

## **Changing notions of ‘partnership’? Changing policy and practices?**

‘Evolving understanding of ‘social partnerships’ between small businesses, VET and one regional community.’

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### **Abstract**

Traditionally much of the research with small enterprises represents the institutional, functionalist discourses of small business participation and formal contribution to VET and workforce development. This practitioner researcher PhD study has been exploring notions of ‘learning partnership’ with the small firm to challenge these predominant economic rationalist paradigms, and to reconstruct an alternative ‘space’ or discourse of social partnerships for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) between VET, industry, and civic society. This paper debates the theoretical tensions for critical interpretive researchers working within a qualitative, humanistic framework, in resisting and reconciling theories of ‘evidence based policy’ and community business partnerships in a ‘neopositivist’ policy climate. It presents challenges for both practitioners and small business in promulgating alliances across the sectors, within the constraints of a neoliberalist market economy. It concludes with implications for future VET policy and practice through cross sectoral partnerships with industry for capacity building, workforce development and ESD.

### **Introduction**

#### ***VET and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development***

Internationally a raft of policy platforms have been launched at the global level with the aim of embedding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the economy and society through social partnerships and capacity building with Vocational Education and Training (VET) at the regional, sub regional, and grass roots, community level (Botaya, *et al* 2004; Birch, 2004; UNESCO 2006, 2005 a, b, UNESCO and UNEP 2005; United Nations Environment Programme 2002, Kronner, 2005). Supranational policy statements such as the Millennium Goals, Education for All, the United Nations/ UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), the ILO Decent Work Strategy, and World Business Council on Sustainable Development Global Compact (Birch, 2004) advocate public private partnerships as a vehicle to underpin the pillars of sustainable development: economies, cultures and society, and the natural environment. These documents call for coordination through inter agency arrangements for strengthening governance at international, national and regional levels. Key drivers of this change management process are to be cross sectoral multidisciplinary approaches with stakeholder groups, to monitor and evaluate progress towards the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). There is pressure though for VET research and practice to come to grips with the meaning of policy convergence for enabling social partnerships for ESD with industry in developing, transitional and developed market economies.

### ***Research seeking reconciliation in diametrically opposing ‘lifeworlds’***

For the reader this qualitative, critical interpretive PhD study has been exploring the enablers and barriers for promulgating cross sectoral social partnerships for ESD in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in one peri urban, high growth region of South Australia. The research has been ‘critiquing’ a theoretical construct of ‘ecologies of learning’, or ‘capacities of capital’ for promulgating a workable model of social partnerships through small business, community partnerships and VET in a developed economy (Plane, 2001). The study is multidisciplinary, ‘critiquing’ the interrelationship, or lack of synergy between two disparate, yet interdependent ‘life worlds’ (Habermas 1987, 1984, Humphries, 2006, Humphries and Grant, 2005). The first is the instrumental world of functionalism, and managerialism; the corporate world of globalising, strident market economies, and skilling workforces for growth and regional development. The second is the subjective world of people; the social ‘lifeworld’ of building civic capacity, democracy and personal agency and improving the quality of life of human beings through community capacity building and sustainable development. But there is also another ‘space’ (Harris and Simons, 2006), and into these opposing ‘life worlds’ and competitive jungle now enters the fearless VET practitioner; with a fine butterfly net to catch the interested adult learner, a medicine bag of training packages for industry, and a vision for social partnerships in communities; therein lies a fascinating between ‘world’ for exploration and critique.

### ***Small business as social partner in ESD?***

*We will have time to reach the Millennium Development Goals- worldwide and in most, or even all countries- but only if we break with business as usual”. (Annan 2006, p.1)*

Those calling for an urgent change to ‘business as usual’ contend though that DESD policy goals will demand collaboration and utilising the innovation, expertise and resources of industry to underpin infrastructure for developing sustainable learning regions. Small business now comprises 99.7% of all small and small to medium sized businesses on the planet, and employs 75% of the world’s workers, (UNESCO 2005b, Annex 2, p.5). There is a need to redefine the role for small business within the discourses of social partnership as it is a key stakeholder in workforce, community and sustainable development at the regional level, but is often excluded (Victorian Government Parliamentary Paper 2005, p.6) and disenfranchised from the debate. Social partnerships may occupy a positive space for building resilience in reconciling and resisting the impact of globalisation at the community level and may be an evolving form of networked governance for political engagement in regional communities, (Seddon 2004, Considine, 2005, Allison, Gorringer and Lacey 2006; Billett and Seddon, 2004, Sumner, 2000) There are challenges for practice however, for promulgating social partnerships and inclusion with the smaller business at the local level in a competitive economy, and finding the right balance of corporate community involvement in VET in the current neopositivist policy climate:

*“The Washington Consensus was a policy prescription that benefited transnational corporations, large companies and international financial institutions, often at the expense of small local businesses, and always at the expense of the poor”. (Beder, 2006 p.46)*

### ***Reducing the subjugation to global corporatism?***

There are diametrically opposing views in the discourses however, on the extent to which the state and civic society has become subjugated to global, corporate interests and the market (Beder 2006, Hunt 2003, Gleeson 2005, Hamilton 2003, Hamilton and Dennis 2005, Gettler, 2005). Public pressure on government and the larger corporate organisation from stakeholder capitalism and consumers is realising a slow evolution towards social, cultural and environmental accountability. The corporate misdemeanours of the 1990's, and what some have termed an epidemic of 'Enronitis' have resulted in the Sarbanes Oxley Legislation (2002) in United States, Corporate Governance Codes in the United Kingdom and Australia, and new regulations for Social Accountability and Triple Bottom Line Reporting (Garratt, 2003, Gettler, 2005, Vanclay, 2003). There are conflicting views though on whether industry has the skills, capacity and propensity to develop Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and a sociological footprint throughout its human resources and organisational policies (Gettler 2005; Vandenberg 2002; Goldsmith and Samson 2005, Birch, 2001, Bowles, 2001, Wackernagel and Rees 1996). There are dissimilar opinions too, about corporate involvement in VET, and to what degree industry should be allowed to dominate, and drive the policy agenda and VET curriculum, without taking a significant social partnerships stakehold at the same time (Billett, 2004).

### ***ESD, industry leadership and a balanced policy agenda?***

Another barrier for promulgating social partnerships is the incompatibility of instrumentalist policies for democracy, equity, social sustainability and inclusion (Hamilton and Dennis 2005, Hamilton, 2003; Humphries, 2006, McKenzie, 2004). There are those who contend that corporate dominance and the privatisation waves of the last three decades have resulted in an insidious policy culture increasing social division and inequality, polarising communities and reducing capacity at the local level (Beder 2006, Apple, Kenway, and Singh, 2005; Gleeson, 2005; Hamilton, 2003, Spoehr *et al* 2002, Pusey 2003). Senge, Scharmer, Jaworksi and Flowers (2005) contend there is little safe space in the discourses of corporate culture though for dissenting perspectives. Humphries (2006) contends we have few ways of thinking beyond the marketplace, and this 'lifeworld' dominates our relationships with everything around us. There has been political contention about the marginalised pillars of ESD, the 'othered capitals': climate change, environmental degradation, cultural inclusion, and social sustainability (WMO, UNEP, 2007, Bardsley 2006, McManus, 2005, Gleeson 2005, Pusey 2003, Yencken and Porter, 2000; McKenzie 2004, Ellyard 1998). There is a need to find theoretical alternatives to the traditional market model and redefine stakeholder capitalism, and as Hamilton (2003) has argued, reconstruct a policy culture suitable for a post growth society. In practice, this means enculturating triple bottom line ethics for ESD through VET institutions and industry and leadership capacity in change management (UNESCO, UNEP 2005; ARIES, 2004, a, b, Chinien *et al* 2004, Tilbury 2004, Bowles, 2001).

### ***Seeking the meaning of Sustainable Entrepreneurship?***

De Woot (2005) has asked us to question to what extent the 'Prometheus' of industry should be bound by stakeholders. Hunt (2003) provides evidence of the paradox of the lost faith, and crisis of confidence in larger corporations. He finds management has

become timid and indecisive, has lost its pioneering spirit, and is a victim of change, as opposed to driving it. Hindle (2005, p.3) argues existing practices misperceive entrepreneurship and for initiatives which cultivate capacities to enable Australia to lift its “*middle of the international road status*”. There are those who seek a more holistic approach to small business training (Gibb 2006, Birch, 2004, Fenwick 2000; Storey 2004, Johnson, 2002) finding existing curricula is inadequate and anachronistic for successful entrepreneurship and fostering leadership, creativity and innovation. Smaller businesses are embedded in their communities at the grass roots; local entrepreneurs can play an integral leadership role in workforce, community and sustainable development through networks, partnerships and alliances. Some may already be playing this role, (Madden, Scaife and Crissman, 2006); but we know little about ESD in the context of industry (UNESCO and UNEP 2005), or what impacts on decision making capacity in small business to adopt the triple/quadruple bottom line.

## **Methodology**

The practical application of the study has involved four years field work and ‘lived in’ observation gathering data from practitioners in the ‘institution’ of VET, and practitioners in the ‘institution’ of small business. The research has adopted qualitative techniques of critical interpretive inquiry through semi structured interviews, with both groups (Denzin and Giardina 2006, Piantinida and Garman 1999; Guba and Lincoln 1989, Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Small business is defined as the owner managed small firm (6-19 employees) and the micro firm workplace (1-5 employees) from a range of industry sectors. Practitioners include those working in VET, ACE, community and regional development, business incubation and support; library and information services and local government. One hundred and twenty interviews have been undertaken; all interviews have been transcribed and returned to the interviewee for correction and comment. Data analysis of transcripts has been managed using spreadsheets and NVivo text analysis software. It is acknowledged that a regional case study is restricted to transferability by its scope; but may offer new interpretations about the meaning of cross sectoral social partnerships with VET.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The study has found evidence of proactive, successful partnerships, networks and alliances in the region, across a spectrum of formality to informality. Formalised partnerships are often within public sectors, community sectors and between sectors of local governance and NGO’s through shared funding arrangements. Conversely ‘Partnerships’ in the context of small business are more often informal alliances, networks and industry clusters between similar firms, or between the firm and its local community. The success of clustering may depend on the ‘nature’ of the people in the industry, its industry leadership, and suitability for networks and alliance building. There is evidence of clustering particularly in wine, food, local tourism, accommodation and hospitality, and ecotourism. Other successful alliances have been formed between government and industry through the horse industry networks, land care management, safe chemicals use, and small property management with the commitment of local practitioners to capacity building. These networks are outside formal VET and a vital lifeline for collaborative marketing, learning in the industry, and information sharing between businesses in similar industries. Some have been driven by the industry itself in response to a crisis or immediate need; others have

been formed through government assistance and regional development intervention stimulating local networks and alliance building. There are challenges though in sustaining these networks which are very much built on trust, healthy social capital and continued local contact between people within their respective industries. 'Partnerships' however, in the context of small business are often perceived as sponsorship, or corporate philanthropy through providing 'work in kind', gifts and resources, and labour or local expertise. Some of the businesses interviewed were very active in the community through local associations, Rotary and Lions Clubs, Chambers of Commerce and Sporting Associations, and local events sponsorship- but they were mostly well established firms. In this context, the notion of small business as social partner in supporting the community is a very successful one.

But are other small firms just as politically disengaged and marginalised by the marketplace, and how does this impact on participation within VET and ESD debates? As in the wider community and populous there are questions about income disparity, socioeconomic status and inclusion, representation and participation; there are similar questions for the small business sector. The social partnership role may not be one played out across all industries or be suitable for all small businesses. Many firms in this region are very small and micro businesses; some are very isolated and need support to function themselves. Not all firms are established enough in their life stage to be philanthropic, or employ people and formally train them, or have the flexibility to participate in an industry network, or to learn outside the firm. There are those who never had the intention of becoming larger and employing, many are lifestyle, hobby businesses only. Others are downshifting and downsizing; seeking the 'good life', 'just enough' style businesses. They were previously employers, but prefer to be very small owner operators and there are questions as to whether or not this is a trend and why. There are also significant differences in levels of inclusion and participation in networks between industries, with some industries clustering more than others. There are challenges then, for promulgating cross sectoral social partnerships across dissimilar and diverse industries and the -for -profit and not-for- profit sectors which include:

- A predominant focus on the survival of the organisation
- The increasing workload, labour intensity and commitment to the workplace
- A perceived 'safeness' in autonomy: less risk and threat, more control.
- Partnerships are seen as a vehicle for corporate sponsorship by both sectors, and less about building social relationships, or sharing knowledge and learning
- Not knowing who to partner with, little free time for networking
- Restricted human resources in small organisations to grow the alliances
- Partnerships are not seen as conducive to the organisational goals or culture; values and differences between partners are perceived as too great
- Both sectors are grappling with a preoccupied focus on the defensive and protecting the organisation/firm and its resource base from threat
- The increased accountability, measuring, auditing workload for the organisation/firm taking focus away from pursuing external opportunities
- Partnerships are not seen as core 'business' in their industry/ sector
- Partnerships and alliances are mainly in similar, like sectors where it is easier to forge the links, where networks are already strong
- Both practitioner and small business capacity and capability for promulgating social partnerships is being eroded by hierarchies of control above them

### ***An anachronistic ideology for a sustainable development agenda?***

The research finds that neoclassical liberalism which should be capacity building for small business in theory is increasing polarisation and disengagement in small firms in practice, and antithetical and capacity reducing for promulgating social partnerships with VET. 'Globalising neoliberalism' results in disparities and inequalities even in the egalitarian small business sector, and a high growth community, with tensions for promulgating cross-sectoral social partnerships for workforce development and ESD between smaller organisations, at the local level. Jennings, Perren and Carter (2005, p 180) have argued for '*paradigmatic pluralism*' in the entrepreneurship debates finding that functionalism removes the possibility of small businesses creating personal agency, ignoring the power relationships within the political discourses. Billett (2006, p.8-9) contests this, arguing that small business owner's use personal agency to manage external conditions and are independent of, and not subjugated to the market. Hamilton (2003, p.180-85) contends though we do not have the alternative political frameworks to support human beings downshifting and rejecting the marketplace. Similarly, implementing the quadruple bottom line in industry in the context of a post growth society has created a mismatch for VET curricula for sustainable entrepreneurship and capacity building for ESD. In the highly regulated policy climate of the so called deregulated economy (Hunt, 2003), there are questions for research and policy about whether VET is 'training' small business entrepreneurs (and VET practitioners?) for leadership, creativity, innovation and collaboration, or a workplace culture of insularity, audit, and compliance to meet the demands of an oppressive, anachronistic doctrine and its ideologies.

### ***Enablers for Social Partnerships***

In a time of devolution and decentralisation, at least in theory, local social partnerships may have an integral role in filling a resources and leadership void in shrinking public sector governance. There is reconciliatory work to do however, to build collaboration for ESD across sectors with often little meaningful contact on a day to day basis, competing organisational goals and values. Practically improving relationships between the 'lifeworlds' of industry and VET is integral to ESD; yet we know little of how VET itself needs to change to manage the shift to sustainable development and a post industrialist society. This will need to be balanced by a similar paradigm shift in governance and regulation at the policy level. If the Millennium and Education for Sustainable Development goals are to be met through social partnerships and fully realised in VET/TVET there needs to be:

- Better cross sectoral collaboration, convergence and integration for ESD at the international, national and state policy level
- Strategic, not ad hoc, funding arrangements for VET, local government, NGO's, regional development and community organisations for developing sustainable partnerships/alliances for the longer term at the regional level
- Support for the capacity builders to work across the sectors to create the space within the discourses for alternative debate about realistic change management practices for ESD at the community level
- Recognising other ways of 'knowing' and legitimising the integral role for VET practitioners, local community leaders, volunteers and small business and their value in driving the grass roots process.

## Conclusion

The paper concludes that in the evolving search for a suitable paradigm of sustainable capitalism and sustainable entrepreneurship there are difficult tensions for VET policy and practice being brought about by the 'revolution' of the stakeholder capitalism, social partnerships debate. Embedding ESD in VET means reconciling competing needs of state, industry and civic society and redefining a policy climate more conducive to rebuilding trust, collaboration and tolerance for democratic, peaceful, inclusive societies around the world. Globalising neoliberalism results however in polarised levels of political engagement and empowerment with economic, social, cultural, and environmental winners and losers. There is need for further research to critique the impact of three decades of economic rationalist policies on the theory and practice of social partnerships in not only developed, but also, developing and transitional economies around the world.

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