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Developing and Sustaining Perpetual School University Partnerships

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Developing and Sustaining Perpetual School University Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

A Bachelor of Education course was developed at Edith Cowan University (ECU) Joondalup in 2002 with a significant focus on creating and sustaining mutually productive relationships with partner schools. These industry partnership links have afforded authentic workplace opportunities for prospective teachers to develop contextually, whilst undertaking field placements and making valid contributions to partner school priorities and children's learning. This has involved all stakeholders developing collegiality and professional interaction from a position of trust, respect and sense of contribution to the whole (Marlow and Nass-fuka, 2000). The involvement of industry partners is of a completely voluntary nature and hinges, almost entirely, on a commitment to teacher education and peripherally associated benefits. Sustaining the principles, processes and relationships on which partnerships have been developed is however, a consistent challenge.

This paper outlines the development of professional relationships, the provision of service to schools through intensive teaching units and the central role of professional practice in the course, with explicit links between practice and theory. A model has evolved which supports the retention of stakeholders with the partnership at various developmental junctures of their careers that reflects the key elements of interdependency and mutually beneficial relationships for stakeholders within the school-university partnerships at ECU Joondalup. The partnership model affords stakeholders access and re-access points from undergraduate level to post-retirement and aims to retain school/industry partnership commitment, lifelong links to ECU and a sustainability provision for the future.

INTRODUCTION

The Kindergarten through Primary (K-7) Program discussed in this paper was established at Edith Cowan University, Perth in 2002. The course was housed at a newly opened satellite campus in the rapidly developing northern suburbs region of the Perth metropolitan with an investment focus on the introduction and development of mutually beneficial partnerships with educational establishments in the Kindergarten and Primary sectors. It was hoped that by engaging partners in genuine and lasting collegial relationships a sustainable model for workplace learning in teacher education would eventuate despite the increasing difficulties faced by universities in Western Australia in gaining practicum places for pre-service teachers. The impact of curriculum evolvement, teacher accountability and workload, the decrease in the public status of teaching and consequent increase in the union activity were just some of the factors surrounding the climate for accessing industry partners in support of pre-service professional experiences in the workplace.

In 2007, five years after the inception of this course, The Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training released the *'Top of the Class Report'* on the inquiry into teacher education. The report detailed the importance of establishing strong, authentic partnerships between schools and universities and collaborative approaches to practicum, research, induction and professional development was identified. Our university-school partnerships prefaced this, striving to provide authentic opportunities for prospective teachers to learn

in the continually changing and evolving context of practice, whilst also contributing to school priorities and children's learning. However, one characteristic that is critical to the sustainability of our partnerships has been that of interdependence and the principle that within the collegial practice of teaching, teachers, teacher educators and pre-service teachers develop both individually and collectively in the context of 'interdependent relationships'.

In securing 'interdependent relationships' it is crucial to continually draw on the fundamental principles on which this course and associated partnerships were founded. Central to these relationships were processes that focused on enhanced learning for children. Commitment to bridging any theory/practice nexus required stakeholders to engage as authentic 'learning partners' with the collective aim of enhancing teaching and learning. Opportunities were made available for stakeholders to pursue collaborative curriculum inquiry, curriculum development, teaching practice assessment and collaborative professional development opportunities. This process reflects Wenger's (1998) conception of learning in the context of communities of practice by a process of negotiating meaning through engaged participation and draws on the partnership work developed by Victoria University of Technology whereby the workplace learning experiences of pre-service teachers was conceived quite differently from the normal practicum models, along with a more flexible course structure and changing roles of university staff. (Kruger, Millwater, Yarrow, Short, Cherednichenko, Hooley & Moore, R, 2001).

As a result of this a model of interacting with schools in partnerships was conceptualized with the aim of forming valid partnerships grounded in collegial processes whereby stakeholders develop in the context of 'interrelated relationships' typified by trust and respect. A formally constituted partnership with shared purpose and clearly defined roles has significant effects such as optimising stakeholder outcomes and enhancing the professional development of all parties. Ironically the greatest challenge has arisen as a result of the success of the program and the growth in partnerships with schools. With the consequent increased numbers of stakeholders, sustaining meaningful professional relationships with schools is an ongoing challenge.

Contrary to local and national trends, enrolments in this program continue to increase bringing with them countless challenges, competing with associated benefits. Moreover, locally in Western Australia, there has been a marked decline in the number of teacher education applications. The Western Australia Tertiary Institutions Service Centre (TISC) data indicates a total of 2,646 students had first preference applications for teacher education courses over the 2007/08 year, which is down significantly (almost half) from the peak of 4,706 first preference applications in 2003/4. In direct contrast our K-7 teacher education program has seen the required numbers of placements soar by almost 80% over the last six years, whilst the number of active partnership schools has increased by a similar figure to 120 schools. These schools host an average of 10 professional practice Pre-service teachers annually. During this time of significant program growth permanent academic staff directly involved in the program has remained in single figures, whilst 70% of teaching is undertaken by contracted, sessional staff, to alleviate impracticable workloads for program staff.

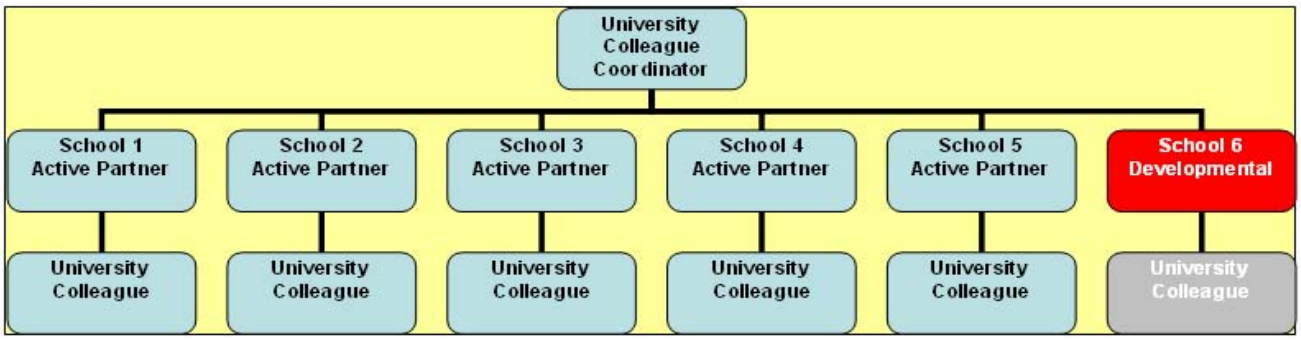
This successful expansion has relied greatly on incredible 'grace and favour' commitment levels from staff, aligned with a strategic approach to safeguard the uniqueness associated with the program's achievements. Indeed, core staff have laboured tirelessly in addressing the perpetual complexities of preserving close and meaningful relationships with stakeholders within partnerships comprising university staff, contracted teaching staff, school partners and pre-service teachers amongst significant others. Beck & Kosnick (2000) stress the importance of the involvement and commitment of university teaching faculty in the practicum for strengthening school university partnerships. The robust partnership links and the program's enhanced reputation within the teaching community have certainly benefitted from the commitment of staff, although, this in itself presents a quandary regarding sustainability amongst these people.

Bullough et al (1999) warn that some partnerships are driven by short term rather than long-term gains and engage little research into the costs and benefits to all stakeholders. However as the staff to stakeholders ration is impacted upon through growth, furnishing mutually beneficial partnerships is an increasing challenge. Whilst the program maintains cost effectiveness there is no indication of investing university time and funds to afford academic staff further time to invest in partnerships, with a consequence of a dilution in the strength of relationships with the very same partners who co-constructed this program and who have welcomed hundreds of pre-service teachers into their workplace to undertake professional experience.

We must consider whether this will prelude the acceleration of the 'fading face' of University within our partner schools. Jasman (2002) contests that teacher educators have long been significant in their absence in schools whilst Cooper and Jasman (2002) also allude to the significance of stakeholders wishing to communicate with a permanent university 'face' providing incidences for school and university staff to engage in genuine dialogue surrounding bigger educational issues and a lack of engagement, and perceived commitment, from particular programs in universities. Partners invest constant efforts in mutual understanding of programs, outcomes and philosophies that support partnerships in meeting the needs of stakeholders. Confronting this challenge has required an emergent restructure of the typical roles involved in the area of professional experience, whereby collaboratively working partnerships are high on the agenda. Teachers are now regarded as 'mentors' rather than supervisors and university staff are regarded as 'colleagues' with some responsibility for bridging the theory-practice nexus cited by Bullough et al (1999) as creating a cultural division characterised by deficiencies in shared vision and agreement of larger issues in education.

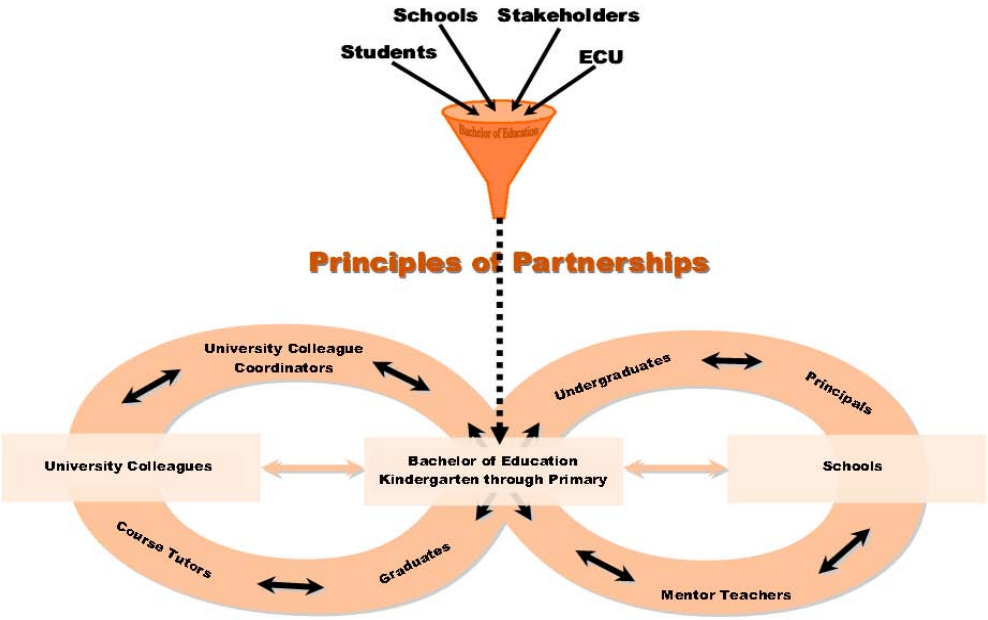
In order to link core academic program staff to workplaces without compromising the authenticity of partnership relations in a growing field has been difficult. This has been addressed, if not completely overcome, by them assuming the role of 'University Colleague Coordinator' with a negotiated commitment to maintain discourse with a portfolio of five or more partnership schools. University Colleague Coordinators also undertake to nurture a partnership with one other less active or inactive school annually. University Colleague Coordinators also liaise with several University Colleagues (Associate Staff) directly regarding the schools in which they are involved. These activities account for less than 70% of schools that the course is able to access. The remainder of schools, which have been strategically identified as requiring increased levels of input are allocated to a designated Professional Practice Coordinator whose academic workload is reduced accordingly as the role requires frequent contact with schools. The Professional Practice Coordinator also commonly contributes meaningful and personal support for schools, school staff and the University Colleague (Associate Staff) to broker and maintain collaborations. These examples of the development of functional and equitable partnership are instances of what Marlow & Nass-fukai (2000) describe as the two elements essential for the development of collegiality - strong relationships and the validation of colleagues as equal.

This model outlined is presented in the form of a diagram below;



A revision of the conventional 'teaching practice' supervisory role of university staff has also ensued as 'University Colleagues' have replaced supervisors. These members of staff were sought via recommendation from Principals in partnership schools, once again extending collegiate interdependency of stakeholders. University Colleagues have experienced partnerships from multiple perspectives working simultaneously in school and university roles and a number have accepted contracted teaching positions, further empowering colleagues through their contribution at all levels. University Colleague access induction training' and 'professional development' opportunities, although a more apt, if less succinct, description of this would be 'developing joint understandings collegially through interactive processes focused on negotiated needs' rather than autocratic direction. The recruiting method sees University Colleagues return to the classroom from temporary periods of absence having developed further awareness of the associated partnership benefits. It has also meant that positive partnership experiences receive wider exposure in schools from knowledgeable and trusted advocates. However, retention of staff to work year on year as University Colleagues has been problematic as work opportunities are sporadic throughout the year and carry remuneration packages that are dwarfed by more lucrative relief teaching opportunities.

Just as all stakeholders, University Colleagues are actively encouraged to remain members of the partnership community at some level to assist in continuation, development and expansion of ongoing partnerships. As the diagram below shows, stakeholders were responsible for the development and conceptualisation of the principles of this program. As retention of partners is critical to the sustained development of partnerships it is hoped that as graduates enter the teaching profession they may retain involvement as contracted course tutors, mentor teachers, partner school Principals, post graduate students, future academic staff and subsequently University Colleague coordinators. As this approach is in the infancy period there is little research to support the sustainability at this stage and there is a lack of definitive literature to inform in the area. However, it is clear that the partnership cycle can be accessed at any level from undergraduate to retirement at levels suitable for all stakeholders. It is hoped that in fostering collegial relationships with common goals of the enhanced learning for children and a commitment to teaching and teacher education a model of sustainability will ensue.



This model is immediately defunct without the development of relationships and real conversations around the shared context of children's learning through the practicum, coursework between faculty members, pre-service teachers and school staff. We have attempted to facilitate this with School University Reference Group (SURG) seminars, bringing stakeholders together to share current teacher expert knowledge of teaching and learning with current university educational thinking to enhance

understanding for the whole partnership community. Membership of SURG is fluid, subject matter is identified by any stakeholder at any time - demonstrating Wenger's (1998) principles of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and negotiability of the repertoire, attendance is voluntary and focus influenced, there is no financial incentive for participation and activities take place outside of school hours. Positively, this attracts participants who are committed, stimulated and keen to engage. However, with current and very public concerns of 'burnout' and the ever-expanding 'role' of today's teachers a substitution effect may prevail at any time that will impact on such initiatives adversely. This is especially significant when comparing the Price Waterhouse Cooper 2001 study with that of Hilsum & Cane's 1971 work, which shows an increased weekly workload for teachers of 23% over the last thirty years.

CONCLUSION

If a partnership littered by mutual engagement, collegiality and equitable interdependent relationships amongst stakeholders holds the key to sustainability this example provides insight rather than a blueprint. Retaining the integrity of the negotiated principles, processes and relationships on which partnerships, and this particular model of partnerships, have been developed, however is increasingly challenging. With stakeholders, particularly teachers, working to absolute capacity reliance on their continued 'grace and favour' commitment per se would be foolhardy and cannot be assured. In an ironic twist the greatest challenges to this model have arisen as a result of the success and growth of the program. The 'Interdependent relationships' on which so much of the partnership model is based, are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Continued success will present continue challenges, although if the growth of those engaged on the model matches enrolments that buck downward trends annually the status quo or better could eventuate in this instance.

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