

Governance and Partnerships

**Analysis of the Tasmanian Polytechnic's
eLearning Strategy**

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1.0 Introduction

In this paper I will present the Coulson critique of partnerships as it relates to the development of an eLearning Strategy by the Tasmanian Polytechnic. The eLearning Strategy is currently in draft form, with the partnerships involved in its formation still in their infancy. For the purpose of this assessment I will focus on development of the draft and the initial partnerships and governance that impact on its development. I will begin by discussing the mandate for development of the partnerships and the mandate for development of the eLearning Strategy itself. Next I will analyse the structure of the partnerships involved, including the overarching governance framework of the Polytechnic and the underlying governance framework for development and implementation of the eLearning Strategy. I will then analyse and discuss the partnership resources, capacity to act, and the purpose and actions of the partnership and the eLearning Strategy. I will finish by considering likely impacts and outcomes of the eLearning Strategy and the partnerships involved, before concluding with my final thoughts.

2.0 Mandate for development of the partnerships

It could be proposed that there are several mandates for development of the eLearning strategy and the partnerships involved in its creation. The Polytechnic is experiencing fiscal crisis, with budget cuts across most areas and a drop in adult [fee paying] enrolments. It has been stated by local management (personal communication, 2011) that the Polytechnic Strategy Group [PSG] and upper management view eLearning as a way to lower delivery costs and draw more adult learners back to the Polytechnic. The public [potential adult learners] are increasingly mobile and, due to the Internet, can access a wider choice in where, how and when they access education. It is also in part about social inclusion, as the Polytechnic's Strategic Plan specifically mentions "Social inclusion and re-engaging the disengaged" and "improving access to our courses and services, particularly in rural and remote communities".

Another mandate for developing the eLearning Strategy is roll out of the National Broadband Network, as the plan mentions "capitalising on the learning opportunities, efficiencies, and

innovation that information and communication technology and the roll out of the National Broadband Network enables”. Under the ‘Terms of Reference’ for the development of the eLearning Strategy, it is stated quite clearly that recommendations for the development of the eLearning Strategy must support the Tasmanian Polytechnic Strategic Plan, therefore examining the ‘Plan’ appears to uncover several mandates (Tasmanian Polytechnic, 2011).

The single biggest mandate is perhaps responding to technological change for learning, but the guiding principles are enabling, supporting and enhancing the Tasmanian Polytechnic Strategic Plan. The development of the eLearning Strategy appears largely to offer the object of policy.

3.0 Structure of the partnerships involved

The development of the eLearning Strategy will be facilitated through the following structures and processes: a steering group which will advise and make recommendations to the Polytechnic Strategy Group [PSG], a reference group [which I am part of], regional coordinators, regional and workforce sector forums and workshops, PSG updates and roadmaps, learning displays for staff, students and the wider Polytechnic community, online documentation and discussion including video. The reference group works directly with the steering group, the steering group draft the plan recommendations and provide a final report to PSG (Tasmanian Polytechnic, 2011). Currently the eLearning Strategy is in first draft form ready for review by the reference group (Appendix A). Following review, each area of recommendation will subsequently be fragmented into individual projects and programs with specifics in terms of benchmarking, timelines and processes for measurement of outcomes, goals and success. Once accepted by PSG there will then be calls for project teams. Ultimately PSG will decide exactly what eLearning Strategy will be implemented, it is hoped they take on board the recommendations in the draft, as there is a risk that centralised corporate needs may take precedence - “chief executives or cabinet members who are not necessarily familiar with much of the detail on the ground” (Coulson, 2005, p. 160) usually control funds and decision making.

Our world is increasingly complex, rapidly changing and evolving, and partnerships appear unable to deal with complexities. Partnerships are a subtle way of exercising power (Adams,

2011). The upper echelons of management often have a somewhat political hidden agenda in the push for establishing partnerships under the guise of ‘collaboration’. Partnerships are often born of “financial or efficiency motivation” (Coulson, p. 151). Each member of a partnership has their own agenda or area of interest, believing their ideas to be crucial. In the case of the Polytechnic, upper management [the Polytechnic Strategy Group] are looking at ways to improve budget deficits, teachers and coal face workers would have specific areas of interest related to their own area of discipline, local community and immediate work environments.

Fahey (2011) proposes that there are three types of partnerships; supportive, competitive and collaborative. It could be suggested that the development of the eLearning Strategy could be likened to a supportive partnership “Essentially, a supportive partnership exists to benefit the mission and operations of only one of the partners”. In this case the eLearning Strategy is being developed for PSG in support of the Polytechnic’s (2011) Strategic Plan. Perhaps the partnership is just a way of looking forward, lacking the artefacts needed to get there, some partner members may not have the resources or tools to do what is required. The partnerships involved in the development of the eLearning Strategy bare a resemblance to an unstructured partnership as mentioned in Darwin’s typology of partnerships (1992, cited in Coulson 2005), as there are no partnerships with any other organisations, but rather within the organisation.

3.1 Governance of the Polytechnic

The Tasmanian Polytechnic is a public Vocational Education and Training [VET] provider. The State [the public] owns and operates this training provider through the Government. In 2009-2010, the Polytechnic operated under a purchaser/provider model with the Tasmanian Government through the Department of Education [DoE] and Skills Tasmania (Tasmanian Polytechnic, 2009a). In 2011 the Polytechnic moved from being a Statutory Authority (reporting to the Minister of Education and Skills, the Hon Nick McKim MP, through a Board of Directors) to an educational institution that is now part of DoE reporting to the DoE Secretary (Tasmanian Polytechnic, 2010). DoE reports to the Minister of Education and Skills. Governance is highly centralised within the Polytechnic and now, in 2011, is becoming more centralised within DoE. The Tasmanian Polytechnic primarily receives funding from Skills

Tasmania and DoE through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), both of which in turn receives funding from State and Federal Government. Therefore the Government has the impetus to monopolise both funding and provision of VET training. Skills Tasmania is a statutory authority which reports to and advises the Minister for Education and Skills on VET policy and strategy, and is responsible for the administration of VET training in Tasmania. Skills Tasmania also coordinates state/local government partnerships on behalf of DoE (Skills Tasmania, 2011).

3.2 Governance of the eLearning Strategy

Development of an eLearning Strategy for the Polytechnic is part of the Polytechnic's (2011) Strategic Plan, under 'Strategic focus area 5: Our infrastructure' as part of the broader 'information and communications technology plan'. Governance of the eLearning Strategy can be found in the Polytechnic's Strategic Plan and also in the 2009-2012 Corporate Plan (2009b, p.26) which specifies that a shared governance group will be established to oversee implementation of the Information and Communications Technology Plan [incorporating the eLearning Strategy]. Even though the partnerships involved in the development and governance of the eLearning Strategy are 'in-house', and therefore somewhat less risky, the lack of funding to support many of the draft recommendations is of concern "partnerships are more likely to succeed where there is money, or profit, to move around" (Coulson, 2005, p.156). The development of an eLearning Strategy is a complex project. Coulson (2005) asserts that complex projects require a "consortium of interest to construct an asset and maintain it" (p. 158). I believe the Polytechnic to have a consortium of interests involved:

Under the strategic focus area for infrastructure – a shared governance group is to oversee implementation of the plan [eLearning Strategy]

Stakeholders

- *All Polytechnic students and teachers*
- *Polytechnic leaders, managers, Polytechnic Strategy Group (PSG)*

- *Quality Assurance Team, Professional Learning Team, Learning Centre Libraries, Student Support Team, Workforce Sectors, Communications & Marketing*
- *Department of Education Information Technology Services*
- *Business, Industry, Community*
- *Skills Tasmania*

Coulson (2005) also mentions the notion of ‘citizens’ jury’, in which partner representatives or members preference some ideas and question others. From my own perspective and involvement, while there has been evidence of this to a relatively small degree, generally this has not been the case so far. The majority of ideas put forward have been well received, and have been accommodated or incorporated in some way. Huxham (1996, cited in Coulson, 2005, p155) mentions problems in making partnerships work “differences in aims, language, procedures, culture and perceived power”. Inequality of power and control “ ‘power’ must be analysed carefully not in terms of achieved goals but in representation of ideas from differing interest groups” (Tompkins, 2010, p. 74).

4.0 Partnership resources

Two key knowledge mobilisers are driving the eLearning Strategy forward. Roger Stack and Anita Busch, of the Tasmanian Polytechnic, are coordinating and chairing the steering group respectively. Both bring a broad perspective and a wealth of knowledge to the development process. There is a risk that the more adept, more knowledgeable and more vocal representatives can oppress weaker or non-represented parties (Benson, 1975, cited in Coulson, 2005, p.156), though both Roger and Anita have put many strategies in place to ensure the ‘silent’ voices are heard. There is a collaborative wiki that anyone, including students, can add to. There are online polls, Facebook pages, anonymous voting and polling mechanisms etc. Although there are two key knowledge mobilisers, I believe that development is an exercise in collaborative rationality (Susskind, 2010). Stakeholders are diverse and self-organising, there are high levels of interdependence moving towards mutual gain, and dialogue is authentic ‘DIAD’ (p. 368). In initial meetings many assumptions were challenged, such as distance delivery being treated as less than face-to-face delivery under the teacher’s award, which appears to disregard the sheer amount of time that must be invested in

resource preparation. Consequently these issues have been factored in to the eLearning Strategy, as although we may be unable to change the award, we can implement a view to reach a new shared understanding between management and staff surrounding distance delivery.

Expertise is drawn on from a wide variety of areas and sources including Polytechnic teachers and students, educational literature, industry reports, research on online learning, Government reports such as ‘Engage: getting on with Government 2.0’, Tasmanian Dept. of Premier and Cabinets ‘People directions project’, research on new technologies such as cloud computing and virtual environments, failures and best practice of other eLearning providers, industry and technology innovation, NBN and Telco providers, interoperability standards, learning management and content management systems and research, to name a few.

5.0 Purpose and actions

At the current stage of development, the eLearning Strategy is a heuristic collaborative living document that will continue to change and evolve. The various partnerships in the consultative process provide ideas and input to the Steering Group. The Steering Group will then consult and make recommendations to PSG. The outcome will be running programs and projects to implement and measure each recommendation in the eLearning Strategy. The eLearning Strategy seeks to; make recommendations to “do what needs to be done” to meet the flexible and eLearning needs of students, staff and other stakeholders, to address barriers to eLearning, to identify and implement effective, efficient and sustainable models of eLearning development and support, explore ways in which newer technologies can enhance or transform Polytechnic learning, teaching and assessment and also to continue to be a living document linked to structures and processes for continuous improvement in order to be responsive to rapid change in digital technologies, training requirements, and learning teaching and assessment practices (Tasmanian Polytechnic, 2011) .

An eLearning Strategy Steering Group will advise and make recommendations in support of the Tasmanian Polytechnic Strategic Plan to PSG in the following areas:

- *Objectives, policies and standards to enhance learning, teaching and assessment for all students through the use of digital technologies and services*
- *Principles, strategies and direction for using digital technologies and services, including ICT service provision and support for all students, teachers and the wider Polytechnic community*
- *Institutional approaches to support Workforce Sector exploration and implementation of commercial opportunities provided by the use of digital technologies and services*

The eLearning Strategy Steering Group will achieve this by:

- *Sponsoring investigation, discussion, roadmaps and support for a forward looking agenda enabling innovation and agile development to meet changing needs and opportunities*
- *Focussing on ways in which eLearning can address the Objectives, Key Strategies and Strategic Measures outlined in the current Tasmanian Polytechnic Strategic Plan*
- *Actively engaging all stakeholders in timely and meaningful consultation and co-construction of an agreed state-wide Polytechnic eLearning Strategy for 2012-2014*

Roger Stack (2011) is on the steering group developing the eLearning Strategy, and suggests that perhaps we are moving away from reactive ways of planning for learning, towards more pro-active strategies in the second decade of this century:

*“Flexibility --> Agility
 Future Proofing --> Future Building
 Problem Solving --> Problem Prevention
 Collaboration --> Co-creation
 Social Justice --> Social Inclusion
 Questioning Solutions --> Questioning Assumptions
 World's Best --> Best for the World”*

6.0 Likely impacts

Certain conditions need to be realised for a partnership to succeed, such as clear and measureable outcomes (Coulson, 2005). In regard to the eLearning Strategy there are no

clear or measureable outcomes. But as the strategy is in its infancy it cannot really be judged at such an early point in time.

Bauman (2007) discusses the complexity of the world and way in which we live. He calls this 'liquid modernity' – everything is temporary, changing... everything is fluid... always in a state of becoming something different. It is volatile and risk laden, to establish a stable identity is a difficult task. The notion of the eLearning Strategy continuing “to be a living document linked to structures and processes for continuous improvement in order to be responsive to rapid change in digital technologies, training requirements, and learning teaching and assessment practices” appears to support this ethos. According to the Skills Australia (2011, p7) "there are increasing challenges for learning products to be agile and remain fit for purpose in an environment of constant change." Agile learning, agile organisations and agile leadership are increasingly referred to in response to ongoing changes in the workplace, technology, society and even challenges at the global level. More than being responsive however agility also calls for an awareness of probable futures or social foresight, being able to respond quickly and efficiently to changes and challenges (Tasmanian Polytechnic, 2011).

I personally feel that I have had “some role in influencing the implementation of strategies that have already been decided upon “this is incorporation, not a partnership” ” (Byrne, 2001, cited in Coulson, 2005, p.157). Though I do feel my ideas have helped ‘tweak’ the framework that seemed largely to be in place before we started. Nowhere is it clear how training will be provided to allow many key areas of the eLearning Strategy to come to fruition, such as ensuring ICT services for students are accessible from mobile devices and pursuing the development of mobile applications. Without funds, staff, training, support or time I really do not see how we [Polytechnic teaching staff] can meet many of the desired outcomes within the plan.

Perhaps the biggest impact will be the Internet itself. The Internet and its reach is a new form of governance between business and the consumer (Adams, 2011), in our case between the Polytechnic and its students. With so much knowledge being freely available it is hard to say whether an eLearning Strategy will really save us money, increase enrolments and better engage students that are living in a digital world. After all, much of what we are selling is

now available at their fingertips... the only thing missing is the credential on the piece of paper itself.

7.0 Conclusion

Coulson (2005) states that partnerships vary and generalisation is difficult, that they need time to grow, and should be evaluated and judged over time, particularly in relation to what works and what does not. Partnerships are constantly changing and evolving and must be analysed over their lifespan as opposed to a single point in time. Central organisations are often unable to deal with the complexities and differences at a local level in rural and regional communities. The view that eLearning might save money is misguided. Unfortunately this is perhaps an indicator that PSG do not understand that eLearning requires considerable resources in terms of time, staff training, ICT support, infrastructure support and investment in new technologies and a different pedagogical approach than traditional face to face teaching “chief executives or cabinet members who are not necessarily familiar with much of the detail on the ground” (Coulson, 2005, p. 160). Along with budget cuts, reduction in staffing across the Polytechnic will see teaching staff teaching across discipline areas and across teams. Staff will be more time poor than ever. Consequently morale is not exactly high, so it would seem difficult to imagine enthusiasm being whipped up around a new eLearning strategy as the way forward.

Coulson (2005) asserts that much literature supports the notion of partnerships as a good thing. Governments increasingly look to partnerships as a way to solve and manage complexities that they are unable to deal with. Partnerships are often seen as collaborative, nimble, responsive, low cost and low risk in terms of reduced conflict and misunderstandings. Coulson (2005) argues that there are many risks inherent in partnerships. Partnerships result from complexity and interdependence (Adams, 2011). It is important to consider who needs to be in the partnership to make it work, who has the relevant knowledge, whose knowledge is privileged, as relationships and networks are critical to making it work. Leadership should be distributed. Trust is critical. Power relations are often hidden, and there can be an imbalance between the leveraging abilities of individuals and the valuing and prejudicing of ideas. There is also a risk that partner members can reach agreement or consensus due to normative pressures, or to minimise the risk of conflict, as opposed to voicing an opinion or

idea that differs or opposes. Accountability, responsibility and measurement of outcomes can be problematic in partnerships. Partnerships, like relationships, are adversely affected by commitment issues, trust issues, power issues, differing values, differing agendas and differing ideas... “partnerships are a challenge – certainly not a panacea” (p. 155).

While it is somewhat evident that varied groups are constructing this asset [the eLearning Strategy] there is no mention of a continuum in regard to maintaining it, generating motivation or progressing beyond the formation of yet another policy document. With so much pressure on delivery and assessment it is hard to see how the eLearning strategy can be attended to in the manner prescribed. Even in the development of the eLearning Strategy, the focus is on delivery and outputs but there is little focus on tending to and maintaining the supports required to see it through to fruition. It could be suggested that the development of the eLearning Strategy is a partnership in purpose only, as decision making and responsibility for outcomes is not clear. Although the partnership in some ways appears participative the truth is that it is not independent from management and so will most likely reflect the whims of the hierarchical silo that is PSG. Will it make a difference? I do not think so. Without money to invest in the technologies needed, without time release for staff training and up-skilling, without timely ICT support when problems arise, and without the trust and freedom management need to extend to those at the coal face... I think it will simply make a nice policy document to aspire to.

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Appendix A – Draft eLearning Strategy: September 26, 2011

1. Ensure access to ICT services for learning is available where and when required.

- Implement solutions to provide sufficient bandwidth (both campus to campus and to the Internet) on all campuses by July 2012 through Telstra, AARNET or some other service.
- Provide campus-wide wireless access for students and staff on all campuses by July 2012.
- Provide remote and disadvantaged students with the knowledge, skills and support to access the same learning experiences as other students.
- Implement the recommendations of the Polytechnic LMS Evaluation (Interim and 2012 Strategies) and ensure solutions put in place are fully supported and fully compliant.
- Ensure that ICT service provision enables and supports the on-going agile development of open access and commercial projects and products.
- Ensure that ICT services for students are accessible from mobile devices and actively pursue the development of mobile applications.
- We recommend the use of cloud computing to provide responsive and agile ICT services that meet learning needs and are financially and organisationally sustainable.

2. Identify, support and develop organisational and individual work practices which enable and support elearning.

- Promote and support flexibility in work and learning hours
- Develop an agreed understanding of Direct, Distance and Mixed Mode learning in the PY10 Award
- Develop processes and structures that support state-wide sharing and collaboration of learning, teaching and assessment resources
- Develop models and processes that sustainably support the development of appropriate and effective blended learning that is an integral part of most, if not all, courses by 2014
- Implement models and processes that encourage students to actively participate in the development, sharing and re-mixing of learning resources within and beyond the Polytechnic
- Identify and expand structures and processes that enable students to support each other 24/7 and to develop supportive learning and professional networks within and beyond the Polytechnic

3. Build a global presence

- Actively build an organisational identity as a networked vocational education institution through participation at state, national and global forums, conferences, summits
- Actively participate in the global development and sharing of learning and training innovation, open education resources and open education courses
- Engage in branding and marketing through new media with a strong student voice.
- Promote project, service and advocacy opportunities for our learners at state, national and global levels being mindful of having a positive planetary impact.
- Address local, national and global issues and challenges as an active global organisational citizen

4. Build on our existing applied research and design culture

- Share, celebrate and support current and emerging creativity and innovation.
- Engage in action research and applied design collaboration and partnerships across workforce sectors and with other national and global institutions.
- Establish the Centre for Connected Learning as an internationally networked applied research and design hub for eLearning.
- Provide staff and students with access to online "sand pits" for collaborative research and design projects within and beyond the Polytechnic.

5. Create an 'umbrella' blended environment to support and enable

Recommendations 1-4 above

- Build an 'E- Polytechnic' that is
 - A coherent view of a vibrant and agile learning ecology that is the Tasmanian Polytechnic
 - a blended virtual and physical location that is easy to access for all learners, our wider community and globally
 - a one-stop-shop front window and portal to Polytechnic services, open and fee-paying courses, and learning communities with global connections
 - an openly participative and immersive learning and social environment that is engaging, supportive and inspiring
 - a way to remotely access and participate in learning and training environments for those who cannot physically attend a campus
 - an evolving creative space(s) with organic processes that support innovation and emergence within a framework of continuous improvement
 - a showcase of Polytechnic excellence as a global institution of vocational education and training