

# **Fruitful learning ecologies: Building effective partnerships**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we reflect on our own and broader practice with a lens on partnerships, one of the keys to successful TAFE Outreach practice. Traditionally our partnerships have been built on longstanding relationships and often emerge through organic processes that are articulated in current learning ecology theses derived from Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (1979). Dynamic interagency networks are often at the heart of this process. This collaborative approach can lead to highly innovative, locally negotiated, supportive and flexible programs for equity student groups. External policy pressure on educational providers to develop new paradigms in order to comply with conditions such as imposed partnerships with nominated agencies can undermine existing successful models. We reflect on our own practice and explore practices within Australia and in other countries to inform our future directions.

## **Introduction**

In this paper we will analyse partnerships in our own practice and feedback from key partners and teachers to garner a range of perspectives on the essence of healthy productive partnerships. This research extends across four TAFE Outreach practices in inner and south western Sydney and will ascertain recurrent themes emerging from the literature and data, to help us better understand our practice and the systems we work under.

In 2010 Kevin Rudd launched a National Compact 'Working Together' that laid out a framework to foster cooperation and partnership between the 'Third Sector' and government. While there is plethora of evidence to support the richness of outcomes and broader benefits of partnerships in Vocational Education and Training (VET) (Kell 2006, Plane 2007, Cooke and Kenny 2009, Harding 2010), we question the viability of authentic productive partnerships in the current context of competition where agencies struggle to win limited funds. Furthermore, in VET, imposed partnerships have become part of the landscape particularly with programs for disadvantaged learners where funding can be contingent upon partnerships. Reflecting on more than three decades of practice of working with equity groups using a multi-agency approach, we find many fruitful outcomes for learners and their communities.

The key to success of TAFE Outreach is authentic collaboration which comes from deeply embedded partnerships. The word partnership can describe a legal entity linked to business and while the formality of such legal partnerships has a role in successful practice, it is the collaboration that is the essence of the partnership which leads to success. According to anecdotal evidence within our community of practice, imposed partnerships can have a tendency to undermine outcomes. The complexities of strong partnerships in learning align comfortably with the ecology metaphor that reflects diversity of dimensions and perspectives that can overlap, interact and inform practice rather than mechanistic hierarchical metaphors.

In order to contextualise the issues addressed in this paper we provide a brief summary of TAFE Outreach which emerged in 1974 as a result of the intersection of two events. Firstly Don Phillips (TAFE Assistant Director) returned from an Educational tour of the United States where he was inspired by urban outreach programs and secondly the release of the

Kangan report which recommended that technical colleges should ‘move away from their narrow role of producing manpower for industry’ (Kangan, 1974) into a broader role encompassing ‘lifelong’ and ‘second chance’ learning. The report also recommended that TAFE NSW take on a role of social responsibility to engage the most marginalised in our communities through adult education opportunities. From its inception in 1976 TAFE Outreach has used a partnership model as per the Outreach Policy 4.2.7 “negotiating, establishing and maintaining effective state-level partnerships and alliances with relevant Government Departments, NGOs and other educational providers and equity advocacy and support groups” (Outreach Policy, PD/2005/0299/V01) to engage people experiencing multiple dimensions of exclusion (Frierer, 2001) in community and vocational education and it continues to use this strategy. The role of social responsibility and notions of lifelong learning have diminished amidst the competitive training market and growth of managerialism in public policy as VET moves towards the more narrow role of supplying workers for industry (Butland, 2008).

This paper problematises the extent to which partnerships in VET equity programs act to optimise resources and sustainable outcomes. We argue that Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model fits well with our successful practice in contrast to partnerships developed as a result of current government policy and strict funding guidelines. We draw on ecological models as underpinning theory for the analysis of our data to ascertain the dominant and recurring themes. This thematic analysis is applied to the role of partnership programs for learners experiencing multiple barriers to education, employment and community engagement and their relationship to successful outcomes. Our aim is twofold: to present a more effective model of working in cross-sectoral partnerships for future practice; and to critique the governance issues that impose restraints upon this model.

## Literature Review

The current Federal Government’s Social Inclusion agenda lists among its approaches the building of partnerships with key stakeholders and building joined-up services and whole of government solutions. Our research has uncovered a wide range of studies and reflections on the effectiveness of partnerships in supporting effective adult education.

Louise Olliff (2010) reports in the Refugee Council of Australia's *What Works - Employment Strategies for Refugee and Humanitarian Entrants* that the major theme emerging from research findings was the positive effect of strong coordination and collaboration between service providers, industries and communities.

Hodgson and Spours (2009) draw on the work of ecological theorists Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Finegold (1999) to explore lifelong learning governance in the UK and to reflect on various strategies for ‘building effective, inclusive and collaborative local learning ecologies, capable of meeting the needs of all learners in a locality’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2009, p.4). They refer to Coffield and colleagues (2008) study that found that ‘steering from the centre has produced instability amongst education providers’ and ‘reliance on the market (which in reality is highly centrally managed) has also resulted in the unintended marginalisation of the most vulnerable learners’. This has led to competition at a local level rather than collaboration and Carmel and Harlock (2008, p.155) express concern that the third sector have become ‘disembedded from their social and political contexts and denuded of ethical and moral content and purpose’. Allison, Gorringer and Lacey (2006, p. 31) found that collaboration being ‘driven by competition for a relatively small number of training dollars’, lack of flexibility in training package delivery, and that ‘institutional delivery/budget

requirements hindering flexibility and creativity' were institutional barriers to outputs and outcomes.

As an alternative perspective to top down centralism and marketisation Hodgson and Spours (2009) explore the more flexible concept of learning ecologies to explain the complex inter-dependent relationships operating at the different levels of British arrangements of adult education and lifelong learning. Brown (2002) describes ecologies 'as living systems containing a diversity of factors that interact with each another organically; that are partially self organising, adaptive and fragile' (Hodgson & Spours, 2009, p. 9) and the authors state how these systems provide another perspective and 'new language' for exploring the 'spatial and dynamic communication and governance' of what they call 'collaborative local learning ecologies'.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the ecological model of human development as operating at the micro, meso, exo and macro levels with micro being the interpersonal in one's immediate environment, mesosystems comprising the linkages between the immediate and school, college or workplace, exosystems being the effects of a larger institution, community and government and their policies on a person; and the macrosystem being the overarching culture, subculture, belief systems and customs. Hodgson and Spours (2009) apply these systems to the adult learner and their connection with institutions and the wider political system. Furthermore Hodgson and Spours (2009, p.11) deem that 'those who use ecological theory seek to describe and create new realities. In the main they have attempted to develop holistic and multi-level thinking' and 'point to areas of action, in particular the development of new forms of collaboration – popular, professional and institutional – that create spaces for local deliberation of innovation and capacity building.'

Balatti, Black and Falk (2009) explored using a social capacity approach in the teaching of literacy and numeracy to adults. The social capital perspective necessitates seeing the learner as a member of networks or as a community member who accesses networks. Balatti, Black and Falk (2009, p. 6) adapt Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model to describe the various partnership configurations that can contribute to better outcomes for adult literacy and numeracy learners. They conclude that 'an effective approach depends on an integration of the macro, meso and micro aspects of the intervention' and that policy needs to 'build on existing successful models from **inside and outside government** and to draw all stakeholders into the national dialogue on the role of adult literacy and numeracy in enabling socially inclusive policies' (Balatti, Black & Falk 2009, p. 12).

In 2009 we concluded that the 'broad and deep community partnerships across all levels of government, non government organisations, industry and other community groups give [NSW TAFE] Outreach an in depth understanding of local communities and networks that are effective in joining up services to provide support and intervention where it is needed for our students' (Cooke & Kenny, 2009).

Karen Plane (2007) considers the challenges of providing education for sustainable development (ESD) in a neoliberal market economy and considers the difficulties three decades of marketisation poses for the setting up of cross-sectoral social partnerships. Plane finds that social partnerships occupy two main separate 'spaces', one the market economy, functionalism, managerialism and skilling workforces for economic growth and the other, the social 'lifeworld' of civic and community capacity, democracy, personal agency and sustainable development. She purports that the VET practitioner works between these opposing 'lifeworlds' with their plethora of courses and skills to lure the adult learner and

their 'vision for social partnerships' and that this requires exploration (Plane, 2007, p.2). In respect to partnerships Plane notes that Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers (2005) 'contend there is little safe space in the discourses of corporate culture though for dissenting perspectives' (Plane, 2007, p. 3).

In her research Plane found evidence of successful partnerships and networks of varying degrees of formality between the public, community and business sectors. Plane states there is a need for reconciliatory work to build collaboration for ESD across sectors as a result of 'competing organisational goals and values' and concludes that 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' (Plane, 2007, p. 7).

In the NVEAC Equity Blueprint 2011-2016 the authors state that they 'know that establishing the right partnerships and connections and nurturing them so they are robust, sustainable, and based on mutual benefits are fundamental to achieving successful pathways and transitions, particularly to employment' (NVEAC, 2010, p. 35).

Skills Australia in their submission to the NVEAC blueprint respond that 'currently the VET outcomes framework does not recognise the time consuming work of RTOs in developing partnerships, engagement and customised services. Until there is acknowledgement of the value of this work in accountability frameworks, partnerships and wrap around services may continue to be the exception rather than the rule' (Bullock, 2010 p.3).

## **Research Method**

The methodology for this research comprised a thematic analysis of qualitative data. The data was drawn from partner and teacher questionnaires. To contextualise the findings case studies and enrolment and pathway statistics are presented together with reflections on the effectiveness of several decades of partnership approaches. Learning ecology models provide a framework for this analysis as data was interrogated to determine compatibility with the system levels defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his theory of human development.

Based on our collective experience and knowledge gleaned from the literature we developed a questionnaire for a range of partners and teachers seeking feedback about their partnership projects, the qualities necessary for success, the constraints, challenges and communication strategies. Respondents were asked to comment on aspects of partnerships, emerging as themes such as access to resources, commitment to a common goal, organizational protocols, compliance issues, funding guidelines and restrictions, benefits to students, outcomes, community capacity building, risk taking, reporting, celebrating, MOUs, systemic barriers, funding, legal and bureaucratic requirements.

## **Findings and discussions**

### *Case studies*

The partner respondents we are collaborating with come from a range of organisations and have provided a wealth of feedback. The participants included in their partnership programs are from geographic areas identified as some of the most disadvantaged in NSW (Vinson, 2007). Projects nominated by the partners as examples of successful collaborations, were those engaging individuals in further study or employment in Marrickville LGA, Partners in Learning and Community Engagement (PLACE) in the City of Sydney, Social Inclusion Pathways for Refugee Youth (SIPRY) in Fairfield LGA and Warwick Farm Neighbourhood

Centre in Liverpool Local Government Area (LGA). The projects used collective learning strategies and prioritised long term outcomes and community capacity building.

### *Connect Marrickville (SACC - Schools as Community Centres)*

The Connect centre that is based at Marrickville West Public School is an important hub for local families. Connect has as its official target group families raising children 0-8 years living in Marrickville South, particularly those who do not easily access mainstream services, including Aboriginal people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, refugees, the socially isolated, people with disabilities, people in precarious housing situations and people of low socio-economic status. Connect Marrickville and Petersham TAFE Outreach have had a strong and enduring partnership since 2006 with many educational programs conducted on site as well as an informal referral service for community members to TAFE Counselling and Disabilities services and other community based or campus course provision. Educational programs conducted on site include *Work Opportunities for Women (WOW)* courses, *Playgroup Facilitation* courses, *English Language* classes, a *Creating Community Events Course*, *Sewing Skills Workshops*, *Barista* training and a *Literacy for our Kids* program.

Over 30% of the 198 students have accessed employment with a much higher percentage pathwaying into further study. This partnership has significantly increased parental involvement in the school community, with some students taking on roles in the P&C, supporting local community cultural development initiatives, volunteering in the school canteen and on reading programs for children and facilitating cultural or bilingual playgroups. Many other partners have contributed to the success of these programs and continue to provide opportunities for further community engagement and employment.

### *Social Inclusion Pathways for Refugee Youth*

In 2008 Centrelink responded to the Federal Government's commitment to promote social inclusion with their *Place Based Services Initiative (PBSI)* projects. This included a PBSI project through Fairfield Centrelink for young refugees. Wetherill Park TAFE Outreach joined the Action Research Group (ARG) based on a long standing productive partnership with PBSI Manager Edna McKelleher. In early 2009 at an ARG meeting the principal of Fairfield High School, Bob Mulas, expressed profound concerns about the complex issues posing obstacles to young refugees. Mulas's concerns instigated a spin off project with a committed core group forming a partnership that had a shared vision which provided the glue for the ecology within this effective partnership (Hodgson & Spours, 2009, p.17).

Sixteen young refugee students from Iraq, Afghanistan, Burma and the Sudan enrolled in a pilot program named *Social Inclusion Pathways for Refugee Youth (SIPRY)*. The students were referred from the Centrelink PBSI and Fairfield High School's Intensive English Centre (IEC). The pilot succeeded in engaging the learners in adult education and raising their awareness of viable Vocational Education and Training options. A marker of success was school attendance of 41% transitioned to 90% at TAFE with all absences explained. Negotiation and authentic consultation with partners and the students provided an effective platform to develop SIPRY with a flexible framework suited to customisation for similar programs elsewhere. Currently the program has been customised and delivered in Blacktown, Miller, Bankstown and Liverpool. Each program is locally negotiated and contextualised to be relevant to the learner group and partnership.

### *Warwick Farm Neighbourhood Centre Project*

The Warwick Farm Neighbourhood Centre has a long history with Liverpool TAFE Outreach but in 2008 the partnership regrouped and created a community hub. The proposal was for a Food Market to improve community health. The opportunities planned included participants gaining OHS, customer service skills, employability skills, greater awareness of healthy affordable dietary choices, extending networks and participation in a community project. Pat Hall, the coordinator at the Warwick Farm community centre was full of energy, knowledge and commitment to the project and community in Warwick Farm, a housing estate in a high profile postcode area. Hall knew the needs and strengths of the local community. She had the respect and trust of this community and an extensive network available to contribute to the project. Students became empowered and continue to take on opportunities and challenges beyond our expectations. Hall's quote reflects Plane's social life worlds and Brown's (1999) description of ecologies:

*"Doorways to the Future* is a partnership between Liverpool Districts Neighbourhood Centres Association (LDNCA), Sydney South West Area Health Service (SSWAHS) and TAFE Outreach where the course was designed to train people to work in the Food 4 Life Food Market, a pilot project run by SSWAHS and Salvation Army. The Neighbourhood Centre advertised the class, TAFE Outreach trained the volunteers and then they worked in the Market which allows residents of Warwick Farm to purchase approximately \$40.00 of food for \$10.00 each week ... These same students have now volunteered their time at the centre and work on Special Events and a newsletter which is distributed to 2,500 residents every three months."

### *Findings*

Our findings from the thematic analysis are grouped under Governance, Learning Ecologies and Outcomes as the dominant and recurring themes fit well under these subject areas.

#### *Governance - impacts of funding models and government policy*

The main and recurrent themes emerging from the data included: funding constraints, parameters and contestability; time constraints; and compliance problems with partnering agencies.

Though partnerships are deemed to be cost effective and a means of using available resources a dominant theme from the data suggests that certain governance issues such as contestable funding and funding parameters threaten to undermine the success of collaborative programs for equity target groups. Funding policy and guidelines do not necessarily take into account the complexity of partnership arrangements, the time required to build successful collaborations and the negative effects of local agencies competing for funding. Likewise in the UK "top-down policymaking and marketisation have contributed to the undermining of the local level of governance and institutions' ability to respond to their local communities and labour markets" (Hodgson & Spours, 2009, pp. 6-7).

Several of the more recent Connect educational programs have been funded by Federal Innovation funding with the Sydney Institute PLACE Project (Partners in Learning and Community Enterprise), a partnership program that aims to provide creative place-based solutions to address barriers to employment and community engagement for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the three inner city/inner west communities. This funding has created many opportunities that would have been unimaginable under previous funding arrangements.

TAFE sustainability teacher Paddy Lane states that a major barrier to effective collaboration 'can be lack of transparency around true agendas'. These agendas are generally a result of

external guidelines (funding or operational) or the internal policy or culture of an organisation and these pressures though occurring at an exosystem level can have destructive effects on a project as it impacts at the meso and microsystem by undermining participants' goals and project goals. A theme common across the programs were constraints from the exosystem where participants' success was at risk as JSAs (Job Services Australia) did not acknowledge the benefits of course attendance and work experience available to their 'clients' and threatened 'breaches' or loss of benefits if they chose to attend a 'competing' program. Partnership key players advocated for these students who were confused and intimidated by the situation.

Government policy and resulting changed institution targets can have a negative effect on program participants, for example, the defunding of pathway prevocational and access vocational courses as the emphasis shifts to achieving higher qualifications to meet COAG targets. For educators working with marginalised learners there is now a gap between access programs and AQF Certificates III and IV qualifications - the bridge in bridging pathways has been withdrawn. Level I and II certificate courses have previously been essential articulation pathways to higher qualifications.

Policies developed at the exosystem level such as welfare to work requirements impact negatively on participants progress and these are in turn a result of the thinking of the dominant political power. These macrosystem beliefs and resulting policies impact in a very real way on students of community access courses that are aiming to provide people with an opportunity to escape from the welfare trap. Policy requirements can force students to withdraw from courses as they do not fulfil the 15 hour mutual obligation expected of most welfare recipients. This correlates with our own experience of working with partners who require very specific outcomes in order to acquire funding, for example their need to place clients in full time courses or full-time employment when only part-time courses/employment opportunities are available or manageable. This is particularly disappointing given that courses for equity groups are designed as part-time to help reduce the barriers that those students face (Waddell, 2003).

### *Learning ecologies*

The thematic analysis found a range of interrelated components are integral to forming a successful partnership including the need for: partners to share common goals and have a grounding in social justice principles; flexibility; effective communication and space for dissenting views; and partners needing to be solution oriented, innovative and risk taking.

The ecological metaphor makes sense of the depth and range of agencies, networks and support systems operating in partnership programs such as those outlined in the case studies above and the organic nature of these programs. Connect Coordinator Vivi Martin regarded flexibility and people-centredness as two of the most important attributes of the partnering agency. Martin added that 'a common philosophy grounded in principals of social justice and community development, a commitment to life-long learning and solution orientated approaches to overcoming obstacles' were equally important attributes. Lane states 'that authentic understanding of the complex needs of each group, flexibility, shared goals and willingness to contribute' were essential to the success of the Ultimo Outreach/PLACE Cafe Cana partnership.

Sarah Pedroso (Place Based Services Manager, Fairfield Centrelink) acknowledges the significance to the project of highly committed partners with supportive managers who gave them the space to be innovative, creative, take risks and have a positive can do approach.

Pedroso also nominated teamwork, open lines of communication, transparency, reliability and complimentary contributions as hallmarks to the success of this partnership.

Critical to the Warwick Farm planning process was the specific involvement of Hall as coordinator, TAFE Outreach teacher Mary Cunneen and partners who appreciated the need for flexibility and open communication, allowing the project to develop in response to the ongoing directions as they arose and resolving dissenting perspectives appropriately at planning meetings.

TAFE Outreach projects decisions are made at and between the mesosystem and exosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) after consultations with partnering agencies, the student group and individual students. Cunneen concurs: 'Students are an intricate part of the partnership and are involved in every step of the development of the course and project'. Applying the ecological metaphor this 'encompasses the interrelations of two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates' (Hodgson and Spours, 2009, p9).

High level ongoing open authentic communication, accommodating dissenting perspectives (Plane, 2007), commitment to a shared vision, flexibility, and a willingness to understand complex issues are strong themes consistent across feedback in all projects. This includes spaces for opposing perspectives in an environment of trust and professionalism where authentic dialogue results in stronger more effective partnerships. Respondents acknowledge that while not all values must be shared, common values and goals for the project are vital. People/organisations have different motivations for joining a partnership. Commitment to parameters around differing values and expectations, respect, professionalism and open lines of communication can exploit differences to enrich a partnership.

The learning ecologies metaphor helps explain the complex interrelationship between the micro and mesosystems and the impacts of the exo and macrosystems on the participants and their networks.

### *Outcomes - the fruit*

The dominant outcomes related themes emerging from the data are: reaching the community and community capacity building; participant course completion, pathways, employment and taking charge; and the need to celebrate success and acknowledge all participants and partners.

The community reaching and community capacity building outcomes of the Warwick Farm initiative are evident in Hall's feedback which supports the importance of ongoing communications and a can do attitude where partners make it happen in response to individual and community potential: 'This course was so successful we had too many students for the Market and so we then started a Community Coffee Break where the students undertook a Barista Course and a social enterprise was started so now the Warwick Farm residents have access to an affordable Coffee Break.' In recognition of these outcomes the "Community Coffee Break - Pepper's Place" component of the project was Highly Commended in ZEST Western Sydney Community Sector Awards.

Decades of TAFE Outreach experience have proven that community cultural development and educational initiatives have to come from the community members. As stated by Martin:

'The courses have attracted to them, many people who would never have the courage to just walk into a TAFE College. It has engaged Aboriginal people and Pacific Islanders, refugees, people from CALD backgrounds and people with mental illness, most who've

taken these Access Courses as a bridge to further study and/or work. It has developed the capacity of our school and our community. The *Creating Community Events* [students] were mainly Indigenous young mothers, who not only worked hard on the annual festival *Dance Around the World* but created and ran [the inaugural] *White Ribbon Day* in Marrickville, bringing the whole community behind them. This is a story of empowerment, of formerly very disempowered women.'

The community capacity building outcomes for the Connect students and their community have been made possible by the rich partnership interaction operating at the personal, interpersonal and school community and wider community level. Thus the expressed need to celebrate the outcomes of both participants and partnering agencies. More recently the whole Connect and wider community rejoiced when one of the students won Marrickville Council's 2010 citizen of the year.

The respondents saw community capacity building with long term outcomes resulting from effective partnerships. While innovation and creativity are applauded within current systems, risk taking is not encouraged as it is diametrical to the widespread compliance and audit culture. Feedback from our stakeholders and the literature, notably Hodgson and Spours (2009, p.10), substantiates our belief that creativity and risk-taking is an essential ingredient for fruitful collaborations.

TAFE Outreach teacher, Mark Geerin, emphasised the effectiveness of collaboration with Sarjoh Bah, the Centrelink PBI worker 'we worked towards common goals for each student so their individual needs formed part of our delivery and support, particularly in regard to further training or career pathways'. Working on both the meso and exo system level learners were provided with 'both advocacy support and personal advocacy skills in dealing with other agencies' opening doors into support networks.

The learning in the Connect Marrickville programs mostly took place at the microsystem level concurring with the findings of Balatti, Black and Falk, (2009) yet as a result of the community based location of the programs and the involvement of many partners operating at the meso level enabling ongoing contact and support for the students and their families outside of and after course completion, the outcomes have been particularly rich and varied.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to a finding of Allison, Gorringer and Lacey (2006), that the training reformed VET systems of Queensland and Victoria had 'played a critical role in a new opportunities for dialogue' (p.26), we conclude that competition can undermine effective collaborations, is not necessary for creating dialogue opportunities nor is it beneficial to people experiencing barriers to education, employment and community engagement.

Although these projects have emerged within the current Vocational Education and Training era of marketisation, we suggest an effective cross sectoral partnership fits better into the ecological metaphor. Competitive funding in VET and the commodification of employment services, where the most vulnerable job seekers attract the highest financial reward, pose further obstacles to effective partnerships seeking to include the socially excluded. The ecological metaphor accommodates partnerships driven by notions of the common good that embrace differences and challenges, nurturing vulnerable people and encouraging dynamic, complex and evolving collaborations in an adult learning context.

The National Statement on Social Inclusion ‘*A Stronger and Fairer Australia*’ was launched by Julia Gillard in January 2010 highlights SIPRY (p.34) as a model for supporting young people at risk. While the recognition is welcome a dichotomy exists as governments claim credit for a collaboration that succeeded despite the policies of competition they promulgate. A comparison of feedback in Pedroso’s report (2011) highlights the importance of individuals and agencies in their approach. While respondents unanimously appreciated genuine encouragement, advocacy and support which resulted in access to employment and study, they expressed disillusion with job agencies, reporting they were unable to connect with and lacked confidence in their ability to secure employment or study options for them.

This highlights the fact that ecological metaphors are not the panacea alone they ‘need to be linked to concepts of civil society and wider politics’ (Hodgson & Spours, 2009, p.12) or they can lead ‘bureaucratic concepts of localism’ that leave us trying to bang our square pegs into round holes.

Recent events in Queensland provide an analogy that correlate to our findings about fruitful ecologies and partnerships. Those who fared best against the ravages of nature shared common goals, they paid heed to the past, communications were open and transparent. Politics and point scoring were put aside. Communities came together at the micro, meso, exo and macro system level to pool resources with complimentary contributions maximising outcomes. Flexible, responsive solution oriented approaches with commitment through shared vision and working for the common good culminated in optimum outcomes.

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