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Capitals and commitment: the case of a local learning and employment network

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This article draws on research undertaken with a Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) in the state of Victoria, Australia. LLEN are networks that were implemented by the state government in 2001 to undertake community capacity building through which the outcomes of young people aged 15-19 in education, training and employment would be enhanced. In 2008, in the context of an enhanced federal commitment to social inclusion through 'joining-up', the Victorian experience provides insights on the implications of such policy initiatives. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) discussion of the forms of capital and Granovetter's (1973) notion of the strength of weak ties, I argue that stores of economic, cultural and social capital as outlined by Bourdieu were necessary, but insufficient, for LLEN to achieve the objectives with which they were charged given the failure of government to follow through on the implications of its policies. I argue for a commitment on the part of all stakeholders to realize the potential of 'joining-up'.

Keywords*:* networks, post-compulsory education, transition, whole-of-government, whole-of-community, government collaboration, trust

Introduction

In November 2007 Kevin Rudd's Labor swept to power in the Australian federal government elections. For Australians, this signalled a significant shift in the policy environment and a commitment to 'joining-up' across levels of government and portfolios. The Rudd government has framed its work around a social inclusion agenda underpinned by an investment in human capital and including a whole-of-government approach to be characterised by partnership with state and local government, and the not-for-profit and private sectors, to deliver interventions which address disadvantage (Gillard & Wong, 2007, p.6). In the context of Victoria, a state of just over 5 million residents, this alignment offers particular opportunity in the arena of post-compulsory education reform where significant effort has already been invested in 'joining-up', that is, developing whole-of-government, whole-of-community responses to disadvantage,

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including initiatives to assist young people at risk of disengaging from education and training.

This paper is concerned with exploring the degree of potential offered in the current context to move beyond the rhetoric of 'joining-up'. The paper draws on empirical research completed in Victoria between 2003 and 2005. During this time I completed my doctorate through undertaking an ethnographic case study of a Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), one of 31 implemented by the state government (Kamp, 2006). Victoria's post-compulsory education and training context is 'dynamic' (Keating & Robinson, 2003), recognised for its educational innovation and reform (Long, 2005). The state is characterised by a high degree of devolution, the highest level of private schooling in Australia, and innovative arrangements in tertiary education and the adult and community sector. In 1999, the Australia Labor party, in alliance with three independent Members of Parliament, narrowly and unexpectedly won the state election. Prior to polling, the ruling Liberal coalition was expected to comfortably regain power. However, the electorate demonstrated a wariness of the Liberal Party's economic rationalism and a perception that many regional areas had been neglected, and social structures damaged, under Liberal policies. Since their election, Labor has focused considerable attention on delivering its campaign promises. This has included a high profile on both the compulsory[1] and post-compulsory sectors of education with Ministerial reviews undertaken in 2000 (Connors, 2000; Kirby, 2000) and a raft of policy initiatives since that time including the implementation of the new networks. In exploring the potential of such policies, the argument made draws on Bourdieu's (1986) discussion of the forms of capital and Granovetter's (1973) argument for the strength of weak ties.

In this article I demonstrate that while Labor's policies of 'joining-up' government and community offer tremendous opportunity, they demand a high-degree of commitment from all parties, not least government. In particular I argue that while horizontal joining-up has occurred, vertical joining-up remains insufficient. My approach is to commence with a discussion of the forms of capital before moving to introduce the post-compulsory education and training policy that set the scene for government to move to a network model in Victoria. I then draw on empirical work to demonstrate how governments can, through their actions and inactions, compromise the potential of such policy agendas.

The forms of capital

In late modern society knowledge and skills, whether referred to as human or intellectual capital, have become central to global capitalism (Giddens & Hutton, 2001). Learning both as a process of gaining and managing information and of continuously updating skill has gained an equivalent place in emerging society as that fulfilled by productiveness in early modern society (Strain, 2000). In this context, reference to human capital in particular has become ascendant in a range of policy landscapes of Western governments with emphases ranging from improved schooling and expanded initial education, through concerns with vocational and workplace training and on to a broader concern with life-long learning (Schuller, 2000). This concern with human capital as the accumulation of

knowledge and skills, competencies and attributes, embodied in a person and typically considered in terms of the economic benefits that derive, either directly or indirectly, from such knowledge and skills (OECD, 2001) has, however, been critiqued for its failure to engage with other forms of capital:

> We do not confront abstract 'learners' … instead, we see specific classed, raced and gendered subjects, people whose biographies are intimately linked to the economic, political and ideological trajectories of their families and communities, to the political economies of their neighbourhoods. (Apple, 1996, p. 5)

Some commentators argue that the growing focus on the individual in the context of globalisation has accelerated the decline of social capital (Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004). For Putnam, who is often associated with the term, social capital referred to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitated cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1993) However it was Bourdieu (1986) who considered in detail how the forms of capital intersect. Bourdieu argued it is impossible to consider the social world unless that consideration moves beyond capital recognized by economic theory and includes capital in each of its three 'fundamental guises': economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). It is social capital that enables us to explain the 'work of connections' which are evident when different individuals or groups profit differently from apparently equivalent cultural or economic capital by way of their ability to network and 'mobilize by proxy the capital of a group' (1986, p.256).

The extent of capital within any network depends largely on the nature of the links within the network. Granovetter (1973) outlined a theory of the 'strength of weak ties' whereby individuals improve their likelihood of achieving change by not only being connected to others in their primary network but also by having weak but powerful ties with other communities. Attempts to understand or measure social capital often focus on *bonding*, how capital works within tightly bonded and trusting communities. However, it is *bridging* that expands the resources of the community through connecting with distant others, bringing the capital of one community into another. These are the weak links that 'sew the social network together' (Buchanan, 2002, p. 43), they form bridges that provide shortcuts across the distance of the network and allow it to reach social worlds that would otherwise remain 'distant and … quite alien' (2002, p.44). The work of relationship building is vital here as differences between networks need to be worked through. Finally, Granovetter acknowledged *linking* where the capital of the community is radically advanced through access to power and influence. Different combinations of bonding, bridging and linking ties within a network will affect the 'capability of social capital' (Stone & Hughes, 2002, p. 5) and, therefore, the outcomes that can be achieved.

Social capital depends not only on a network of connections with a volume of capital but also on the ability to effectively mobilize those connections and this process requires a 'specific labour':

> The transformation of economic capital into social capital presupposes a specific labour, i.e., an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern, which . . . has the effect of transfiguring the purely monetary import of the exchange and, by the same token, the very meaning of the exchange. From a narrowly economic standpoint, this effort is bound to be seen as pure wastage, but in the terms of the logic of social exchanges, it is a solid investment, the profits of which will appear, in the long run, in monetary or other form. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253)

In Victoria in the context of networking in post-compulsory education this 'specific labour' was the work of the LLEN. Indeed, researchers suggest that amongst the most beneficial impacts of LLEN as a group has been their contribution to the creation of social capital (Robinson & Keating, 2004). The state government in Victoria created the conditions for social capital to develop by sponsoring and supporting—providing economic and cultural capital for—initiatives such as LLEN (Robinson & Keating, 2004, p. 29). At this point it is timely to provide a brief overview of the genesis of Victoria's LLEN.

Government, community and the rise of social capital

The election of a 'reformist' Labor government in Victoria at the end of 1999 fostered a change in approach from that of the former conservative Liberal government. Labor was committed to fostering greater social cohesion and identified the education and training policy domain as central to the realisation of that commitment (Keating & Robinson, 2003). Labor's vision for Victoria in 2010 was articulated in Growing Victoria Together (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2001). This vision was underpinned by a focus on the role of education and lifelong learning as well as a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach, one that would be aided by the establishment of a dedicated Department. In 2005, this community commitment was further reinforced with the release of the state government's A Fairer Victoria (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2005), a $788m policy commitment that ranged across a broad set of social action objectives based on community capacity building and, in the process, bringing questions of social capital—that resource that would facilitate collaboration and cooperation for mutual benefit—to centre stage.

In regard to post-compulsory education and training, Labor drew on OECD research that proposed a shift from program-based approaches to network perspectives in solving problems related to those who were failed by education systems (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001) Early in 2000, the Victorian Government implemented a number of reviews of education and training including a review of post-compulsory education and training pathways (Kirby, 2000). In analysing the employment and education and training context currently faced by young people in Victoria the Kirby Report, as it is commonly known, noted that pathways were 'uncertain, unequal and poorly signposted … the transition process has become more complex and unpredictable' (Kirby, 2000, p. 7). The evidence gathered had reinforced arguments that youth faced persistent and severe difficulties unknown to previous generations. Furthermore, there was evidence of locational disadvantage, that is, problems were frequently concentrated in particular groups and regions, any response to which would demand a broader commitment. There was a lack of coordination between parts of the system, a lack of strong and clear vision and a lack of accountability for all young people: many fell 'through the cracks' (2000, p. 7). Kirby sought a more coherent and outward-looking policy framework and greater collaboration and integration by providers and other organisations in the community. This would involve a response that would be both 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-community' (2000, p.9). The

Report made reference to the range of collaborative networks that already operated across the state; these existing networks were found to have a variety of origins, were frequently cross-sectoral and had as their main objective the improvement in the range and quality of provision for young people.

Building on this foundation, the Kirby Report recommended the establishment of 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks covering all areas of the state of Victoria that would build on the existing networks by developing a local co-operative approach to planning that would include the renewal and strengthening of communities, minimising duplication and wasteful competition and acknowledging community and industry shared responsibility and ownership of post-compulsory education and training (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission, 2002). LLEN were established as incorporated associations with each one normally encompassing between one to four local government areas. They were funded by and accountable to a Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC) also established on recommendation of the Kirby Report but managed by the Department of Education[2] acting as the agent of VLESC, an arrangement that, while not unique, created particular challenges. While in principle the Department of Education supported the new networks as they were endorsed in policy, in practice there were mixed understandings about their role and how they fitted into departmental structures and authority relations (Seddon, Clemans, & Billett, 2005, p. 38).

The objectives outlined for the new networks aligned closely with those proposed by the Kirby Report. LLEN would maximise post-compulsory education, training and employment outcomes, particularly for young people. They would also establish a new relationship between education and training providers and government that involved less central intervention but greater accountability of providers to government, local industry and the local community. Finally, they would provide local input to and be informed by state-wide policy and planning (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001). These purposes were linked with the goal for LLEN which was to use a community building approach to develop social capital and thereby improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people.

But whose capital is it anyway?

As noted, LLEN had a central role to play in the creation of social capital. However, to what does the name 'LLEN' refer? One of the key findings that came through my research is that entities such as LLEN are many things to many people. Questions of optimising a network's operation cannot be considered without considering what the network actually *is.* From the outset, this LLEN's Committee of Management saw its strength being in a Working Party structure, a structure that was complemented by a number of issue-based sub-groups and an action research methodology. This structure differed from that adopted by many other LLEN who opted for a more traditional, structured operation and invested in staffing and/or capital items. For example, the LLEN in my research did not have either a high profile office front or a branded vehicle that were a feature of some. Instead, a small shared office with minimal staffing supported a Working Party structure which allowed members from a diverse range of

agencies and organisations to become involved in the opportunity to debate, design and deliver on objectives, recognising the fundamental role of broadening the range of partners involved in an evolving post-compulsory education, training and employment sector. This structure also enabled spontaneous communication within the new network as all Committee of Management were involved in or led multiple Working Parties. As an aside, it was an organisational arrangement that sat uneasily with the Department of Education in Melbourne who were uncomfortable with the lack of structure and the extent of budget committed to Working Party project activity on an on-going basis.

However, most importantly, this approach also had implications for understandings of roles, responsibilities and achievements. Notwithstanding the unanimous agreement for the Working Party structure at the local level, there was no shared understanding regarding the boundary of 'the LLEN'. Some stakeholders, even those most closely involved in the governance of the new network, conceptualised the network office—that is the Executive Officer and staff—as 'the LLEN'. These stakeholders were troubled by the lack of a clear organisational entity that was recognised and known in the evolving post-compulsory education, training and employment sector. They were also concerned by the form of industry involvement in the Committee of Management and, when facing their own performative pressures, on more than one occasion blamed inadequacies in 'the LLEN' as the reason for those failures or disputed whether 'the LLEN' could take credit for achievements. As such, when the comment was made that 'the LLEN didn't do anything' this was not a self-referential comment on any level, that is, 'we didn't do anything'. It implied that the new network was almost another level of bureaucracy that should act, a perspective at odds with the policy agenda (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001).

Other stakeholders, including the Chair and the Executive Officer, conceptualised the LLEN in a more 'acentred' way, one in which the boundaries were porous. In such a conceptualisation individuals and structures were interchangeable as circumstances demanded; the new network would continuously evolve with its members moving to different points: sometimes in the core membership, sometimes at the periphery which is the greatest point of connection (Wenger, 1998). What was in the network, and where in the network it was, had to be what was useful and necessary for the LLEN's existence (Urry, 2003). In this way the new network would model its ambition to be 'an opportunity to act' (committee member A, 2005) rather than an entity that would act. Thus, while there was an entity comprising the LLEN office with whom the Department of Education contracted and which the Committee of Management governed, this was no more than one part of the new network alongside the other parts. Thus local industry, the Field Officer, local government, staff employed by the new network, local education providers, the Department of Education, schools, youth agencies and so on were all 'the LLEN'.

Networks, norms and trust?

The comments thus far provide background for my discussion in this section. The social capital that has been the focus of the preceding sections does not only involve networks but also the norms and trust they foster. Dasgupta (2000, p. 341) defines a norm as a

'behavioural strategy that is subscribed to by all'; such norms foster trust and enhanced cooperation as they allow more efficient judgments on the reputation of others. While norms can be oppressive they are not inherently so, those that embrace diversity and inclusion foster willingness to consider new ideas and accept change (Flora, Flora, & Wade, 1996). The third dimension, trust, is important as it affects not only what people choose to do, but often what they can do (Flora et al., 1996). Pollitt (2002) notes the central role that trust plays in overcoming the vulnerability that cooperation involves without taking recourse in the 'bluntness' of contractual arrangements.

Trust is only important in contexts of risk (Alford, 2002). Certainly in the context of LLEN where funding regimes and accountability structures were competitive, risk was present. Furthermore, whether people trust depends on what they know of those they are asked to trust. This too was difficult given the introduction of new stakeholders in the post-compulsory sector and the limited information that was available. Thus, LLEN members were largely dependent on their current experience of other parties in a rapidly evolving policy context that demanded innovation. As commentators have noted, the logic of networks privileges the 'easy trust' that is feature of the social capital within bonded networks (Stone & Hughes, 2002). The weak ties of bridging and linking networks can provide access to a far broader range of resources but also inhibit the development of norms and trust because of differences which come into play when networking outside familiar contexts. Thus, while promoted in policy as a relatively simple linear process (Seddon et al., 2005) in actuality networking is 'a learning process marked by tensions and contradictions' (Warmington et al., 2004, p. 6).

This alerts us to a central paradox that pervaded all LLEN. Labor had campaigned on the basis of, and was committed to, fostering greater social cohesion. Education, training and employment policy was seen as central to that agenda. Yet, at the same time, like all governments, it needed to legitimate its actions to the electorate and against the critique of both the then Liberal federal government as well the Liberal state opposition. All governments must retain power to achieve their agenda and the ability of government to work collaboratively is constrained by the operational imperatives of the political context (Alford, 2002). The discourse of parental choice that institutionalised competition as the primary distributive mechanism of public education was firmly embedded in Victorian public discourses. Schools that put aside their economic interests in recruiting and retaining students—and thereby enhancing their own levels of capital—through working collaboratively with non-school providers in whatever arrangement best met the needs of a given student, would do so at considerable risk given that government did not act to create meaningful funding and accountability structures and, in the process, compromised the work of relationship building and consequentially the strength of weak ties.

Networks at work

Some examples serve to illustrate these points. As part of its successful 2004 campaign for federal government re-election, the Australian Liberal Party proposed a budget commitment of $289m for the establishment of 24 Australian Technical Colleges in regions with a significant industry base, skill shortage issues and high rates of youth

unemployment. The community where my research took place was one of the areas selected for an Australian Technical College. While it is beyond the constraints of this article to provide a detailed account of the process of implementing this policy into the Victorian context, a brief comment can be made. In accordance with its philosophy, the LLEN reacted to this policy announcement by convening a public forum that would enable a collaborative, community-based response within an exceptionally tight time-frame: announced towards the end of 2004, the Australian Technical College was to be operational by the beginning of the school year, 2006. This was an intense challenge given that Australian Technical Colleges were to be a 'new' approach, providing high-quality education and training that combined the Victorian senior school certificate with a school-based apprenticeship in a selected range of industries. The up to 300 students would be high achievers; the College would be run by a Board led by industry; the industrial arrangements would accord with the federal government's contentious push for Individual Workplace Agreements. While it was often suggested that Victoria was already well ahead in the national arena of vocational education and training, there was also some argument in the local community that schools had not gone far enough in conceptualising new models of post-compulsory education. This is not to say that schools did not respond to the interests of students and/or industry but rather that they were constrained both by their existing operational structures and by the remnants of the competitive culture that had framed their philosophy for a considerable time. As a result, because of how vested they were in their own journey of innovation—upon which their financial viability continued to depend—some of the most innovative education and training providers became progressively more obstructive of the process. One way of reading this would be to say that despite their demonstrated commitment to vocational education and training, and a desire to grasp this federal resource to provide expanded opportunities for local students and to profile vocational education and training as a legitimate pathway for high achievers, when the gauntlet of collaboration was thrown down that commitment became compromised. This was because competitive funding drivers not only remained but were effectively strengthened given the intent for the most able students to be directed into these colleges. Here, with access to both economic capital and considerable intellectual capital, the social capital of the new network was actually undermined by a lack of attention to the perverse effects of competitive funding processes.

Alternatively, we can consider a senior secondary school in an area of Victoria with a level of teenage parenting far in excess of the national average. Even before the LLEN was introduced, the community had worked to accommodate the desire of many teenage parents in the local community to return to school and complete their senior school certificate. This would at times involve teachers letting students bring their infants into class and so on. After the LLEN was established the existing network of agencies the school had working with at one time or another was called together and a bold agenda established. It was resolved that the best option for the teenage parents would be a program that included childcare as part of the school. The challenge was how to achieve this within an education system that was largely silent on the question of the education of teenage parents and had no brief to provide childcare within secondary schools. The resulting Young Parents' Access Project involved the provision of licensed and accredited in-school childcare provision for the children of students, support from a

Parent Support Worker, a modified curriculum and so forth (see Angwin, Harrison, Kamp, & Shacklock, 2004). However, whilst the Principal had had a number of discussions with government staff and the Project was, from its earliest days, visited by state Ministers of Education who praised the effort and made public reference to it as an outstanding example of school innovation, for the first two years there was an inability to push aside bureaucratic barriers to create funding for the Project. The Principal had attended cross-departmental meetings and had spoken of the barriers the school was encountering in attempting to gain financial support to establish this multi-dimensional Project notwithstanding that it would be a model of joined-up government working innovatively with the local community. All the government departments that would have an interest in the Project were present, all were supportive but none was able to effectively assist given bureaucratic barriers. In this instance the absence of effective linking ties resulted in significant delays and unnecessary complications that were primarily overcome by the sheer commitment of the Principal. Government did not bring its resources to bear until well after the risk of community backlash abated.

On a further dimension, the limiting effects of performativity also required that networks include government. The new network, as well as those of its member organisations that were state funded, was subject to what Perryman (2006) elegantly refers to as 'panoptic performativity'. From the outset there was a tension for all LLEN in accessing the economic capital provided by government. Although the new networks were established as incorporated associations their funding was linked to a Performance Agreement that was only partially negotiable. They were restrained in what they could include in their Performance Agreement and could not refuse the additional responsibilities for state-wide initiatives that could be, and were, added in as post-compulsory education policy initiatives were introduced by the Labor government. Furthermore, their funding was contingent on implementing 'good self-governance' processes that enabled government to demonstrate its accountability within politically expedient time spans. This has profound consequences:

> … the extent that accountability mechanisms prescribe tight monitoring procedures which are characteristic of classical contracting, they can also actually diminish trust. Rigid monitoring of a non-government partner conveys a message of mistrust, prompting cautious disclosure in reply, with the potential for an ongoing low-trust spiral. (Alford, 2002, p. 11)

The manufacturing and sustaining of 'fabrications' is often the result in these circumstances: an 'investment in plasticity' at the cost of authenticity and commitment (Ball, 2000, p. 9). The LLEN in my research recognised the risks of performativity and attempted to withstand submission to its requirements. However, in the process authenticity, time, energy and limited funding were expended. This had consequences for the core work of the new network and thereby for its accountability to local community and industry which, in the final analysis, is the ultimate measure of its worth. As Geddes (2003) found in a review of similar attempts in the United Kingdom, the effectiveness of local partnerships depends on practices at other levels of government[3]. Despite a policy agenda of whole-of-government, whole-of-community the linking tie between government and community was not realised. Government maintained a hierarchical relationship to the LLEN and, in the process, diminished the extent of structural change that could be achieved.

Conclusion

In Victoria, government acted to realise their ideological commitment by funding LLEN to build on existing collaborative networks that contributed productively to improving the range and quality of provision for young people confronting the new and unique challenges of entering the labour market in a globalised world. Notably, LLEN were not implemented in a void. The community I researched was known for its well-established bonding ties and a strong commitment to innovative approaches to education and training. Thus the new network would be working to 'gear it up to go somewhere else' (LLEN committee member B, 2003).

This effort demanded a provocative approach in a context that remained constrained by the damage wrought through the preceding economically-rationalist era. In this context, it was vital that the new networks contain not only the bonding ties that already existed, and the bridging ties that brought new players—most significantly industry—into the network, but also the linking ties that would bring in government itself. This was imperative for a number of reasons. It would ensure that government, as part of the LLEN, was also accountable to the new network for those dimensions only it could contribute, for instance resolving inconsistencies in out-dated funding models. It would also enable government to work with community in finding a new *language* for governance and accountability that recognised the rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) nature of networks at work.

In providing economic capital but exposing LLEN to existing accountability processes, their potential was, and continues to be, diminished. In an early evaluation of the LLEN initiative it was recommend that there be investigation into –

> … current strategies for regulating public activities . . . in order to determine a regulatory matrix which provides appropriate guarantees in relation to probity but which also encourages responsiveness and innovation within LLENs. (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission, 2002, p. iv)

In considering the content of the latest review (KPMG, 2008) there does not appear to be cause for optimism that a new language for governance has been developed. The Victorian government's investment has been undermined by its inability to garner the potential of weak ties in its pursuit of a whole-of-government, whole-of-community post-compulsory education training and employment sector that would meet the needs of young people, and government, in the globalised context. Federal Labor's broader social inclusion agenda is also underpinned by a commitment to a whole-of-government, whole-of community approach. The success or otherwise of that agenda will rest in part on the ability of the government to follow through on the implications of that commitment.

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Notes

[1] In Victoria the school leaving age is currently 16.
[2] During the course of this research the Victorian Department of Education has change its name a number of times. The current title is the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
[3] I undertake a fuller overview of Geddes findings for the Australian context in Kamp (2003).

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