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Area-Based Partnerships and Service Delivery Coordination

The Case of Local Learning and Employment Networks in Victoria

Richard Curtain*

The challenge for policy makers is to find a balance between the demands of centralised control systems required for accountability purposes and the flexibility and commitment needed at the local level to achieve more effective outcomes.

Achieving better coherence and collaboration in the design and implementation of publicly funded programs at the local level is a major challenge for governments, local communities and individual users of services. Victoria's Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS) are one recent attempt in Australia to create a coordination mechanism at a regional level. The aim of these partnerships, according to a recent study of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is to identify ways that synergies can be produced by drawing on local knowledge and goodwill to coordinate the delivery of existing services better (OECD 2001).

Local area partnerships seek to pursue a policy outcome through increasing the coordination between policies and programs between government-funded services and across levels of government and adapting them to local conditions.

Local area partnerships seek to pursue a policy outcome through increasing the coordination between policies and programs between government-funded services and across levels of government and adapting them to local conditions. They work at the community or regional level to involve local actors in the definition of priorities, the development of projects and integrating service delivery by drawing on local resources and skills (OECD 2001: 20).

Local Learning and Employment Networks

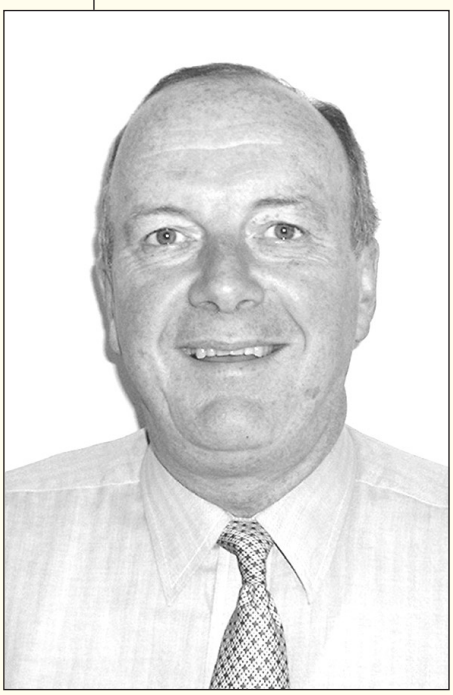
This paper draws on the author's experience in preparing an environmental scan for the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network (Curtain Consulting 2001). Local Learning and Employment Networks operate as bodies answerable to the Victorian Learning & Employment Skills Commission for the coordination of the local area provision of post-compulsory education and training.

The main functions of the Local Learning and Employment Networks are to:

- identify gaps in the provision of education and training
- develop new programs to fill the identified gaps and develop new opportunities for young people
- link education and training provision with local employment opportunities (Kosky 2001).

The environmental scan tracked down regional education and labour market data on young people aged 15 to 24 years, highlighted gaps in the available data, and proposed ways to address these data gaps. The study also proposed suitable performance measures on young people 'at risk'. The study was also asked to recommend ways to 'improve the collaboration between key support service providers in the education to work process'.

The very establishment of the local area networks reflects a strong dissatisfaction from a public policy perspective with the performance of existing institutions. The OECD's Economic Survey of Australia for 2000 noted that:



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> Many school leavers remain at considerable risk of being locked into marginal labour market activities that may not lead to better skills and employment prospects. More needs to be done to reduce the incidence of early school leaving (OECD 2000: 5).

This issue of poor linkages between service providers was highlighted in the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (the Kirby Review):

> The pathways for young people are uncertain, unequal and poorly signposted. The transition process from education and training to employment has become more complex and unpredictable. Victoria's and Australia's education and training for young people is mediocre, by international standards. Our levels of participation are poor and the patterns of outcomes are too strongly skewed against certain groups and geographical regions. The linkages between education and training, employment and industry and other support and safety are weak. There is a lack of coordination between the parts of the education and training system and there is a need for stronger and clearer vision. The system lacks accountability for all young people: many "fall through the cracks" (Kirby Review 2000: 7).

Local Learning and Employment Networks are one way for governments to move from a narrow focus on system or program outputs such as the Year 12 retention rate. The implicit aim of the Networks is to encourage funding agencies and service providers to taking a more comprehensive, person-focused view of outcomes—how many young people move quickly into good jobs and how many are having difficulties?

The use of the term 'network' in the title of the initiative reflects its status as a non-market and non-bureaucratic structure: a grouping of people who have the resources and potentially share a consensus about the need to produce better quality outcomes.

> Local planning networks have the potential to meet some of the broad objectives [of Government policy]. They are focused upon the needs of young people, are cross sectoral and can support stronger links with industry and other agencies. An important goal should be their capacity to develop a corporate commitment to account for all young people in a region. In doing this, the needs of groups such as Koorie students should be incorporated (Kirby Review 2000: 11).

Why the need for coordination?

In terms of existing system-specific measures of education outputs, Gippsland East is under performing. Nearly a third (31.5 per cent) of young people leave the secondary school system before Year 12 compared with a fifth of young people in government schools as a whole (see Table 1). School retention rates in the region are lower than the average for all government schools in non-metropolitan areas. This situation is reflected in the low level of achievement of the Victorian Certificate of Education. Table 2 below shows that 19 year olds in Gippsland in 2000 are less likely than for the state as a whole to have attained VCE.

Table 1: Numbers of full-time students and rate of retention Year 7 to Year 12, Government and Catholic secondary schools, Gippsland East, Gippsland region and non-metropolitan Victoria

Government and Catholic Secondary Catholic Secondary Schools by Area	1996 Yr 7	2001 Yr 12	Yr 12 Retention
	FT equivalent number of students enrolled		Percent
Overall retention rate			
GELLEN	1257.4	861.3	68.5
Gippsland Region			71.2
Total non-metropolitan regions, Victoria			69.8
All government schools			79.6

Table 2: Percentage of 19 year olds who have attained VCE in 2000, East Gippsland and Gippsland Statistical Divisions and Victoria, per cent.

Statistical Division	Persons	Percentage of 19 year olds who have attained VCE
East Gippsland SD	725	58.8
Gippsland SD	1336	57.8
Victoria	43,066	67.4

The poor education outputs achieved is not for want of supporting programs. The environmental scan identified as many as 27 publicly funded programs specifically focused on assisting young people in general or for specific target groups in their transition from full time education to full time work. All this for a population of 80,000 people and an estimated 9067 young people aged 15 to 24 years in 2000 (Curtain Consulting 2002: 40–41).

The programs for young people varied from vocational education and training in schools, school to work transition programs and post compulsory education and training options provided by TAFE, Adult, Community and Further Education Centres and private training providers. Employment related services included apprenticeships, traineeships, employment assistance, indigenous employment and related programs, employment and community participation such as the Work for the Dole and specialist assistance for groups such as homeless young people.

These programs were funded by two state government departments and three federal government departments. The services were delivered by 14 secondary schools, one TAFE institute, two Adult and Community Education providers, seven employment services providers, four New Apprenticeship brokers, and two other program providers.

The problems of coordination stem from the large number of funding departments and separate divisions within departments involved. These are:

- the three semi-autonomous divisions of the Victorian Department of Education and Training—the School Education Division for the public secondary schools, Office of Training and Tertiary Education for the TAFE Institute, and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (a statutory authority) for the two major Adult and Community Education centres in Gippsland East
- the Victorian Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development's Employment Programs Division
- the federal Department of Education, Science and Training for the Jobs Pathway Programme (JPP), the Vocational and Educational Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme (VEGAS) and New Apprenticeships
- the federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations for the Job Network (job matching, job search training services and Intensive Assistance) and the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme; and

- the federal Department of Family & Community Services for the Reconnect Program ('to improve the level of engagement of homeless young people or those "at risk" of homelessness with family, work, education, training and the community') and the Jobs Placement Employment & Training (JPET) program which aims to provide 'young people aged 15 to 25 years living in rural and remote areas of Australia with information, advice and referral assistance'.

Changing context

Several changes have taken place in recent years that make area-based partnerships more attractive to governments and to local regional communities. The acknowledgment that significant differences in quality of life outcomes such as levels of education attainment persist for specific regions and for the indigenous population has generated a political momentum for change. With this has come awareness among policy makers that existing programs have, in many cases, failed to have a significant impact. This is reflected in persistence of problem issues such as a large group of long-term unemployed and intergenerational jobless households.

As the OECD notes in explaining the pressure for change to local level governance arrangements:

> Disappointing results from government policy…has shed light on institutional and administrative weaknesses: rigid institutions and policy frameworks, vested interests slowing adjustments to the changing context, low degree of cooperation and coordination between compartmentalised government departments, absence of long-term planning, policies weakly adapted to the needs of target groups, [and] long delays in government reaction (OECD 2001: 25).

The delivery of government-funded services has suffered from a number of shortcomings, particularly in regional settings. Accountabilities tend to be department and program focused rather than directed at meeting the needs of the targeted individual or region. Where three levels of government are involved, as in Australia's federal system, the scope for overlap and inefficiencies in the deployment of resources is increased even further.

In addition, local actors are increasingly expressing a strong interest in participating more systematically in the design of strategies for their area. This is due to both the increase in public policy expertise in the regions and local frustration at the poor results achieved by government programs in the past.

Where three levels of government are involved, as in Australia's federal system, the scope for overlap and inefficiencies in the deployment of resources is increased even further.

In Australia, efforts by government to improve the delivery of employment services to better focus on individuals have been made through the Job Network's independent service providers. This has introduced a greater focus on outcomes compared with the previous government based delivery of employment services through the CES. However, this reform through its proliferation of service providers has also increased the need for better on-the-ground coordination. This applies particularly in relation to the needs of young people leaving school. As an evaluation of a local area partnership focused on young people in Victoria recently noted:

The complexity of the requirements for early school leavers to negotiate their entitlements between Centrelink, the various Job Network alternatives, and revamped labour market programs makes the pathway through the employment services sector very problematic (Kellock 2001: 11).

Changes in how governments encourage local participation

It is possible to identify several different types of local area partnerships, each with their own impetus for change. These are outlined in Table 3 below. The initial focus of partnership arrangements was often crisis driven. It was a means for government to mobilise local support and resources to lessen the impact of a one-off local crisis such as a plant closure. The approach was top-down because it involved a large injection of funds into the affected region, usually to generate employment opportunities.

More recently the focus has moved to governments working through partnerships to develop specific social and employment initiatives, with a focus on comprehensive or integrated development strategies. An example of this new approach is the Sustainable Regions program of the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services ($100.5 million over four years). Another recent example of a new regional arrangement is the Victoria's Latrobe Valley Ministerial Taskforce. The aim of this body is to develop a whole-of-government approach to identifying priorities for the allocation of government funding within that region on initiatives such as an integrated learning centre.

One key feature of this type of partnership is a focus on achieving better outcomes from existing services. Another differentiating feature is the absence of new funding for particular projects.

Local Learning and Employment Networks typify the third type of local area partnership arrangement outlined below. These focus on better coordination arrangements among a range of service providers, in this case to meet the needs of a particular age group during a critical stage in the lifecycle—the transition from education to work. One key feature of this type of partnership is a focus on achieving better outcomes from existing services. Another differentiating feature is the absence of new funding for particular projects.

Primary Care Partnerships in Victoria are another example of this third type of local area partnership among service providers. These partnerships are also based on local networks of service providers in the health and welfare sector and also do not involve significant additional expenditure of funds. However, these partnerships have been initiated by the centre and tend to respond to a centrally driven set of guidelines.

The fourth type of local area partnership identified in Table 3 below is a bottom up initiative of local stakeholders. A good example is the Whittlesea Youth Commitment which has been termed a 'community collaboration' because it has brought together schools, community agencies, training providers, employment services providers and employers (Kellock 2001: 11). The National Youth Commitment web site (accessible via www.dsf.gov.au) lists ten similar Youth Commitment initiatives in four states.

A feature of the bottom-up approach (the fifth category in Table 3) is the key role played by bodies other than the service deliverers such as City of Whittlesea, the Area Consultative Committee, RMIT University's Northern Interactive Education Coordinated Area Program (NIECAP) and the Dusseldorp Skills Forum. This role has included providing the framework in the form of a 'spirit of

Table 3: Types of area-based partnership arrangements

Funding source	Motive	Locus	Impetus	Purpose	Example	Focus
1. Federal government—single department	Response to a one off local crisis	Depressed region	Top down	To develop proposals for new expenditure to generate local employment	Newcastle BHP closure	Labour market adjustment
2. Federal government–single department	A planned, integrated approach to structural adjustment	Low socio economic indicators and demonstrated commitment to community action	Top down	Implement viable development options	Sustainable Regions	Regional development
3. State government—multi-department	Response to local crisis	Specific areas	Top down	'…To refine existing govt programs to better promote development…'	Latrobe Valley Ministerial` Taskforce	Whole-of-government approach to identifying priorities and allocating funding
4. State government–multi-department	Response to persistent	State-wide regional focus	Top down	Coordinated service delivery	Victorian LLENS	Critical stage in young people's lifecyle–school to work transition 15 to 24 yrs
5. Pooling of existing funding with non-government support	Response to persistent problem of social exclusion	Specific local areas—sub region focus	Bottom up	Integrated approach to deliver on guarantee to help young people achieve Year 12 or equivalent	Whittlesea Youth Commitment equivalent outcomes	Reduction in students leaving before Year 12 and not achieving

cooperation agreement, information about local conditions and the "glue" that has enabled the service providers to change the way they :do business"' (Kellock 2001: 56).

Whittlesea Youth Commitment: a successful local area partnership

The Whittlesea Youth Commitment (WYC) exemplifies two characteristics as a successful local area partnership. The first is a focus on a clear goal (reduce the number of early school leavers), supported by a key performance indicator (information on immediate post school destinations). The second is a concrete strategy to achieve the goal by appointing transition brokers to collect this information and liaise with early school leavers.

This focus on the importance of a local performance indicator has been to produce a more complete picture of the actual destinations and pathways being taken by early school leavers. This focus on a measurable outcome, according to the review of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, has been to reduce dramatically the numbers of early school leavers going to unknown destinations (Kellock 2001: 4).

The benefits of this clear focus on a local objective are also evident in terms of the behaviour of the service providers. The participating schools, for example, are 'beginning to modify their curriculum, provide flexibility in learning programs for particular students, and generally provide more support for students considering leaving school early' (Kellock 2001: 4).

According to the evaluation, the strategies developed by the Whittlesea Youth Commitment have also:

> created stronger links and much greater awareness between sectors and agencies of the local systems and services that support young people, particularly early school leavers. These links and greater awareness are already having 'spin-off' effects in facilitating other collaborative ventures of benefit to young people in the region (Kellock 2001: 4).

However, the Whittlesea Youth Commitment has achieved only partial success in providing a framework for the exchange of data between agencies and to contribute resources to a common pool of funds to provide specific services for young people (Kellock 2001: 5).

Criteria for success

The OECD has outlined several problems that the 'looseness' of the partnership arrangement can produce (OECD: 14–15).

Of their nature, partnerships lack the institutional and democratic legitimacy of more established bodies such as government agencies or local government. Public servants on the partnership bodies may find it difficult to reconcile the desire of the local area partnership to achieve greater local flexibilities with their own institutional responsibilities for accountability and requirements for standardised approaches. Partnerships may also challenge the power of local elected officials where they have a specific mandate that differs from that of the partners. The appointment of people to the partnership who are not seen as representative of the wider community may also undermine the legitimacy of the partnership's efforts.

Public servants on the partnership bodies may find it difficult to reconcile the desire of the local area partnership to achieve greater local flexibilities with their own institutional responsibilities for accountability and requirements for standardised approaches.

The OECD notes that partnerships can be regarded as black boxes because their capacity to achieve results is dependent on an unknown combination of factors. These

include: the role of local actors, the extent and nature of involvement of central government agencies and the impact of environmental factors at a regional level such as the 'tyranny of distance'.

It is the interaction between two key criteria that is likely to make area-based partnerships successful. One is access to the resources needed to address the issue and the second is the political will to collaborate among the key stakeholders to create better outcomes. Area-based partnerships are likely to work where there is a felt desire to change backed by appropriate level of resources. This has been termed consensus formation and negotiation over resource contributions (Bardach 1998: 7).

Lack of coordination over resource contributions

The major flaw in local-level resourcing arrangements within the LLENS mechanism is the inability of young people who exit a secondary school (for whatever reason) to carry their implicit entitlement to funding to Year 12 to another education provider. This applied in particular in the Gippsland East region where students who were expelled from, or otherwise left, the Bairnsdale Secondary College and who wanted to continue their studies at the Bairnsdale Adult and Community Education Centre (BACE). New, ad hoc funding had to be found by BACE to enable a group of up to 20 young people to continue their education in such courses as the Adult Education Certificate and fostering entrepreneurial skills. However, of its nature, this funding was only temporary. A new pathway to further education had developed but the funding arrangements did not support it.

GELLEN is a good example of the limitations of a local area partnership that is based solely on local service providers. The capacity to achieve better coordination depends solely on the good offices of these local service providers. As noted above, there are five government agencies of the federal and state governments involved in the funding of 27 programs. However, only the agency funding the LLENs is represented on the GELLEN committee. None of the regional managers for the main funding departments are represented or otherwise involved in the activities of the LLENs (see Table 4).

The involvement of these officials in the LLENs would make it easier to achieve changes to program guidelines or protocols which would, for example, facilitate information sharing between programs or even funding transfer between service providers. At present, it is not clear whether, for example, the Job Network, a federal government responsibility, even recognises in its protocols that LLENs, a Victorian Government initiative, exist.

Table 4: Key Stakeholders not included in LLENs

Agency	Region	Position
Federal		
DEST	DEST Office Gippsland	Regional representative
DEWR	Gippsland Area	Executive Director
Centrelink	West & East Gippsland Region	Regional Manager
State		
Dept of Education and Training–Schools	Regional Education Office	Regional Director of Education
Dept of Education and Training ACFE	ACFE Regional Office	Regional Manager
Dept of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development	Gippsland Regional Office	Regional Manager
Aboriginal Affairs Victoria		

Program coordination requires a complex interaction of political and bureaucratic intervention to overcome the 'silo' effect of self-serving bureaucratic structures. There is an argument that elected officials from local government to state and federal parliament also be involved in some way in the LLEN process, if only on a need-to-know basis.

Building a consensus

The process of building a local consensus about the need for joint action is the other key element that can be overlooked if the process is driven by guidelines specified by the centre. Stipulation that all stakeholders be involved, as required by the funding guidelines for the LLENs, has led to an unwieldily 18-member management committee. Regional networks may appear to be well established, but they are often thin, with a small number of people involved in a large number of activities. This often leads to over-stretched capacities.

One way to build local consensus is first to identify separate communities of interest, then work out what goals the members of these communities of interest are concerned about in relation to school to work outcomes. The next step is to discuss and reach agreements between the (streamlined) management committee of the area based partnership and each community or stakeholder group. Specific issues of interest and concern to each community of interest need to be identified.

Regional networks may appear to be well established, but they are often thin, with a small number of people involved in a large number of activities. This often leads to over-stretched capacities.

In the case of the Local Learning and Employment Networks, some seven distinct communities of interest can be identified. These range from service providers such as the secondary schools, and the post compulsory education and training providers such ACE and TAFE, to central agencies funding the provision of employment related services for young people. Other communities of interest are likely to be found among the users of the services such as the public sector employers and for private sector employers in the region (two groups with separate interests and dynamics), community groups such as the churches and service clubs and the young people themselves.

Arguably, these targets lack real meaning at a local level.

There is, however, also a need for a common vision to underpin these separate agreements—a goal that can spark some collective hopefulness and enthusiasm. In the case of the LLENs, these are the targets set by the Victorian Government in relation

to young people's education attainment. The targets commit the Victorian Government to achieving by 2010 a Year 12 or its equivalent completion rate for 90 per cent of young people and to increase by six per cent the percentage of young people aged 15 to 19 in rural and regional Victoria, engaged in education and training by 2005 (Bracks 2001).

Arguably, these targets lack real meaning at a local level. A target likely to have much greater appeal to a local community is the Youth Commitment concept. This can be defined in various ways, such as the following:

- All young people have an equal entitlement to achieving an education level appropriate to their long-term needs.
- All young people have an entitlement to assistance to help them find a good job (i.e. with access to structured training and with career prospects).
- All young people have an obligation to contribute to the welfare of their community by achieving the necessary educational level and job readiness to be able to earn their livelihood.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that area-based partnerships can play a key role in improving local governance in Australia. These partnerships have the capacity to identify synergies by enabling local operators to combine better their efforts to put together the resources of different programs. Area-based partnerships have the potential to set up or adapt in innovative ways national or statewide programs to meet local needs. In this way, they can make government policy more effective and better adapted to local conditions.

Area-based partnerships have the potential to set up or adapt in innovative ways national or statewide programs to meet local needs.

One country where area-based partnerships appear to have been particularly successful is the Irish Republic:

> It is without question that the Community Groups and Area Partnerships have played a vital role in building up some of our most deprived communities and in giving them a meaningful and hopeful future. This has been achieved by identifying local needs, by developing local structures and through applying a unique approach to networking. Through this process they have build up inclusive mechanisms which are custom built to meet the needs of individual deprived communities (Ryan 2000).

However, the Irish experience suggests that the two issues highlighted in this paper—institutional commitment in the form of concrete support from the funding agencies and the development of a collaborative culture and vision at the local level—are crucial elements (Ryan 2000). The challenge for policy makers is to find a balance between the demands of centralised control systems required for accountability purposes and the flexibility and commitment needed at the local level to achieve more effective outcomes.

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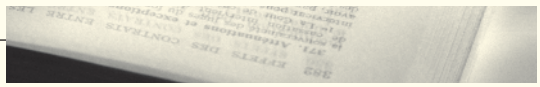

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