Building a Framework for the Development of RMIT Learning Networks

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INTRODUCTION

Learning networks is a unit within Community & Regional Partnerships (C&RP) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University). Community & Regional Partnerships (C&RP) is charged with enacting RMIT's mission to "make a difference" in the world and be "engaged, partnered and creative in supporting individuals, enterprises and communities."[1] C&RPs work is to establish, broker, facilitate and monitor sustainable partnerships between our stakeholders and the university and to build capacity in the university to enable the knowledge society and civic participation.

Making a difference in communities is really about community engagement which is an increasingly common term used by Australian Universities to describe teaching, research and service activities that are more "responsive" to the needs of industry and communities. Within the literature are discourses about social capital, sustainability, community development, community partnerships, networks and regional engagement (Crittenden, 1997; Duke, 2002a; Marginson, 2002; Watson, 2003). The development of RMIT Learning Networks over the past five years happened while the debate about the role of universities in communities had been taking place. RMIT Learning Networks began as a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) funded project—a Victorian Learning Network, one of ten projects across Victoria commissioned with implementing online learning programs in various community locations. The aim of the project was to trial immediate options for increasing the State Training Service's capacity to provide responsive quality training through flexible delivery arrangements that included the use of the Technical and Further Education Virtual Campus (TAFE VC[2]) and online technologies (OTFE, 1998). The RMIT project, RMIT LearnLinks, was successful in competitively tendering for three funding rounds and has now evolved into an access and equity partnership between RMIT University and six Adult, Community Education (ACE) Centres.

As a practitioner researcher, Leone Wheeler used an action research approach to investigate RMIT LearnLinks over three funding cycles from mid 1998 until 2002. The project was used as an instrumental case study in order to gain an insight into a broader issue, that was, the common elements of an operational framework required for a sustainable learning network (Stake, 2000). In other words, how could this project be made sustainable within the confines of a University context, especially when the additional Government project money ceased?

This was a common problem for these types of projects, whether they were within a University context, or run entirely by community organisations. In the last few years both locally and internationally there have been an explosion in projects and initiatives that involved partnerships, community development and information and communication technology with considerable amounts of money invested. These projects are defined in a number of ways, for example, "community learning networks", "flexible learning networks", community networks, "learning towns", "community information networks", "learning communities" and are often not well defined (Denison, Hardy, Johanson, Stillman, & Schauder, 2002). Many of the projects are reliant on short-term funding and when the government money runs out sustainability is an issue. Long-term sustainability of these types of projects and justification in terms of intangible benefits to the community have been identified as two of the biggest challenges faced by organisations who support these projects (DCITA, 2003; Kirby, 2001; Schuler, 1996; Sellar, 2002).

Wheeler systematically collected data over a four-year period of running RMIT LearnLinks. This included previous research (Wheeler, 1997); literature reviews, business documents, interviews with international experts and practitioners, interviews with all key stakeholders (ACE coordinators, RMIT staff and funders) and collaboration with community and University stakeholders through annual review days and the use of two key informants who helped develop the operational framework. Also a senior strategic consultant in vocational

education and training (VET) was appointed to advise on dealing with organisational systems and processes within the University.

THEMES

The key themes that emerged as a result of analysing the data were as follows.

Learning Network Lifecycle

The implementation of an operational framework for a learning network went through a lifecycle that involves phases. The phases were labelled establishment, consolidation and enhancement. Particular actions were carried out at each of these phases. The enhancement phase was also the time to consider reducing the dimension of the program or exiting. As the RMIT Learning Network team took on more projects, each phase became more refined, and we were able to take on new projects and with larger organisations. The development of phases and lifecycles is common in community building projects (Beilharz, 2002).

Partnerships

The majority of time in the establishment phase of RMIT LearnLinks was in the development of trust and building relationships (Phillips, 2000). This is relevant to other types of community building projects (Cara & Ranson, 1998). Himmelman (2001) categorizes partnerships as a continuum from networking through to collaboration. At one end of the continuum is networking which involves the exchange of information for mutual benefit and at the other end is collaboration that enhances the capacity of the other partners for mutual benefit and a common purpose. RMIT LearnLinks, after five years of operation, is now at the collaboration end of the continuum.

Capacity Building

Capacity building for RMIT Learnlinks was viewed in terms of building the human capital skills of the teachers and managers involved in the network and building social capital through the development of the know-how, trust, networks and shared value of the members of that network (Faris, 2001). The majority of the stakeholders that were interviewed said that this was the most successful part of the project. This was on two levels. Firstly, the subsidized professional development programs that were offered to teachers and managers. This included accredited programmes about teaching and learning online, scholar-

ships to undertake Masters of Education, through to short courses in a range of relevant areas to do with teaching with technology. Secondly, the building of networks across the partners in the project was also beneficial. In particular, the links to broader opportunities, for example, some community partners talked of the opportunities of linking into online teaching and learning via the TAFE VC. One community partner talked about the opportunity of tapping into broader networks and specifically referred to being able to hear Dr. Ron Faris talk about the development of learning communities in Canada when he was out here as a guest of RMIT Learning Networks as part of the RMIT International Fellowship programme in 2002. Others talked about the growing collaboration between community partners that enabled them to collaborate on other projects that involved teaching and learning with technology.

Sustainability

Sustainability was the "hot topic" of the interviews with stakeholders who were part of RMIT LearnLinks. The majority view was that beyond the Government funding this project would not be sustainable. Most community partners said that the additional money they received as part of the project for the purchase of information technology (IT) equipment and the building of capacity through professional development and online content projects was very useful and they did not see how they could continue on a service agreement arrangement. However, community partners and RMIT Schools voted to continue the project when funding ran out at the end of 2002. It was a very much down-sized project based on brokering accredited training into six community locations. The program is now linked into the recurrent funding provided by the state government. The community partners use the training hours provided to either value add to work they already do or to extend what they can offer to their learners. The University requires the community partners to target concession learners in a community setting, thus contributing to access and equity targets and managing diversity. However, technology is no longer a focus, apart from keeping the website up-to-date, with periodic newsletters of what is going on. The research into the development of an operational framework for a sustainable learning network found that sustainability could be viewed on a number of levels. The level that was appropriate to RMIT LearnLinks was financial viability at the program level. This was defined as the long-term ability of the program to maintain or improve its capacity to deliver services and is based on a definition used to investigate the sustainability of community technology centres in Seattle (O'Malley & Liebow, 2002). For example, as long as the

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