assist the evaluation process can be viewed as a vehicle to assist this transformation process. The evaluation approach was to incorporate several established metrics which cover a range of engagement-performance measurement tools.

The Alliance is at an early-to-almost-intermediate stage of development; the evaluation concluded that the Alliance was operating at a co-ordinating/collaborating stage (see Figure 1). The evaluation metrics were generally useful in forming the new strategic direction and structure of the Alliance in its early to intermediate stage.

Specifically, in this context, most of the evaluation metrics and the reflective workshop informed the new model of the Alliance. The resource-use template provided the least helpful information. Only a small subsection of the respondents completed this section.
of the survey. Upon reflection, this would have been a difficult part of the survey to complete. The question asked Alliance members to complete a resource-use template to highlight where and how time is spent on the Alliance. The template completion required a retrospective estimate of time spent on the Alliance over a three month period. It is possible that this section of the survey was difficult to complete due to the huge variation in time that most members would have spent on the Partnership, and to the retrospective nature of the question which may have led to Alliance members not feeling confident in completing this section of the survey.

Therefore, the above reflections support the use of the engagement-performance metrics utilised for the evaluation of this Alliance. Most of the tools used were also seen to be useful 12 months after the evaluation.

**Limitations:**
The main limitation to the case study evaluation was the small sample size. This means that while the reflection revealed that the results were ecologically useful, the generalisability of these findings should only be done with caution.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

**Recommendations:**
Several recommendations have emerged as a result of reflecting upon the evaluation approach and the tools utilised.

Recommendations include:

1. The ongoing tracking and comparison of individual metrics over time would provide a clear analysis of collaboration performance, as well as contributing towards identifying areas for improvement.

2. Most of the evaluation tools were a positive addition to the suite of metrics utilised, and would provide useful
benchmark data should they be repeated in a further evaluation.

3. As the Alliance evolves further, the measurement of more tangible outcomes such as publications, and grants sought and obtained, may be useful.

4. Tracking of resource use would ideally be measured prospectively. This would provide more accurate account of time spent on the partnership.

**Conclusions:**
The holistic and comprehensive approach to partnership evaluation was useful to the continuous improvement of the partnership. The benefits were also evident 12 months after the evaluation. Understanding how to optimally manage alliances is a critical component of continuous improvement, and the evaluation of such collaborations may serve to inform good practice and will aid sustainability. As stated in a quote captured in a qualitative study "Longevity and collaboration renewal is the ultimate measure of success, where the best measure is the achievement of a sustainable collaboration" (Philbin, 2008, p19).

**References**


Barwon-South Western Region, Victorian Government Department of Human Services (March 2009), Barwon-South Western Regional Plan 2009.


