

# **Policy, Paradigms, and Partnership Potential: Rethinking the Governance of Learning Networks**

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## **Introduction**

This paper engages with the idea of ‘joining-up’ as an increasingly common policy response by governments internationally in the face of so-called ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber 1973). In particular, the paper concerns the problem of young people in transition from a primary role in engaging with and progressing through the levels of formal education to a sustainable engagement in the increasingly fragmented labor markets that are the motor of individualized risk in the context of the risk society (Beck 1992). Drawing on seminal organizational theory, the paper takes up a metaphorical lens to critique the governance arrangements that have evolved in concert with such policy responses. The paper proceeds in the following stages. Firstly, the problem of youth transition and its interface with socio-economic factors will be framed. Secondly, the policy response introduced in the research context — the state of Victoria in Australia — will be sketched. Finally, the metaphorical underpinnings of the governance arrangements that were implemented as part of the policy will be critiqued. The paper closes with some thoughts for reflection.

## **Framing the problem and the response: youth transition in the globalized context**

My intention in this paper is to make a contribution to the development of policy initiatives around the ‘problem’ of what, is ‘currently rendered as “school-to-work transitions”’ (Maguire and Ball 2012: 49). The reference to ‘currently rendered’ is used by Maguire and Ball to note that up to the 1970s, the majority of young people left school at around the age of fifteen and moved into full-time work: there *was* a transition from school to work, one that is no longer evident. For instance, for the twenty to twenty-five per cent of young people in the United Kingdom who still leave school at the first opportunity (Archer, Hollingsworth et al. 2007) transitions are likely to be uneven, fragmented and extended, ‘certainly not the one-off events that seem to be imagined in the policy rhetoric that surrounds this phenomenon’ (Maguire and Ball 2012: 53). Meanwhile, for the cohorts that move through the increasingly normalized pathway to university the school-to-work transition effectively occurs much later than the end of school (Bradley and Devadason 2008).

In Australia over the decade to 2008 the proportion of young people considered to be at risk in their school-to-work transition through being ‘not fully engaged’ in either education or employment declined. Most of this trend is explained by the increased school retention rate and the increased progression to post compulsory training options. However, while forty-six per cent of young adults from high socio-economic status backgrounds were engaged in full-time education, for young Australians who grew up in low socio-economic status communities the figure was less than twenty per cent (Lamb and Mason 2008).

For those young people who were not engaged in full-time education of some description, there is little argument around their perilous position in transition to first-time employment in the context that has evolved in the wake of the 2008-09 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (OECD 2012). Even in the relatively sheltered shores of Australia the unemployment rate for fifteen to nineteen year olds was nearly seventeen per cent, three times higher than for all adults (Robinson and Lamb 2012). While the scale of swings in youth unemployment rates are influenced by the high levels of full-time education participation rates of young people as a group (O'Higgins 2012), the emergence of, and fallout from, the GFC saw millions of young people who at best wished to work, and at worst were desperate to work, unemployed. Furthermore Australian trends echoed those in other contexts: a significant percentage of young people were deemed to be at risk of unemployment because of multiple disadvantage (tending to lack a diploma, coming from an immigrant/minority background and/or living in disadvantaged/rural/remote neighbourhoods) or because they struggled – despite having gained senior school credentials – to access any kind of stable employment (Scarpetta et al. 2010).

However, governmental responses to concerns about young people, and in particular young people deemed to be at risk, in transition to some form of sustainable engagement in the labour force were, at least in Australia, in place long before the current crisis swept around the globe. In 2001, the findings of a Ministerial Review commissioned by the then newly-elected Labor government in the state of Victoria suggested that youth in transition from education to employment faced persistent and severe difficulties unknown to previous generations. These problems were frequently concentrated in particular groups and regions: those that were socially disadvantaged. The Report's authors argued that these 'joined-up' problems demanded 'joined-up solutions': a 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-community' response (Kirby 2000). In a phased process, thirty-one Local Learning and Employment Networks – or LLEN as they came to be known – were implemented with the initial focus placed on regions that could demonstrate existing strong networks where community had organically come together to meet the needs of youth. Originally funded with AUD400,000 per year for a three-year period, LLEN were established as Incorporated Associations, a status that was proposed to enhance their ability to collaborate beyond the boundaries that constrain innovation in government funded and administered structures of post-compulsory education, training and employment. It was noted that LLEN would have implications for the way that governance worked, fostering a move towards an enabling, rather than 'administering' state (Pierre 2000).

Ten years on and LLEN have become an established component of the policy landscape, not only surviving long beyond that initial three years in the state of Victoria but also becoming something of a template for the Australian federal National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions (Department for Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). The tensions and challenges of that decade in Victoria are not the focus of this paper and can be reviewed elsewhere (Kamp 2005; 2009; 2012; Robinson and Keating 2005; Seddon, Clemans et al. 2005) as can the international literature that highlights the distance between rhetoric and practice in realizing the potential of networks as one form of 'joining-up' (Allen 2003; Billet, Ovens et al. 2007; Considine 2002; Geddes 2006; McCarthy, Miller et al. 2004; Tett 2005). In this paper my intention is to propose an argument that the distance between policy and rhetoric in Victoria reflected the paradigmatic misalignment between the policy agenda itself and the governance arrangements put in place to support it. Given the particular 'wickedness' of youth transitions in the context of globalization, and now the Great Recession with all its constraints, this kind of compromise in the implementation of a promising policy response in support of young people is of more than just academic interest.

Before moving on to tease out that argument I wish to briefly outline the research that underpins the ideas presented in this paper and it is to that task that I now turn.

### **The research: A study of the Geelong Local Learning and Employment Network**

The argument I am constructing in this paper draws on a longitudinal, ethnographic case study funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and undertaken from 2003-2006 in Geelong, the second most populous city of the state of Victoria in the south-east corner of Australia. Geographically the smallest mainland state, Victoria is also Australia's most densely-populated state with most residents concentrated in the area surrounding Port Phillip, including the capital and largest city, Melbourne. If you take to the six-lane highway that ribbons out of Melbourne and head some seventy-five kilometres south toward the Bellarine Peninsula you will find yourself driving through flat brown marshlands that ultimately bring you to the city of Geelong. Given the physical landscape with the expansive Port Phillip to the north and Bass Strait – the body of ocean that separates Victoria from the southernmost state of Tasmania – to the south the region nestles in a natural and highly identifiable enclave. Resident population in the broader Geelong region in 2010 was just over 290,000 ([www.geelongaustralia.com.au](http://www.geelongaustralia.com.au)). Within the region, the population profile differs by location and while Geelong is known for its pockets of advantage – being home to a number of prestigious private schools in the leafy suburbs – social disadvantage persists in some suburbs with the highest and lowest socio-economic index scores ranging from nearly nine per cent above to over nine per cent below the national average ([www.g21.com.au](http://www.g21.com.au)). For those who occupy ‘working class Geelong’ the impact of globalization and the collapse of the traditional manufacturing industry profoundly affected employment opportunities, particularly for young people looking to gain an entry into sustainable work. In this context, community often came together to ‘look after its own’ and it was the presence of these organic, community networks that would be both supported and developed with the advent of LLEN,

In May 2003 I became involved as a participant observer in the Geelong LLEN. The nature of this participation ebbed and flowed but, for the most part, I was a full observer becoming, over time, accepted as being always present but silent. Throughout my time in the field, with the generous consent of the LLEN Committee of Management, I attended their monthly meetings and a wide range of Working Committee meetings and stakeholder fora. I regularly met with the Executive Officer of the LLEN (these unstructured interviews occurred every two or three weeks over a number of years) and I also undertook semi-structured interviews with a number of LLEN stakeholders. Throughout the period in the field, I maintained a reflective journal of my observations and reactions. Clearly, there is a methodological tension in undertaking a case study of a network: case studies are by their nature bounded. I resolved this methodological tension by writing the work in two parts: the first focused on the formation of the bounded LLEN-entity with which the government, through the Department of Education, entered into an agreement over the terms for provision of government funding; the second focused on the operation of the unbounded LLEN. In exploring this more fluid aspect of the case, I used a weaving metaphor to enable me to portray a range of ‘instances in action’ on a series of small ‘looms’. The resulting data was analysed using a range of theoretical perspectives including Deleuze (1987), Bourdieu (1986) and Foucault (1977) as well as drawing in concepts of action research (McTaggart 1991). In this paper I am taking up seminal organizational theory to explore the paradigmatic alignment of the networking policy and its governance arrangements.

## **The mode of enquiry: moving through metaphors in pursuit of the enabling state**

Governance is the act of governing and of being governed. Governance is control by arbitrary or constitutional authority. It involves the exercise of knowledge as well as power and usually involves systematic authority. To govern is to have authority and the power to impose policy. To govern is to administer affairs, regulate, influence, steer and set standards. Committees of Management are governing bodies which are themselves governed by virtue of the context in which they are established and operate. (Department of Education Employment and Training 2001: p.1)

As Higham and Yeomans (2010: 382) suggest there is now a 'global ubiquity of partnership and collaboration as a policy trend'. Yet the policy literature is diffuse and overlapping with 'unspecified notions of "partnership"' (Lumby and Morrison 2006: 323) burgeoning as the public sector grapples with increasingly complex and interrelated problems. At the same time, forms and processes of governance are also changing. From the late 1980s research points to a change from the language of 'governing' to a focus on 'enabling' in the development and management of public services. This shift responds to a growing appreciation that effective problem solving in the global context involved cooperative efforts (Giddens 2002); it involves dependency on others to develop policy and convert it into action (Kickert, Klijn et al. 1997; OECD 2004). This 'enabling' demanded a shift away from the central-steering perspective argued to be incapable of meeting the complexity of the new order (Heckscher 1994; Pollitt and Bouchaert 2004). It also involved a shift from the traditional, bureaucratic approach to public administration and towards 'new public management' (NPM) (Hood 1991; Kirkpatrick, Ackroyd et al. 2005; Pollitt 1993) of which Australia, along with the United Kingdom and New Zealand, were exemplars (O'Flynn 2007).

The quote presented above is taken from the Guide that was issued to all LLEN early in the initiative; its tone gives some indication of the dominant governance discourse of the Department at the time LLEN were implemented Victoria, one that derives from a machinic metaphor. Before we proceed further, I need to create a warrant for my use of metaphor in this paper. Metaphorical thinking has become a popular way of gaining multi-dimensional insights into the workings of organizations and how they do, or don't, successfully engage with the challenges they encounter (Morgan 1980). The idea is that, in identifying the habitual, or dominant, metaphors and paradigms which underpin our thinking and acting, awareness of other understandings becomes possible. This, in turn, opens up the potential for creative action. If metaphorical thinking can prove its worth in organizational settings, I am suggesting it has a contribution to make when we are concerned with systemic change to be achieved by way of completely intangible organizational forms such as networks that work between organizational entities.

Two metaphors have dominated organizational theory: the machine and the organism. Both are 'rational' forms of organization, able to be deliberately created but occupying the opposing ends of the management continuum (Burns and Stalker 1961). The machine is the dominant metaphor of classical management theory and bureaucracy that evolved in the context of the industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth century onwards (Fayol 1949; Taylor 1911; Weber 1948). Bureaucracy commonly refers to all public administration and, as Olsen (2005) notes, has often come to be used as a pejorative label that directs attention to its machinic heritage: it focuses on 'precision, speed, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and material and personal costs ... raised to the optimum point' (Roth and Wittich 1978: 973). Governance processes that derive from this metaphor work well in stable, closed environments where the goal is to reach pre-conceived ends as efficiently as possible. Yet, as we have explored, the take up of

'joined-up' initiatives has burgeoned in a context where pre-conceived ends are no longer appropriate – in the face of wicked problems both the problem itself and what might be its solution are often unclear or transitory; often both ends and means appear in the process of experimentation that draws in multiple stakeholders. As Weber (1920/2011) noted for all its benefits, the kind of mechanization of human life that is emblematic of bureaucracy potentially erodes the spirit and the capacity for spontaneous action.

As to the organism metaphor, it draws attention to differentiated yet mutually connected, dependent parts constituted to share a common life (Morgan 1980: 614). The emphasis here is on 'contingency': how survival of an organization is dependent on both goodness of fit with its environment and processes of internal coherence. Under this metaphor, strict subordination and obedience give way to passion and shared belief in the organizational goal. In this way, the metaphor highlights the need for organizations had to be viewed as cooperative systems (Burns and Stalker 1961). The take-up in a range of policy contexts of network initiatives is a shift in metaphor from a pre-determined, mechanistic approach to established programme provision to a more organic approach where local communities come together in new and evolving ways that, it is hoped, will better respond to the more complex needs including those of youth moving into, out of and around education, training and employment in the context of the risk society. Yet while there may now be an increasing contingency approach at programme level, contingency thinking must also extend to governance structures (Bradshaw 2009) and it is here that the fracture in the policy agenda in LLEN as one example is clearly evident.

### **Governance and paradigmatic change: moving beyond the machine**

Bureaucracy and traditional administrative management depend on hierarchically imposed rules, founded upon Weber's rational-legal authority as a means of control. In organizational theory, the division of labour focuses on the separation of thinking and doing: on management issuing commands and workers responding to and enacting those commands. This is a fundamental characteristic of forms of governance underpinned by the machine metaphor (Littler 1982). In the context of the LLEN, the division of labour focuses on the right of the Department of Education as contract manager to 'call the shots', articulated through a Performance Agreement, and for each LLEN to respond to and enact the Performance Agreement with their performance measured and monitored through technologies associated with New Public Management (NPM): an ideological shift towards individualism and market forces, the take up of private sector styles of management practice and metrics-based performance measurement (Hood 1991; Pierre 2000; Rhodes 1996).

Not only were LLEN to facilitate a new approach to whole-of government, whole-of-community practice, there was also an awareness that, potentially, they were a mechanism to improve governance (Robinson and Keating 2005: 25). Yet in the decade that has passed since LLEN were initiated, with all the success that was attributed to the policy agenda (Robinson and Keating 2004; Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission 2002; 2005), the realization of this opportunity for LLEN to improve governance is far from apparent. Indeed, the capture of NPM – an approach which, no less than traditional public administration, derives from the machine metaphor – has only strengthened through that time. Thus, while the wide-ranging programme initiatives introduced by Australian Labor back in 2001 derived from an organic metaphor, the governance arrangements remained, and continue to remain, framed by a mechanistic metaphor.

In our research team for the ARC research project we considered LLEN as complex sets of social practices demanding a new network sociality (Wittel 2001). We recognised that this

new form of sociality would be one that post-compulsory actors would need to learn in order to function in ways that would enable the policy aspirations for networks to be achieved. The retention of managerial technologies associated with NPM suggest the implications of this new form of networking seemed, in our research, to be missed by government and in some instances by LLEN themselves. On implementation, some of the other Victorian LLEN actively enhanced the existing ‘intuitive’ networks that derive from a community-based sociality (Sennett 1998), working to establish themselves as ‘the’ node in regard to the education, training and employment for youth in transition in their region. For instance, one LLEN established a one-stop-shop, another used the small amount of discretionary funding the LLEN had in the initial years for a badged vehicle to draw attention to the network. The Geelong LLEN’s approach was the antithesis of this with the idea being that everything the LLEN did would be to reinforce the awareness that the network was not the LLEN, its office or its (small) staff. Rather, it was the community who connected with it and built capacity in the process. The LLEN office never had a high-profile and never promoted itself; it worked as a fluid, underground support in a space of flows (Castells 2000). This brought its own difficulties: in a context of increasing accountability invisibility – a focus on ‘smoothing’ flows across boundaries – was difficult to justify to those who held the purse strings and were bound by pre-existing accountability technologies.

Here, given the limits of space, I wish to include just one example of how this plays out on the ground. During 2004 the government’s Community Cabinet was scheduled to occur within the Geelong LLEN region. The Community Cabinet was a long-standing tradition within the Victorian government in which the Cabinet is conducted in the community to allow community participation. However, it is also widely recognised as a promotional opportunity in that Ministers can invite the media to showcase ministerial visits to key projects. In September the LLEN was contacted to provide a list of activities that would be appropriate for the participation of the Minister during the Geelong Community Cabinet. In the following days, the tension between the organic metaphor that was dominant in the operation of the Geelong LLEN and the machinic metaphor that was dominant in the operation of the Department in governing the LLEN was laid bare. The LLEN focused on the space of flows, the ‘underground’ work of relationship and capacity building in its pursuit of an emerging post compulsory education, training and employment sector. It could not roll-out a series of activities that it had funded where there were young people that the Minister could see, and be seen with. When advised of this inability to provide activities for the Minister, the Department advised they would be reporting a ‘nil response’. This was strongly refuted by the LLEN Executive given its implication that the network was failing to deliver. The response of the Department to this objection by the LLEN, as relayed to me by the Executive Officer was

Look at it from our point of view. They are coming down to a Community Cabinet. We have funded that LLEN down there for three years. If there is nothing for you to show about what difference that has made, what does that say?

In the ensuing days as a resolution was sought, the LLEN reiterated their approach. They noted the words of the Minister in her speech to an early LLEN Conference where she had noted

The government has put the resources in your hands – now it is up to you to use them effectively to come up with something different. (Minister of Education and Training 2003: 1)

For the Geelong LLEN, this ‘something different’ was to work in the space of flows, to pursue new imaginaries of how existing actants – be they teachers, programmes, policy documents, employers, strategic plans and so on – could join-up, learn, build capacity to

support young people to better navigate the spaces of the risk society. In the three years referred to by the Department these ‘something different’ included developing bridging and linking networks to initiate innovative education programmes, developing seven processes to enhance the workplace learning and transition activities by schools, a dozen action research projects, a series of events and projects around career choice (for both teachers and young people), the implementation of the new senior secondary school qualification (mandatory for all LLEN), communications strategies including the development of online databases on youth employment opportunities, involvement in strategic initiatives with the City of Geelong including leading the Lifelong Learning Pillar of the G21 Alliance ([www.g21.com.au](http://www.g21.com.au)), five major research projects in conjunction with Deakin University, capacity building and professional development activities for employers and schools, and hosting three strategic conferences and fora (as well as presenting at conferences hosted by others)<sup>1</sup>. None of these activities was able to meet the criteria established by the Department. The Executive Officer reported that when she reiterated the approach of the network and why a funded activity for young people could not be made to appear she was advised ‘That is the line you have been playing for three years ... the Minister is going to want to know, all the funding for three years, what is the LLEN doing’.

The accountability and reporting framework of the LLEN initiative has, from the beginning and throughout subsequent years, derived from a machinic metaphor, privileging measures that foster performativity (Ball 2000) – measures necessary to function within the established accountability regime – over the kinds of measures that would have supported the broader policy agenda (Seddon, Clemans et al. 2005). In 2004 McCarthy, Miller and Skidmore in asking the question ‘who governs in an interconnected world’, noted that institutions such as the Department are ‘not programmed to understand’ networks: while they have been embraced by governments the significance of network perspectives has not been grasped, a ‘governance gap’ remains and their potential has not been harnessed (McCarthy, Miller et al. 2004: 12).

## **Significance**

Hence the challenge for governments intending to implement joined-up initiatives in the face of wicked problems. Given the interconnected complexity of networks and their positioning outside the kinds of closed system that begat classical management theories, demands for accountability are amplified rather than diminished (McCarthy, Miller et al. 2004). What is required to realise the potential attributed to various forms of joining-up including networks, collaboration and partnership is no less than a new discourse for governance, one that can respond to the increasing demands for accountability we face in the context of a GFC yet does not close down the desire, innovation and energy of networked initiatives. Such a discourse, moving further along the continuum towards an organic metaphor where compliance gives way to commitment and shared belief in the goal, would go a long way to release the policy agenda. For the LLEN initiative this was doubly difficult given the appointment of the Department as contract manager: while the networks had gained authority through being implemented by, and funded as a result of, government policy, on the ground there were mixed understandings about LLEN, about where they would ‘fit’ (Seddon, Clemans et al. 2005), about how long they would last and about how much potential they held within them.

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<sup>1</sup> Full details are available in relevant SGR LLEN Annual Reports. See also (Kamp 2006).

The significance of the challenge I am laying down is clear. For Jessop (1998: 29) the networking agenda moves from hierarchy to ‘heterarchy’ which involves the self-organised steering of multiple agencies, institutions and systems: it draws attention to divergence and co-existence. Yet this still obscures the pressing issue of the need for government to recognise itself as *within, rather than above*, the network (Kamp 2009). From my perspective, one of the major restraints for the Geelong LLEN was the inability for the Department to perceive itself as being part of the network. Rather, it maintained its hierarchical position: its points of intersection were along pre-established paths. This compromised its ability to establish a productive relationship with the LLEN and this, in turn, undermined the LLEN’s ability to pursue its strategic agenda, one that the Department itself, acting as the agent of government, desired. For some commentators, this was what the Geelong LLEN – the ‘problematic, argumentative LLEN according to its Executive Officer – was modelling. In 2005, subsequent to a Review to assess whether government should continue to invest in the LLEN initiative, a member of the Review Team indicated that the only place where she had seen the sort of ‘futures thinking’ that the Department itself was promoting, and had seen it succeeding ‘vibrantly’ was in Geelong (Hull, D. 2005, personal communication, 28 April). Clearly there is a case for a paradigmatic re-alignment: government funding rightly demands accountability yet we need to collaboratively explore the potential for mechanisms for accountability that derive from metaphors other than the machine. In this way we might release the potential for governance to become truly ‘enabling’: to be attuned to, and potentially as innovative as, the practice which it needs to support.

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