' Joining-up' : a study of partnership in post-16 learning

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List of abbreviations

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (replaced DfEE in 2001)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
Ufi	University for Industry
UK	United Kingdom

Acknowledgements

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This thesis examines the concept and practice of partnership in the context of post-16 learning. The study explores the process of partnership working through a qualitative case study of a sub-regional partnership that aims to widen participation in post-16 learning through its collaborative activities. The investigation seeks to learn about the basis of partnership and to identify characteristics that contribute to continued and effective partnership working. Drawing on understandings of partnership in policy, theory and in practice, I develop a more detailed conceptualisation of partnership than is currently available in the field of post-16 learning.

The history, development and work of the case study partnership were investigated through a combination of methods including observations of partnership meetings, documentary evidence of partnership working and semi-structured interviews with participants in the case study. The interviews with senior managers of institutions and organisations that provide education, training and guidance for post-16 learners in the Black Country, a sub-region of the Midlands in England, focused on the reasons for participation in a partnership and the aspects of partnership working that contribute to sustainability in partnerships.

The findings give a rich insight into the practicalities of working in partnership with individuals and organisations and provide a basis for theorising partnership as a heterogeneous concept and practice rather than a homogenous entity. The case study reveals both the potential of partnership and the challenges to partnership working, such as resource and power differentials. It also shows how social capital can provide the basis for sustained partnership and function as a resource that can be used in similar ways to other forms of capital. This insight is used together with characteristics drawn from the partnership literature to theorise partnership as a continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership, which function on the basis of different types and levels of trust, the operation of formal and informal networks and shared norms and values amongst actors.

Introduction

This introduction provides a brief history of the development of the research and my personal and professional reasons for focusing on partnership working in post-16 learning. This is followed by an overview of the structure of the thesis.

I begin with my personal motivations, interests and values as I recognise the importance of the self in research, which Coffey characterises as the 'silent space' (Coffey 1999) in research methodology as not all researchers acknowledge the ways in which the person of the researcher shapes a study. My primary reason for re-engaging in formal study at this stage in my lifecourse was a need for personal learning. I wanted to participate in learning for its own sake or as one of the senior managers I interviewed as part of this study put it 'learning for the sheer joy of it'. As a learner, I felt a need for intellectual challenge and as a professional, the need to re-fresh my thinking by undertaking an in-depth investigation that would bring me into contact with new ideas and concepts and other professionals in post-16 education.

My profession, values and teaching and schooling experience influenced my choice of topic for research. As an educator committed to promoting greater educational equality and social justice I was interested in investigating the impact of the policy emphasis on widening participation in post-16 learning. A teaching career of over twenty years in adult, further and higher education had heightened my awareness of the role of social class, gender and ethnicity in educational achievement. My experience of working with learners from diverse educational, linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds, often classed as 'non-traditional' students, had shown that the

opportunities available to them were not equal to those accessible to other students. In my own and my family's schooling I had experienced the effects of cultural stereotyping and low teacher expectations on educational aspirations. As a reflexive teacher and researcher working in higher education in the 1990s I was interested in exploring the global spread in notions of learning throughout life and the more specific strategy of partnership as a means of widening participation in learning.

The following section provides a brief history of the development of the research to give the reader an insight into how the concepts of lifelong learning, widening participation and partnership shaped the course of the study.

Development of the research

The study began as an investigation into the rhetoric and reality of lifelong learning policy and practice and developed into an exploration and analysis of partnership and partnership working through a case study of a partnership. My initial interest in lifelong learning was sparked by the very apt comment by two leading British academics who wrote, 'interest in lifelong learning is exploding, both among policy-makers and practitioners' (Field and Schuller 1999, p.1). As I was planning the research, lifelong learning and partnership were dominant concepts in contemporary academic and policy discourse. In policy and in practice they were being promoted by governments and organisations as learning was seen as the key to economic prosperity and social well-being and partnership a strategy for achieving participation in learning across the lifespan (Field and Leicester 2000a).

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I was intrigued by the notion of lifelong learning and more specifically in the related policy emphasis on widening and not just increasing participation in learning. Widening participation is identified in policy as a means of promoting social inclusion and I was interested in finding out if this policy was actually making any difference to the opportunities open to learners living and working in disadvantaged areas. It was this interest that led me to the work of Midlands Urban Partnership, (MUP), as its purpose is to widen participation in post-16 learning in the Black Country, a sub-region that suffers from economic, social and educational disadvantage. Subsequently, during the fieldwork as I explored the concept of partnership and observed the process of partnership working in MUP, in particular at the micro-level of the relationships and interactions amongst the people in the partnership, my emphasis shifted slightly to focus on the basis of sustainability in a partnership.

Getting to the heart of partnership: the research journey

The research was carried out during a period of intense policy and academic interest in the contested concept of lifelong learning, which in practice in England was largely defined as post-16 learning, and the collaborative discourse of partnership (Powell and Glendinning 2002). During the process of research, there were two aspects of the study that led to the slight shift of focus to concentrate more sharply on partnership than on widening participation in learning though this remains the context for interpreting the findings.

The first aspect was the evidence from fieldwork which drew on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and questioning (Blaxter 1999) as a key process for

analysing and interpreting empirical data and generated searching questions in relation to MUP given the context in which it worked as a partnership. The fieldwork data revealed that MUP was a relatively successful example of continued partnership working in a field where partnerships proliferated and disappeared in response to policy imperatives, often linked to financial incentives to work in partnership. However, unlike other partnerships, such as learning partnerships (DfEE 1999b, Ramsden *et al* 2004), MUP was a voluntary partnership that did not receive funding to operate as a partnership from any external funding body. Furthermore, the individuals and organisations in MUP were simultaneously involved in many other partnerships and networks in the region, some of which were much more successful in attracting substantial funding from government departments and funding agencies than MUP. Despite this, they continued to see a need for MUP and sustained it through 'thick and thin' for over five years and at the end of the fieldwork for this study, MUP was continuing to function as a partnership. It thus became an interesting research site for exploring the basis of partnership working and the purposes it served for the people involved.

The second aspect was that as a researcher, I became more curious about the reasons that bring partners together in collaborative working arrangements, such as partnerships, and the motives and processes that join individuals and organisations together in partnership working. As I puzzled over the reasons for MUP's continuing existence in the shifting landscape of post-16 learning in the Black Country, I became more interested in the connections amongst the actors and the 'glue' that seemed to hold them together. This generated a crucial question for understanding partnership: What factors contribute to continued and successful

partnership working and what sustains a partnership? This question emerged from the inductive process of probing the essence of partnership by examining the lifecourse of MUP and analysing the relationships amongst the people that became involved in its formation, expansion and continued presence in the sub-region.

The empirical data

The methods used to gather and analyse empirical data are discussed in Chapter 4 but a brief note is provided here to assist the reader in placing this study of partnership in the context of the development of the research. The main methods for researching the work of the partnership were observation of meetings of the full partnership board and the smaller executive group, in-depth interviews with members of the partnership board, and analysis of documentary evidence of partnership working. This documentary evidence included minutes of formal board meetings, agendas, action plans, letters, discussion papers and newsletters produced by members of the partnership.

To investigate the impact of the partnership's work in achieving its primary purpose of widening participating in learning, focus group discussions with post-16 learners were held in learning centres in all four boroughs of the Black Country. The learners were all participating in education and training in sites managed by institutions and organisations that were members of MUP and funded through widening participation projects and initiatives. The focus groups explored learners' reasons for participating in the learning provided at each centre and the gains from that learning. We also discussed their understandings of lifelong learning and the factors that prevented participation in formal learning. This data is not presented in the thesis due to the

shift in the focus of the study from lifelong learning to partnership working but has been published elsewhere (Dhillon 2004).

During my research journey I have had the opportunity to share my findings with researchers in national and international conferences and have learnt from their questioning of my interpretation of the data. I have also published my emerging findings (Dhillon 2001b; 2005), and this has helped me to theorise partnership.

Research questions

The thesis focuses on the overarching research question of what sustains partnership and partnership working in the field of post-16 learning through a case study of MUP. The study explores and analyses the concept of partnership and the process of partnership working by addressing the following sub-questions:

1.1   Why is partnership working promoted in post-16 learning?

1.2   How is partnership conceptualised and understood in policy, theory and in practice?

1.3   How is the process of partnership working implemented and experienced and what sustains a partnership?

The structure of the thesis

The introduction outlines my personal and professional reasons for choosing to undertake research in the field of post-16 learning and provides an account of the

history of the development of the research. It explains the reasons for the slight shift in the focus of the study and summaries the content of each of the chapters in the thesis.

Chapter One places the study of partnership and partnership working in the policy context of post-16 learning. It discusses policies and initiatives that have led to a blurring of the boundaries between further, higher and adult education and traces the development of collaborative working arrangements which aim to widen participation in post-16 education and training.

Chapter Two examines the concept of partnership drawing on literature from different disciplines and policy fields. It analyses the reasons for the prominence of partnership as a concept and a practice and discusses characteristics of weak and strong forms of partnership, including power differentials amongst organisations, agencies and individuals. The chapter considers the role of contracts, trust and networks in partnership working and explores the boundaries between collaboration, co-operation and partnership.

Chapter Three discusses social capital which emerged as a key concept for understanding partnership working in this study. It traces the origins and applications of the concept by seminal and contemporary researchers and defines the dimensions of social capital that are applicable to understanding partnership. The final part of the chapter explains how I have drawn on network analysis and social capital to theorise partnership and explain partnership working in MUP.

Chapter Four explains the methodology and fieldwork used to research partnership working. It positions the study in research terms and discusses the considerations that affected the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven present the fieldwork data. Chapter Five presents the history of the development and progress of the case study partnership through the framework of the four stages in its lifecourse. Chapter Six compares partnership working during two contrasting stages in its lifecourse, a peak, a period of expansion, and a trough, a period of decline. Chapter Seven presents participants' perspectives of partnership in which senior managers of post-16 education and training organisations reflect on the factors that contribute to effective and sustained partnership.

Chapter Eight relates the findings from the fieldwork data to policy and theoretical literature on partnership. It discusses the role of social capital in sustaining partnership and presents a continuum of characteristic features of weak to strong forms of partnership, which were found in the case study and in the literature.

The final chapter reflects on the main research questions and discusses the limitations of the study. It also looks to future practice in partnership working by focusing on what we can learn about the basis of sustained partnership from this study.

Chapter 1

The shifting landscape of post-16 learning

This chapter places the study of partnership in the policy context of post-16 learning and outlines recent policies and initiatives that have promoted partnership working as a strategy for widening participation in post-compulsory education and training. It defines the field of post-16 learning for the purposes of this study and explores the more expansive discourse of 'learning', which has to some extent displaced the concepts of education and training in policies for the post-16 sector.

The chapter considers two dominant themes in academic and policy debate that have led to changes in the sector. Firstly, policies that posit participation in learning as the panacea for economic, social, civic and democratic problems. Secondly, the call for greater collaboration and partnership working amongst providers of education, training and other stakeholders as a strategy for widening participation in learning. It thus locates partnership as a specific strategy for widening participation and introduces the emergence of the case study partnership in this policy context. I start by discussing post-16 learning and then consider partnership working because partnership in this thesis needs to be understood in this context.

During the 1990s the post-compulsory sector of education and training was redefined as the shifting boundaries between further, higher and adult education were encompassed by the more embracing concept of lifelong learning and became the terrain for contesting the meaning and purposes of post-16 learning. There was global and national interest in the need for lifelong learning in order to meet the demands of the knowledge economy and promote a learning society to cope with

wider changes brought about by globalisation. The debate amongst 'an extraordinary range of organisations and nations' (Field and Leicester 2000b, p.xvi) led to the development of policies and strategies to increase and widen participation in formal learning as this was perceived by policymakers as the solution to economic and social disadvantage and the key to economic prosperity and social well-being. 'Learning' emerged as a key theme and the need for learning throughout life was reinforced in policy and in practice through initiatives and incentives (Hodgson and Spours 2000) to encourage, sometimes compel, participation in formal, often vocational, learning.

Policies and initiatives developed by governments, supranational and international organisations to bring about greater participation in post-16 learning emphasise two key elements that are particularly pertinent to the context of this study. Firstly, the importance of widening, not just increasing, participation in learning and secondly, the call for greater collaboration and co-operation amongst stakeholders and providers of education and training through partnerships. Partnership working amongst different government departments, various tiers of government and between institutions and agencies is promoted as a more effective and efficient way of improving access to learning and of developing the quality and standards of provision.

In the UK, the change of government in 1997 brought a fresh impetus to partnership working as New Labour 'tied its colours firmly to the partnership mast' (Balloch and Taylor 2001, p.3). This study focuses on the work of a partnership that aims to

widen participation in post-16 learning through 'joined-up' working amongst providers of education, training and related services in one sub-region in England.

1.1. Delineating the field of post-16 learning

The field of post-16 learning is not easy to delineate as traditional fields of policy and practice have become displaced by more open, less bounded concepts and changing boundaries (Green and Lucas 1999, Gallacher and Thompson 1999, Field and Leicester 2000a). The more bounded fields of further, higher, adult, community and continuing education as fields of study and practice have become encompassed by the 'more diverse moorland of lifelong learning' (Edwards 1997, p.67). At the same time policies and incentives to encourage and improve collaborative working arrangements amongst providers of education and training (Stuart 2002) have led to boundary crossing as more higher education is delivered in further education colleges (Hyland and Merrill 2003, Jary and Jones 2003) and some universities have established centres of lifelong learning (**www.warwick.ac.uk**, http://crll.ac.uk). Discussions around the 14-19 curriculum (Tomlinson 2004) also reflect changing boundaries and thinking in new ways about traditional sectors of education. Both the discourses of lifelong learning and the emphasis in policy and practice on boundary crossing have led to transformations and shifts in post-compulsory education and training and redefinitions of the field.

Meanings as Hughes (2001) points out are context-dependent and the implications of notions of lifelong learning and emphasis on boundary crossing in policy development and practice have influenced the way in which I the use the term 'post-16 learning' in this study. In the title of the thesis I have chosen to use post-16 learning as it best reflects the boundaries of the field of study in terms of the age of

the learners and captures the dispositions of the people who participated in the research as they saw partnership working as a form of learning, both for themselves as individuals and for the organisations they represented in the partnership. I use post-16 learning to refer to all education and training provision for post-16 learners, other than higher education at degree level or above. This interpretation of post-16 learning is close to how lifelong learning is officially defined in England as according to TeacherNet, the government's resource to support the education profession: 'for most practical purposes, the term [lifelong learning] is taken by the Government (and its partners: local government, the further and higher education sectors) to mean all post-16 learning' (TeacherNet 2003, p.1).

Education, training, learning and skills

Defining the boundaries of the field of this study with respect to the age of the learners and in terms of learning rather than education reflects the breadth of the field and changing conceptual boundaries as the language of learning displaces that of education and training (Jarvis 1998, Lawson 2000, Biesta 2004). In policy texts and in the field of practice learning is a dominant concept with a much wider reach than education and training. Governments, supranational and international organisations place learning at the centre of economic and social policies (DfEE 1998, Scottish Office 1999, Welsh Office 1998, CEC 2001, European Commission 2002, OECD 1996) and in educational practice the concept of learning is equally prominent. Educational organisations, like other proactive organisations, are expected to become learning organisations (Easterby-Smith *et al* 1999, Hargreaves 2001) and individuals to be reflective practitioners (Schon 19991, Cowan 1998) so as to continually improve their professional practice through learning and self-reflection (Moon 1999).

This dominant discourse assumes that it is possible for organisations and individuals to continually improve; an assumption that is not unchallenged (Avis 2003).

The ideas and expectations associated with learning are rooted in ideas of reflexive modernity (Beck 1992, Giddens 1998, Alheit 1999) and are evident in educational research as well as in policy and practice. Researchers are expected to engage in reflexive analysis (Griffiths 2000) to learn from the process of research as well as to make a contribution to a body of knowledge. The emphasis is not just on the content of the work but also on the individuals' ability to transfer learning to other situations, a skill which is valued in learners and workers as rapid technological change means that knowledge quickly becomes out-dated. The importance of skills is reflected in the concept of employability and has led 'schools, colleges and universities to sprinkle their provision with such offerings as 'enterprise education', 'life skills', and 'key skills' (Unwin 2003, p.8).

In recent government policy, particularly for the post-16 sector in England, the language of skills dominates policy texts even though the need for 'a culture of learning' (DfEE 1999a) is acknowledged and frames the overall context. The emphasis on learning and skills has led to renaming of government departments and agencies and this is discussed later in this chapter in the context of New Labour's post-16 policy. These conceptual changes and blurring of boundaries reflect academic and policy debate about the meaning, nature and purposes of education, training and learning which in recent years has centred on the contested concept of lifelong learning and notions of the learning society. Such policies and debates are set within the context of wider economic and social changes brought about by

globalisation, such as shifts in the economy and labour markets, and other aspects of living in a world of increasing risk and uncertainty.

Globalisation, risk and learning

Globalisation and the information revolution are leading to major transformations in the economy and society (Beck 1992, Giddens 1998, Castells 1998) bringing changes in patterns of employment in Western capitalist countries and increased risks for individuals, communities and nations. In globalised capitalism, multinational companies are able to move resources easily around the world and shift manufacturing production, and more recently service industries, to poorer countries and regions to take advantage of lower labour costs. It is claimed that this is necessary in order to remain competitive in the global economy but this aspect of globalisation increases the risks of unemployment for those working in these industries and the potential for economic decline and related social problems for those living in areas with high levels of manufacturing industry and lower levels of skill. Though the inevitability of the forces of globalisation are contested (for example by Castells 2000, Elliott 2003) the consequences of marginalisation for those affected by labour market shifts are accepted by policymakers and their critics as these communities and neighbourhoods are at greater risk of social exclusion (Geddes 1998, SEU 2004).

Beck argues that major scientific and technological change has created 'a risk society' where 'the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*' (Beck 1992, p.20). Beck also points out that the consequences of scientific and industrial developments, for example environmental

disasters, can cross national boundaries and hence pose further risks to global society. Giddens (1998) suggests that national governments need to work with non-governmental organisations and transnational pressure groups to maintain political stability and cope with changes brought about by globalisation, technological and ecological developments. In response to these changes governments and organisations have posited lifelong learning as a means of coping with these pressures and increased risks. As knowledge rather than physical resources becomes the key to prosperity and well-being in global capitalism, knowledge workers, that is those with the skill to manipulate existing and new knowledge in their work, become an increasingly valuable commodity in the labour market whilst those with few vocational skills or no marketable skills risk become de-valued and in danger of isolation and exclusion.

Participation in learning is strongly linked to economic and employment reasons, particularly in lifelong learning policies developed during the 1990s, but learning is also held to bring wider social benefits which are reflected in notions of the 'learning society' (Ranson 1998, Coffield 1997; 2000b), a concept which like lifelong learning has been fiercely contested (see for example, Hughes and Tight 1998, Strain and Field 1998). As Jarvis (1998) points out metaphors attempt to describe phenomena and at the turn of the millennium 'information society', 'knowledge society', 'learning society' were amongst the terms that attempted to capture the nature of contemporary society. This provided the terrain for contesting the meaning and purposes of lifelong learning, a concept that has been characterised as 'both the mantra and the mantle of late twentieth century education' (Butler 2000, p.120).

Contested meanings of lifelong learning

The eruption of interest in the concept of lifelong learning in the 1990s is well documented in the policy and academic literature (CEC 1995, Delors 1996, Fryer 1997, DfEE 1998, G8 1999, Watson and Taylor 1998, Field and Schuller 1999, Field 2000a, Hodgson 2000a, Edwards *et al* 2002, Tett 2002, Longworth 2003, Hyland and Merrill 2003). However, in this now substantial body of literature on the topic, there is sometimes a failure to differentiate between lifelong learning as a policy approach and lifelong learning as a concept. Griffin points out that 'the shifting emphasis away from education to learning in the lifelong context *does* signify some kind of a substantive development away from a conceptual to a policy-orientated approach' (Griffin 1999, p.122). Policymakers tend to focus on the *need* for lifelong learning, and hence its policy implications, whilst academics focus also on its *purpose*, and hence its conceptual meaning. The academic literature includes a critical perspective, which challenges policy interpretations of lifelong learning.

The reasons put forward by policymakers for the need for lifelong learning are considered in Section 1.2 in the context of the British government's policies. The academic debate reflects different ideologies of education and challenges the dominant hegemonic discourse (Martin 2001) which posits that the primary purpose of lifelong learning is the development of human capital essentially for economic ends. Alternative conceptualisations range from the very positive articulations of visionaries where lifelong learning 'is touted as the New Jerusalem which leads to a bountiful and promised land' (Boshier 1998, p.4) to more critical interpretations which see it as a form of social control (Coffield 1999a, Ecclestone 1999) that includes a compulsion to participate in formal learning (Ainley 1998, Tight 1998).

Critics point out that the magic bullet of lifelong learning (Coffield 1999b) cannot by itself address the structural inequalities in poor neighbourhoods that lead to economic and social deprivation. Initiatives such as government funded training schemes for the unemployed (for example New Deal) may not lead to jobs in areas 'where there are no jobs to be had' (Thompson 2000). New Deal, a training scheme primarily designed to equip unemployed 18-24 year-olds (DfEE 1997) with the skills needed for employment, was implemented under the banner of lifelong learning during the period of this study and members of MUP were contracted to implement it in the Black Country. However, in practice such training did not always lead to employment opportunities for the individuals involved. The reasons for lack of success in obtaining employment were attributable to deeper structural factors in patterns of employment in the local labour market rather than the quality of the training or the skills of the individual.

The issues raised by such debates about lifelong learning are pertinent to the context of this study as the institutions, organisations, agencies, managers and practitioners that became involved in MUP worked in partnership to create opportunities for learning for a range of reasons. They came together to increase and widen participation in formal learning but were also alert to the social and personal purposes of learning. Competing notions of lifelong learning challenged their understandings of the purposes of post-16 learning reflecting older debates about lifelong and recurrent education (Field 2001, Edwards *et al* 2002) and of routes to second chance education. These older debates underpinned by liberal democratic, social democratic and humanist ideologies reflect a wider range of purposes for learning than the more instrumentalist goals of vocational training and skills that

dominate contemporary policy texts. The members of MUP had to work within the boundaries of government policy and were not in a position to address structural inequalities but were able to pool their resources to address social as well as economic purposes for learning in the area in which they worked, as shown by the research data presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

The context of this study includes the policies of the Labour government and the motivations of the individuals and organisations that participated in MUP both of which shaped the meaning and nature of partnership. Motivations for engaging in partnership are discussed in Chapter 2. The next section of this chapter considers New Labour's policies, which like other policymakers (EUROPA 2004, OECD 1996) offer three broad reasons for participation in post-16 learning. These are, firstly and predominantly, that participation in learning is necessary to sustain economic growth and prosperity, secondly, that it is needed to promote social inclusion and social cohesion in society, and thirdly, to encourage active participation in democratic forms of government. New Labour discourse uses the terms economic competitiveness, social inclusion and active citizenship in its policies and these provide the policy and historical context for the study.

1.2   New Labour, the Third Way and post-16 learning

Two themes in New Labour's policies are particularly important in the context of this study. Firstly, the vigorous focus on education and learning as Tony Blair's now famous slogan of 'education, education, education' (Giddens 1998, p.109) is firmly lodged as his mantra as Prime Minister during his first term in office. Secondly, the promotion of partnership as a way of developing and implementing policy, as

following its election in 1997 New Labour announced 'its intention to move from a contract culture to a partnership culture' (Balloch and Taylor 2001, p.3).

The first theme focuses on why there is a need for participation in post-16 learning whilst the second provides the means for achieving this in terms of a strategy. Both reflect third way thinking and values (Giddens 1998; 2000, Clarke and Glendinning 2002) which contend that new ways of thinking and working are needed to meet the challenges of globalised capitalism and increasing individualisation in society. They also show the impatience of a government determined to be seen to be taking action to address the challenges faced by the nation. The focus on partnership is discussed in Chapter 2. The remainder of this chapter considers the importance given by New Labour to lifelong learning, which as the definition given on page 12 shows is for all practical purposes, defined in policy as post-16 learning.

The speed with which lifelong learning policy was developed in the UK following New Labour's election to power is comparable to other countries such as Germany, Finland, Norway and Ireland (Field 2000b) and reflects the global interest in the concept. In 1997 the government appointed the first Minister of Lifelong Learning and commissioned wide-ranging reports on further (Kennedy 1997), higher (Dearing 1997) and continuing education (Fryer 1997). In 1998, separate Green Papers set out proposals for England (DfEE 1998), Scotland (Scottish Office 1998) and Wales (Welsh Office 1998) followed by a White Paper (DfEE 1999a) for restructuring post-16 education and training in England. These reports and proposals set out the government's reasons for wanting to both increase and widen participation in learning.

The policy rhetoric: imperatives for participation in learning

New Labour's policy rhetoric provides three imperatives for greater participation in learning, which is taken to refer to formal accredited forms of learning. Despite evidence of the significance of informal learning (Coffield 2000a, Field and Spence 2000) policy has tended to ignore this aspect of learning. In New Labour's policy the imperatives are firstly, the need to achieve and maintain economic competitiveness in a global market, secondly, to promote social inclusion in society and thirdly, to engage individuals in more active citizenship.

The imperative for economic competitiveness

In its key policy document *The Learning Age* (1998) the government set out its vision of developing a new culture of learning and although the subtitle 'a renaissance for a new Britain' might appear to allude to the cultural benefits of learning the dominant idea in the text is that lifelong learning is needed for economic competitiveness. In the foreword to this Green Paper, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment writes:

> Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. (DfEE 1998, p.7)

This idea is reinforced by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who is quoted as saying 'Education is the best economic policy we have' (DfEE 1998, p.9) and further amplified in other policy papers by Blunkett:

> The early part of the 21st century will be characterised by the transformation of the basis of economic success from fixed capital investment, to human capital. In a knowledge-driven economy, the continuous updating of skills and the development of lifelong learning will make the difference between

success and failure and between competitiveness and decline. (Blunkett 1999 quoted in Hodgson 2000c, p.12)

For New Labour, lifelong learning is a central strategy for ensuring the future economic prosperity of the UK and updating of skills a key priority for 'enabling people, and businesses, to succeed' (DfEE 1999a, p.3) in the information and communications age of the twenty-first century. The centrality of skills in government thinking is reflected in policy texts and in actions such as the renaming of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) as the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), in 2001, and replacing Training and Enterprise Councils (TECS) with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) as part of a major shift in planning and funding post-16 education and training in England (DfEE 1999a). These changes took place during the course of the present study and some of the organisations and individuals in MUP experienced the transition from being TECs to becoming a local LSC as shown in Chapter 6.

In its White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999a), which sets out the new framework for post-16 provision, the proposal to create 'a single body to oversee national strategies for post-16 learning' is described as 'a fundamental change' for which there is 'widespread support' (DfEE 1999a, p.3). Notions of change and widespread support for its policies permeate the rhetoric of New Labour's discourse but the realities of accountability and the drive to raise educational standards and workforce skills are equally evident in policy texts and in the structures put in place to implement and monitor policies. Thus, although *Learning to Succeed* sets out strategies for realising the vision of *The Learning Age* in the post-16 sector the language of skills and standards quickly follows that of enabling people to fulfil their

potential through learning. For example, in the opening paragraph of the White Paper, the statement 'it [lifelong learning] can and must nurture a love for learning' is followed in the second paragraph by 'we must develop a new approach to skills' and place 'the emphasis on quality to lever up standards' (DfEE 1999a, p.3). The shift in language from 'learning' to 'skills' reveals the real focus of New Labour's agenda for post-16 learning and the structures put in place to make this happen demonstrate its determination to make providers more accountable for the money that the government spends on education and training.

In terms of structures, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) consisting of a national LSC and a network of 47 local LSCs with responsibility for planning, organising and funding all post-16 education and training, other than higher education, is accompanied by a rigorous inspection regime to lever up standards by regularly inspecting training providers. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), an agency with a ruthless reputation for inspecting educational provision in schools, is given responsibility for inspecting 16-19 provision and a new organisation, The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) for inspecting all provision for learners over the age of 19. By shifting responsibilities and using central inspectorates the government is able to exercise tight control over providers of post-16 learning in the name of improving the quality of training and raising standards of attainment. Phillips and Harper-Jones (2003) in a review of the first four years of New Labour's education policy identify four dominant themes in the government's policies and priorities for education. These are: firstly, a determination to raise educational standards; secondly, a quest to modernise educational systems, structures and practices; thirdly, a desire to promote choice and diversity within education and fourthly, a pre-occupation with the culture of performativity (Phillips and Harper-Jones 2003).

These themes are present in all spheres of education from schools to higher education and reflect the emphasis on measurement and performance of both individual and organisational achievement in delivering improvements and providing 'value for money'.

In the post-16 sector, National Learning Targets, previously known as National Education and Training Targets, embody the government's emphasis on measuring learning although in policy rhetoric they are presented as evidence of 'our commitment to widen and increase participation in learning and raise the attainment levels of people entering education and training' (DfEE 1999a, p.14). In practice, however, the focus is very much on increasing skills levels amongst the workforce to meet economic needs. I observed this emphasis on the ground during the fieldwork for this study. In several meetings of MUP, the LSC representative presented the skills strategy for the Black Country which included targets for increasing the proportion of people receiving job-related training, increasing the proportion of people achieving higher level vocational qualifications and improving literacy and numeracy skills of adults, in order to meet the needs of the local economy and labour markets (MUP document 2001a). These targets derived from national objectives and local needs reflect another aspect of New Labour's policy: that of drawing local, regional and national needs together to bring greater coherence and responsiveness to planning and delivering post-16 learning by encouraging greater collaboration between different tiers of government and agencies and organisations working in the post-16 sector. This is discussed later in this chapter in Section 1.3.

Hodgson (2000c) suggests that the infrastructure for planning, organising and funding lifelong learning creates 'an interesting balance or tension between national, regional and local tiers of government' (p.13). However, Giddens (1998) argues that the third way is not only possible but also necessary in politics in order to find a way of tackling social, political and economic issues in a changing world. It is claimed that polarities between left and right and between public and private sector are no longer appropriate and a mixture of competition and collaboration is needed. Leadbetter argues that 'the most knowledge-intensive sectors of the economy, software and bio-technology, thrive on a mix of competition and collaboration' (Leadbetter 1998 quoted in Hyland and Merrill 2003, p.29). This example highlights the strength of economic arguments in New Labour thinking and policy although the third way is not exclusively focused on economic competitiveness and the skills agenda. This is reflected in policy rhetoric, which does acknowledge broader aims of post-16 learning:

> As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. (DfEE 1998, p.7)

The imperative for social inclusion

The second strand in New Labour's policy is that learning has a central role in promoting social inclusion (DfEE 1998; 1999a, Gallacher and Crossan 2000, Hyland and Merrill 2001, VSS 2004). In *The Learning Age* it is stated that 'learning is essential to a strong economy and an inclusive society' (DfEE 1998, p.11) and that 'learning contributes to social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity' (op.cit). This is consistent with policies in Europe, where

lifelong learning is seen as 'central not only to competitiveness and employability but also to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development' (EUROPA 2004, p.1). Lifelong learning is a core strategy in the European Union's ten-year mission to become a dynamic knowledge-based economy with better jobs and greater social cohesion. The OECD also includes social inclusion in its aims of lifelong learning (OECD 1996).

Social inclusion is thus an important element in national and international lifelong policies though secondary to economic reasons for participation in post-16 learning. Even when framed in the context of social inclusion it is presented as a way of gaining employability skills and seen as a route to employment and consequently to being 'included' in society. Furthermore, it is often conceived as a means of tackling social exclusion as participation in learning forms part of economic and social regeneration strategies targeting deprived regions, disadvantaged groups and disengaged individuals (Geddes 1997, Hibbett *et al* 2001, LGA 2004). Clegg and McNulty (2002) point out that current economic regeneration of communities places particular emphasis on education and skill rather than physical regeneration. It is assumed that by gaining the skills needed for employment, neighbourhoods, communities and regions will be lifted out of poverty and deprivation and avoid social exclusion. Another key element in such strategies is the attempt to develop more co-ordinated action through partnerships amongst national, regional and local tiers of government and agencies, government departments and civic society as part of producing 'joined-up solutions to joined-up problems' (SEU 2004, p.1).

The formation of strategic units to co-ordinate action to deal with deep-rooted problems, such as social exclusion, is another feature of New Labour's policy. In 1997 the Prime Minister set up a Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) as 'part of the Government's strategic approach to tackling social exclusion including all Whitehall departments and many external partners' (SEU 2004, p.1). In 2002 the SEU became part of the cross-cutting Office of the Deputy Prime Minister working across departments to deliver an overarching strategy to achieve social justice and quality of life for everyone (ibid).

The terms social inclusion, social exclusion and social cohesion are not precisely defined in policy documents or in research studies though aspects of their meaning can be deduced from usage in context. Social exclusion has negative connotations whilst social inclusion and social cohesion are regarded as positive attributes of social groups and promoted as worthy policy goals. Although there is no clear definition of social exclusion (Gallacher and Crossan 2000) it is associated with a number of problems such as poverty, unemployment, marginalisation, low skills and high crime environments (Geddes 1998, SEU 2004). The term social inclusion is often used to mean the opposite of social exclusion and is more popular in policy rhetoric as it reflects a more positive veneer whilst both terms are used as euphemisms for problems linked to poverty. The language of inclusion and exclusion reflects a reluctance to acknowledge deep-rooted structural factors and engage in debate about issues such as re-distribution of income, power and wealth to address inequalities based on class, race and gender. Policy to promote social inclusion is premised on a deficit model (Gallacher and Crossan 2000) as it emphasises the deficits of the individual, who by lacking employability skills is poor,

rather than addressing the structural inequalities that lie at the root of social and economic problems in poor neighbourhoods.

Though social inclusion can be interpreted as being the opposite of social exclusion, there are differences between the meanings of the two terms, in particular when related to third way values which underpin New Labour thinking. Social inclusion is linked to notions of social justice and equity as equality is identified as a core value of the third way in addition to 'protection of the vulnerable, freedom as autonomy, no rights without responsibilities and no authority without democracy' (Giddens (1998, p.66). Giddens, a key proponent of the third way argues that:

> the idea of equality or social justice is basic to the outlook of the left....Those on the left not only pursue social justice, but believe that government has a key role in furthering that aim.' (Giddens 1998, p.41)

One of the ways in which New Labour sets out to further that aim is by widening participation in learning through strategies to improve access and lift barriers to participation for those who have not traditionally participated (DfEE 1998) in formal, accredited post-16 learning. Other forms of learning, such as informal, non-formal and experiential learning that are not formally accredited, do not feature in the policy discourse reflecting the credentialist emphasis in government policy.

Participation in learning is posited as the key not only to economic prosperity but also to social unity by policymakers and influential figures that have chaired committees to advise the government on reform of different sectors of post-16 learning. For example, Helena Kennedy, Chair of the committee set up to report on further education, maintains that 'Learning is central to economic success and social

cohesion. Equity dictates that all should have the opportunity to succeed' (Kennedy 1997, p.15). Notions of equity and social justice highlighted by influential figures, such as Giddens and Kennedy, appeal to researchers and practitioners who share a concern for issues of inequality and disadvantage, such as the participants in MUP.

Third way values include equality and appeal to notions of social justice but third way politics are based on the fundamental principle of 'no rights without responsibilities' as the basis of a new social contract between citizens and the state (Giddens 2000, p.52). This 'new social contract' means that individual citizens have responsibilities as well as rights and must carry out their responsibilities in order to enjoy the rights of living in a free democratic society. Thompson (2000, p.2) maintains that in the Prime Minister's view engaging in the discipline of work is the most important 'responsibility' a citizen can demonstrate and necessary if she or he is to enjoy the 'rights' of citizenship even when 'there is no work to be had'. The emphasis on 'no rights without responsibilities' represents the increasing individualisation of society and a shift away from state control and responsibility for the provision of welfare and other social and educational services to increasing individual responsibility for one's position in society. In this scenario, the role of government is to create opportunities, often in collaboration with other actors and agencies, to enable citizens to lift themselves out of poverty and disadvantage rather than to take responsibility for addressing structural inequalities. Lifelong learning and widening participation initiatives are thus presented as routes for avoiding social exclusion and means to promoting social inclusion.

Another aspect of the increasing individualisation of society is the emphasis placed on the learner for learning accompanied by the idea that learning is not bound to any particular time, institution or place. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is regarded as having the potential to revolutionise learning (Dearing 1997, Ufi 1999) by making it possible to deliver learning in more flexible ways, in particular through different forms of e-learning. In post-16 learning the development of opportunities to 'learn anywhere, at any time and at any pace' (Learndirect 2004, p.1) is co-ordinated by the Ufi, a public-private partnership which aims to enable people 'to fit learning into their lives' and put them into a 'better position to get jobs, improve their career prospects and boost business competitiveness' (Ufi 2004). This government-sponsored initiative delivers learning through Learndirect 'a network of online learning and information services' (Learndirect 2004) where learners can access learning through the Internet or in the extensive network (now over 2000) of learning centres located across the country.

The location of Learndirect centres is designed to encourage and widen participation in learning as they are placed in community and social settings such as shopping malls, pubs, colleges, companies, libraries and football clubs (Learndirect 2004) which are deemed to be easily accessible. By taking learning to people who may have been excluded or not had the opportunity to participate in education and training in traditional settings initiatives such as Learndirect aim to promote social inclusion. Although any initiative that widens participation and promotes social inclusion is a positive measure even if it only reaches some people, the language used to promote Learndirect is premised on the false assumption that learning is easy and that learners need no guidance or teaching in order to construct knowledge

(Biesta 2004). This rather naive portrayal of the process of learning as easy, fun and something for everyone is appealing but ignores the complexities of knowledge construction as an educational process which can be challenging, uncomfortable and difficult as well as transformational for the individual. There is also evidence that forms of on-line learning though intended to widen participation in learning are reinforcing the gap between the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor, the educational 'haves' and the educational 'have-nots' (Gallacher *et al* 2000, Fryer 1997) through the digital divide (Sargant 2000, Osbourne 2003) and hence contributing to exclusion.

The imperative for active citizenship

The third strand in New Labour's policy centres on the responsibility of citizens to actively participate in democratic processes at local, regional and national levels of government. In a climate of declining trust in politicians (Giddens 1998) and general apathy in political processes amongst the population signalled by low rates of participation in democratic processes, such as voting in elections, the government tries to promote the idea of 'citizenship' (DfES 2004a; 2004b). In the UK, voting in elections was as low as 24% in European elections and 30% in local elections in 1999 compared to a turnout of 71% in national elections in 1997 (Fabian Society 2001), an indicator of the depth of apathy and level of non-participation in fundamental processes of democracy. In some areas of England voter apathy amongst the majority of the population has led to a few extremist racist politicians being elected to local government in ethnically mixed areas suffering from economic decline. By blaming specific ethnic groups for economic and social problems in such areas extremists heighten the potential for social and political unrest and

sharpen divisions amongst communities, risking further marginalisation of groups and individuals and hence increasing social exclusion. For a national government that promotes social inclusion and believes in 'No authority without democracy' as fundamental third way values this clearly poses significant challenges.

In trying to reconstruct democracy on the basis of no rights without responsibilities the government is trying to engage its citizens in a process of political, social and civic renewal, partly through education and participation in learning. Education to encourage active participation in democratic processes includes the introduction of citizenship as a subject in the national curriculum for schools and citizenship as a theme in 14-19 qualifications (Hyland and Merrill 2003) in post-16 learning. Other developments include resources, websites and funded projects (TeacherNet Citizenship 2004, DfES 2004a) to enable 'young adults to exercise social responsibility...and [support them] in developing their roles as learners, workers, consumers, and members of families and communities' (DfES 2004b, p.1).

Another feature of policy in this area, as in the social inclusion strand, is the promotion of partnership working between government departments and other organisations and agencies in finding strategies for developing active citizenship. The Active Citizenship Centre, a virtual centre linked to the Home Office, 'is a partnership between policymakers, academics, practitioners and citizens...to advise on research and best practice in civil renewal' (Home Office 2004, p.1). Organisations in the voluntary sector are also involved in promoting citizenship, for example the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust 'is working in partnership with young people, schools and community groups to develop...meaningful opportunities for all

young people...to become more active citizens' (Institute for Citizenship 2004, p.1).

Such partnerships place particular emphasis on empowering members of the community themselves to take a key role in regenerating their neighbourhood and developing a sense of community. Promotion of partnership as a means for developing a sense of community involves recognising the importance of social connections amongst individuals, groups and communities and draws on communitarian values and the concept of social capital, which is discussed in Chapter 3. Whilst the government's concern for empowering citizens to engage in the civic and political life of their neighbourhoods and communities, as well as in wider processes of democratic participation can be seen as commendable, a more critical reading suggests that it is way of maintaining social control and of shifting the responsibility for regeneration on to communities and individual citizens (Thompson 2000).

New Labour's policies and its reforms to the structures for planning and delivering post-16 learning show the significance placed upon partnership working as a means for increasing and widening participation in formal education and training. However, though the vigour with which New Labour has promoted both learning and partnership is exceptional, issues about participation in learning and collaborative working between providers of education and training have a longer history. These are considered in the following section.

1.3 Partnership as a strategy for widening participation

Collaborative working arrangements between different sectors of education, for example compacts between schools and colleges and franchising between further

education colleges and universities have existed from the 1980s (Bird 1996). Such arrangements have been a means for opening up opportunities for individuals and groups who may not aspire to further and higher education or as routes for adults without traditional entry qualifications for higher education, for example 'Access' courses (Jary and Jones 2003). The greater emphasis by New Labour on widening participation reflects third way values, such as equity and social justice (Kennedy 1997, Giddens 1998) and the policy thrust sees lifelong learning as 'a policy instrument for promoting greater social justice, equity and inclusion' (Hodgson 2000b, p.52).

Strategies to widen participation in learning focus on getting individuals from lower socio-economic groups, in particular social classes III, IV and V, and certain minority ethnic groups, to participate in education and training as they are currently under-represented in post-16 learning (CIHE 1997, Woodrow *et al* 1998, Thomas 2002, Archer *et al* 2003) and non-participation is linked to economic and social disadvantage. Widening participation strategies are thus seen as a way of promoting social inclusion and have become an important element in further and higher education policies, supported with initiatives and special funding streams (FEFC 1997, HEFCE 1998; 1999; 2000) to encourage, (even require), institutions to widen and not just increase participation in education as part of a broader social justice agenda (DfES 2003). In delivering widening participation, further and higher education institutions are persuaded to engage in collaborative partnerships through policy and funding initiatives (FEFC 2000, Doyle 2001, Institute for Access Studies 2001). This is reflected in the broader field of post-16 learning in the remit of local learning partnerships, discussed later in this chapter.

Partnership working between further and higher education

Paczuska (1999) dates links and partnerships between further (FE) and higher education (HE) to the 1960s though the main growth was in the 1980s and 1990s. The increase is linked to a 'growing emphasis on widening access to further and higher education [which] emerged in the second half of the 1980s' (Gallacher and Thompson 1999, p.14) as the government became interested in attracting more students to return to education to improve their qualifications and skills. During the 1980s 'Access' courses developed to provide special routes and a second chance for those that had missed out on the opportunity to enter HE (Jary and Jones 2003). The provision of Access courses was located in FE colleges with progression routes linked to HE institutions and according to Stuart (2002) it was mainly women, who had been denied education earlier in their lives, that participated in such programmes.

In the 1990s the marketization of FE (Ainley and Bailey 1997) and the ending of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities, through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, enabled more joint working between the sectors (Bocock and Scott 1994) and diversification of both educational provision and the links between institutions. Paczuska (1999) provides a typology of the types of links between FE and HE, shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Partnership working between further and higher education

Types of further education/higher education partnerships (Paczuska 1999, p.99)		
Rawlinson (1997)	Bird (1996)	HEQC (1993)
Associate college arrangements	Franchising	Articulation
Preferred partnerships	Associate college arrangements	Joint provision
	Validation and accreditation arrangements	Validation
	Access courses	Franchising
		Subcontracting

The table shows the three main approaches to describing relationships between FE and HE and the overlap between the categorisations. Rawlinson (1997) distinguishes two main types of collaboration: associate college and preferred partnerships. Bird (1996) offers four categories of activity: franchising, associate college arrangements, validation and accreditation arrangements and Access courses. The HEQC (Higher Education Quality Council) differentiates five categories: articulation, joint provision, validation, franchising and subcontracting. All the categories attempt to capture a closer working relationship between an HE institution and FE colleges, which are often located in the same geographical region.

This reflects the attempt to formalise and simplify regional progression arrangements, which according to Doyle (2001) are designed to benefit those traditionally under-represented in HE. Though the focus on regional collaboration in widening participation strategies does open up opportunities for under-represented groups and so promotes social inclusion through partnerships it also risks creating a two tier-system of HE where new or post-1992 universities produce graduates for second-tier lower-status occupations in the labour market whilst old and or elite

universities provide a different kind of HE experience for standard age and background students (Taylor *et al* 2002, Taylor 2001). Jary and Jones (2003, p.1) maintain that recent HE policy 'has a Janus-face' as the government endeavours to create fair access and social justice in a much expanded system whilst at the same time setting out to maintain a minority of institutions as 'world class universities'. The university that is a key partner in MUP is a post-1992 university with a strong mission for widening participation and a history of working collaboratively with FE colleges through Access courses, franchising and accreditation and validation activities.

Franchising is the most common form of collaborative activity and though precise forms of the arrangement vary between institutions, it generally refers to a whole course, or stage of a course which is designed by an HE institution and delivered in an FE college (Opacic 1996). The HE institution remains the more powerful partner as it retains responsibility for quality assurance though more recent developments describe such relationships as partnerships (Brownlow 1994) implying that the relationship between the HE institution and the FE partners is more equal.

In the literature on collaborative working between FE and HE, other forms of links and special relationships between institutions, such as preferred partnerships and associate colleges, are also referred to as partnerships (for example by Paczuska 1999, Bird 1996, Abramson *et al* 1996, Trim 2001). However, this literature merely describes such links and relationships as partnerships without attempting to define partnership or engage in a critical analysis of the meaning of the concept. Similarly, the literature on partnerships between HE institutions and schools for delivering

initial teacher education programmes tends to use the term partnership without defining it (Griffiths and Owen 1995). Consequently, in Chapter 2, I draw on the use of partnership in other disciplines and contexts to conceptualise partnership and consider aspects of partnership working.

The literature on FE/HE partnerships reflects the changing boundaries between FE and HE and the re-labelling of such collaborative links as partnerships, which was given fresh impetus by the election of the Labour government.

Collaboration, partnership and New Labour

For New Labour and third way politics collaboration, co-operation and partnership is a necessary strategy for developing coherent polices and for delivering post-16 learning. The 'new framework for post-16 learning' set out in the White Paper *Learning to Succeed* aims to 'create a framework based on partnership and co-operation between individuals, businesses and communities, as well as institutions' (DfEE 1999a, p.4). In this framework, national networks, such as the Learning and Skills Council, (LSC 2005), are given a strategic role in identifying needs, addressing gaps in provision and avoiding duplication of services to bring greater coherence to local, regional and national planning and provision of post-16 learning.

In addition to bringing more coherence to post-16 learning through the LSC structure, partnership working is regarded as a strategy for widening participation in learning. The national LSC and its local arms are complemented by what are called learning partnerships, previously known as lifelong learning partnerships, established to 'bring coherence to local post-16 learning' (UK lifelong learning 2000) and to

'widen participation in learning, increase attainment, improve standards and raise skills' (DfEE 1999b, p.1). They also have 'a key role in taking forward the Government's social inclusion and regeneration agendas' (ibid).

Post-16 learning partnerships

Learning partnerships and the shifting terminology used to describe them illustrate the pace of change in policy development and implementation and the government's determination to improve existing practice in the field. These non-statutory, voluntary groupings of local learning providers were known as strategic lifelong learning partnerships before New Labour turned its attention to reforming post-16 learning. In 1999, they were re-labelled lifelong learning partnerships, just prior to the conception of the LSC, and brought together in a national network covering all the regions in England:

> to promote a new culture of provider collaboration across the sectors (schools, FE, work-based learning and adult and community learning) and to rationalise the plethora of existing local partnership arrangements covering post-16 learning. (Rodger *et al* 2001, p.1)

In addition to forming a national network of learning partnerships, (Partnerships directory 2001), a dedicated website to spread good practice and provide guidance and information about their work was set up and a national evaluation commissioned by the DfEE started in 1999 (Rodger *et al* 2001). Subsequently, following a government consultation process on their future role in the post-16 sector in 2001, they were re-labelled learning partnerships (www.lifelonglearning.co.uk 2004). During this period, government support for learning partnerships in the form of funding also shifted from the DfEE to the DfES and then to the LSC (Learning Partnerships 2003), indicative of the move towards more local responsibility and

accountability. The linguistic shifts in the discourse and the changes to frameworks and structures for delivering post-16 learning reveal the government's determination to search for a language and a mechanism to address issues such as social inclusion, regeneration and widening participation and to improve current arrangements through a pooling of ideas, expertise and resources, together with the rhetoric of partnership.

The LSC together with other organisations and agencies in post-16 learning also represent New Labour thinking in terms of the role of government and the types of governance structures that are necessary for policy development and implementation in order to improve education and other public sector services. As part of its third way approach (Giddens 1998; 2000, Clarke and Glendinning 2002) and its drive to modernise and reform government (Cabinet Office 1999) New Labour has promoted new forms of governance to meet the challenges of governing modern societies which reflect 'changing relationships between state and society' (Clarke and Glendinning 2002, p.34). Part of this changing relationship is a shift in responsibility for planning and delivering public sector services away from the state to agencies, organisations and other stakeholders in the public and private sectors through 'joined-up government' (Field 2000c). In the case of the LSC, the national LSC and its 47 local arms are supported by an information, advice and guidance service for adults, (learndirect), a network of local learning partnerships and the University for Industry (Ufi) to form a 'joined-up' structure intended to enable achievement of learning targets and increase the quality and coherence of post-16 provision nationally, regionally and locally.

New Labour's approach is indicative of wider debate about new forms of governance (Field 2000c, Rhodes 2000, Stoker 2000). A central argument in this debate is that the role of government is to steer rather than row policy development and implementation in public sector services. Rhodes (1996, p.655) uses the image of rowing and steering to argue that there is a need for 'less government' (or less rowing) but 'more governance' (or more steering) where government is associated with central control and hierarchical systems and governance with collaboration and looser networked structures, as in partnerships. The shift towards new forms of governance, in particular networked governance is discussed in Chapter 2, as part of defining partnership.

In New Labour's policy rhetoric the language of partnership is used to encourage stakeholders to work together to find solutions to educational and social problems whilst at the same time central government retains power and control through mechanisms, such as funding and inspection regimes, and shifts responsibility for delivering improvements away from the centre onto other actors, such as the LSC, learning partnerships and providers of education and training.

It is this shifting landscape that provides the context for the present study.

The emergence of Midlands Urban Partnership

Midlands Urban Partnership (MUP) started in 1997 as a small grouping of providers of post-16 education and training and grew over the next three years to become a complex partnership of all the key stakeholders involved in the planning and provision of post-16 learning in the Black Country sub-region of the Midlands in England. In some respects, it was a response to New Labour policies to increase

collaboration in post-16 learning and can be understood in the context of policy imperatives and initiatives in post-16 learning and third way approaches to policy development and implementation.

In other respects though, MUP is unlike other partnerships. It was instigated by a group of individuals though it is an inter-organisational partnership. Throughout its existence it has not been funded to operate as a partnership by any external funding body, unlike other partnerships in the post-16 sector. It started as, and remains, a voluntary partnership of organisations and individuals and is an example of sustained and successful partnership working in a field scattered with examples of ineffective partnerships. It thus provides an interesting empirical case study to learn about the basis of sustained partnership with the potential to make a contribution to knowledge and understanding of the concept of partnership through an in-depth analysis of the process of partnership working in the context of widening participation in post-16 learning.

The next chapter examines the concept of partnership and the basis of relationships in partnership working drawing on literature from different disciplines and policy fields where partnership has emerged as a prominent practice.

Chapter 2

Defining and conceptualising partnership and partnership working

This chapter examines the central concept in this study by drawing on a range of literature from different policy fields, including post-16 learning. It considers the meaning of partnership and partnership working by discussing definitions, theorisations and empirical studies of partnerships in different contexts. I draw on the use of the concept in other disciplines and contexts as the literature on partnership in post-16 learning is limited, largely, to descriptions of collaborative working arrangements between educational institutions, as the previous chapter has shown. The post-16 partnership literature does not interrogate the meaning of partnership or the basis of relationships amongst organisations, agencies and individuals that work in partnership. I thus turn to a wider literature to analyse characteristics of partnership and partnership working which include power relations, trust and networks. The chapter begins by discussing the history of the development of partnership and then considers the basis of relationships in inter-organisational partnerships.

In the literature, partnership is described as a buzz-word (Harriss 2000), a transdisciplinary concept (Mullinix 2001) and a global practice and this chapter analyses how the concept is used and understood in policy, theory and in practice. Powell and Glendinning (2002, p.2) characterise partnership as 'the indefinable in pursuit of the unachievable' and Ling (2000, p.82) points to the 'methodological anarchy and definitional chaos' in the literature on partnership. Given this context,

the focus of this chapter is: why is partnership being promoted and how is it being defined and conceptualised?

2.1 Partnership: a new way of working?

Partnership is promoted as a 'new' way of delivering improvements in services and of achieving maximum impact in alleviating poverty and disadvantage (Clegg and McNulty 2002, Tett 2003). At the level of policy the concept 'seems to have permeated the fabric of policy making' (Trevillion 1999, p.2) and at the level of practice, organisations and individuals are busy 'doing partnership'. In different fields, including education, health, housing, social and community development and international development, the language of partnership pervades policy and practice. Governments, agencies, organisations and individuals, which I will refer to as actors in this thesis, engage in a range of working arrangements which fall under the partnership label in national, (Geddes 1997, Hyland and Merrill 2001, Blaxter *et al* 2003) supranational (Geddes 1998, CEC 2001, OECD 2000) and international arenas (Fowler 1998, Ansari and Phillips 2001, Preston 2002). In this chapter I use the UK, the EU and the OECD as examples to illustrate the prominence of partnership at national, supranational and international levels.

The dominant theme in the literature on partnership is the imperative for government departments, non-government agencies, public and private sector organisations and individuals to work together to tackle international, national, regional and local issues. Policymakers urge actors to transcend traditional sector boundaries and conventional organisational structures to work in new ways to achieve goals and extend the impact of their work. Partnership is promoted as a visionary ideal and the

way forward in addressing economic and social inequalities, particularly in communities suffering from economic decline and social and educational disadvantage in both rich and poor countries.

In the UK, partnership has been embraced by New Labour (Jones and Bird 2000, Painter and Clarence 2001, Tett 2005) and is pivotal in the modernisation agenda for public sector services (Balloch and Taylor 2001, Glendinning *et al* 2002), including education as Chapter 1 has shown. It is also explicitly placed at the centre of regeneration strategies: 'partnership and collaboration are essential to achieving the government's goals for economic prosperity and social cohesion through regeneration, capacity building and community development' (DfEE 1999b, p.1.).

As well as national governments, member states of wider political, economic and social groupings such as the European Union (EU), sign-up to the notion of partnership. The Commission for the European Communities declares, 'as well as promoting partnership at all levels, national, regional and local, Governments should lead by example by ensuring effective coordination and coherence in policy between ministries' (CEC 2001, p.11). Strategies to actively promote partnership working include websites and databases dedicated to finding partners for projects in different member states (www.partnerbase.eupro.se, http://leonardo.cec.eu.int/psd) in addition to initiatives such as ESF (European Social Fund) project funding.

In the EU as in the UK, partnership is also seen as a strategy to deal with the problems faced by disadvantaged communities in economically deprived areas. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has

sponsored transnational research in ten member states of the EU into the role of partnerships in combating poverty and social exclusion (Geddes 1997). It has also conducted a cross-national analysis into the contribution of one specific approach - the local partnership approach - to promoting social cohesion across the EU (Geddes 1998). These research programmes found that the local partnership approach makes a significant contribution to combating social exclusion by producing better co-ordinated and integrated local policy action and leading to innovative forms of local governance which can lever in resources for programmes and projects. The researchers concluded that this approach to partnership provides a valuable though not sufficient answer to localised problems of poverty and exclusion.

In the international arena, partnership is promoted by the United Nations (Tennyson and Wilde 2000) the World Bank (World Bank 2001) and the OECD:

> Partnerships are vital - between developing and developed countries; among governments; civil society and the private sector; and among international organisations. Partnership means sharing responsibility for achieving goals...
> (OECD 2000, p.1)

It is hard to find an area of policy where the actors are not engaging in the rhetoric of partnership even if the practicalities of how the concept can be operationalised are not fully worked out. As Stuart points out:

> Terms such as partnership, collaboration and joint working are increasingly part of the vocabulary in F [further] and HE [higher education] and are often seen as pre-requisites for widening participation...Yet, seldom does the literature provide a critical engagement with the day-to-day practicalities of partnership working. (Stuart 2002, p. 43)

This study focuses on the practicalities of partnership working in MUP as a basis for learning about the concept and the practice of partnership.

Partnership as a concept and a practice

In the academic discourse and growing literature on case studies of partnerships in different policy fields, the *concept* of partnership is not always distinguished from the *practice* of partnership working. There is a need for a greater conceptualisation but studies of partnerships shy away from defining partnership (Balloch and Taylor 2001, Geddes 1998) choosing instead to present examples of 'partnerships'. The tendency to conflate the concept, the process and specific examples of practice leads to blurred boundaries of meaning and a lack of clarity about relationships that fall under the partnership label.

I distinguish between partnership, partnership working and partnerships. In this thesis, 'partnership' is used as a generic term to refer both to the concept of partnership and the process of partnership working. This is how it is commonly used in policy. 'Partnership working' refers to the process of working with other actors to implement partnership on the ground whilst 'partnerships' denotes specific examples of partnership working in different contexts. These terms and others, such as collaboration, co-ordination, co-operation and joint working, used to describe relationships among actors in partnerships in different disciplinary fields are used to develop a conceptualisation of partnership which can be applied to the analysis of partnership working in MUP.

Policymakers focus on the visionary appeal of partnership and the potential it offers for working in new ways to address global, national, regional and local issues. I find it helpful to conceptualise this is as 1+1+1= more than 3, the assumption being that the actors in a partnership can achieve more by working together than by working individually. Here I am using 'actors' to refer to any of the constituencies that are involved in partnerships, such as national governments, public, private and voluntary sector organisations, national, regional and local agencies, funding bodies and the individuals who engage in partnership working in the field of practice. The notion of the 'value-added' is a strong motivation for promoting partnership and is linked to ideas of joined-up government (Blair 1997 cited in Tett 2002, Field 2000c, Tett 2005), joined-up thinking and the continuum of inter-organisational relationships which fall under the partnership label. The rhetoric of the vision, however, fails to account for the dynamics of power inequalities among actors involved in partnerships and the practicalities of the process of partnership working in the field of practice as revealed by research studies of partnerships, (for example Mayo and Taylor 2001, Geddes 1997).

The policy thrust and the language of partnership carries an implicit belief that this new way of working together will achieve positive outcomes for all involved and lead to better services and provision through collaborative effort and pooling of resources, both financial and human. In their determination to drive the implementation of partnership approaches policymakers use financial incentives and initiatives as well as the visionary rhetoric of idealising partnership as a concept and a practice. In the UK, the government has used financial incentives to bring potential partners together in initiatives such as the formation of Health and Education Action

Zones (DOH 1997; 1998, Painter and Clarence 2001) learning partnerships in post 16-learning (DfEE 1999b, DfES 2001) and partnerships between public and private sector organisations (Ruane 2002). In most cases being a 'partnership' or demonstrating a commitment to multi-agency working is a condition of obtaining project funding from specified funding streams and linked to the attainment of targets within defined timescales. The 'carrots and sticks' reveal the resolve of policymakers but 'compulsory partnerships' (Powell and Glendinning 2002) where actors are compelled to work in partnership are not necessarily the most effective means of addressing poverty, social exclusion and improving services. In the field of practice, actors in such externally driven partnerships may become so embroiled in the practicalities of the bidding process and demonstrating the outcomes specified through reporting mechanisms to the funding agency that they lose sight of the purpose of the partnership. The promise of partnership may not be realised in practice.

The promise and potential of partnership may explain why it is being promoted as a 'new' phenomenon but as researchers and practitioners working in different disciplinary fields point out partnership is not new (Hudson *et al* 1999, Trevillion 1999, Fowler 1998, Balloch and Taylor 2001, Stuart 2002). The range of inter-organisational and inter-agency relationships to which the term partnership is applied has a considerable history and reflects previous attempts to address deprivation and disadvantage by improving planning and co-ordination of services in different contexts.

Roots of partnership approaches

In the UK features of current partnership initiatives such as collaboration, inter-agency working, community participation, targeting deprived communities have been aspects of social and community development, social and health care provision and regeneration strategies for a number of decades. Powell and Glendinning (2002) trace the history of such relationships to the period before the post-war welfare state and Balloch and Taylor (2001) identify strategies at the end of the 1960s as constituting a major drive towards partnership working. Stuart (2002) links the 1980s to the development of collaborative working in social and health provision and suggests that partnership approaches in education stem from these developments in social policy. In the field of international development, Fowler (1998) dates the notion of partnership to describe relationships between development agencies to the 1970s and Mullinix (2001) states that the term has a 'substantial cross-disciplinary history' (p.1). The evidence that partnership is rooted in previous attempts to promote inter-organisational and inter-agency working to address social development issues suggests that the contemporary emphasis on partnership is founded on something more than the belief that partnership is a 'new' way of working. The newness seems to lie in its application rather than originality as a concept or novel practice:

> Partnership working is not new...what is new is the emphasis that is being placed on partnerships and the range of issues that they are being asked to tackle...both as a result of local initiatives and in response to central requirements. (Local Government Association, 1999, cited in Painter and Clarence 2001, p.1216)

It is the permeation of different policy arenas by the partnership ideal and the expectations of what partnerships can deliver that *is* new in the contemporary

discourse. Partnerships operate in diverse contexts, come in all sizes and organisational structures, cover different types of relationships between actors, both explicit and implicit, and may be externally driven by government initiatives or internally driven by the partners. Partnerships are the buzz of social policy circles (Robinson *et al* 2000) but are 'not immune from the dangers of inflated expectations' (Trevillion 1999, p.3). Inflated expectations can be attributed, on the one hand, to a lack of definitional clarity about the meaning of the term which despite a growing body of research on partnerships continues to be surrounded by fuzziness, as there is no agreed theoretical framework for conceptualising partnership (DETR 2000). On the other hand, inflated expectations may arise from a failure to recognise the significance of the practicalities of partnership working, such as establishing inter-organisational relationships and managing power differentials amongst the organisations and individuals in a partnership.

The fuzziness and flexibility of partnership has an attraction as a policy ideal and a working practice as its positive resonance can be used as a device to pull partners together but it also carries the risk of becoming a 'Humpty Dumpty' term (Powell and Glendinning 2002 p.2) whereby the mere act of calling something a 'partnership' makes it a partnership. The tendency to apply 'the slippery notion of partnership' (Audit Commission 1998, p.16) to a range of relationships between organisations and individuals in different fields of policy and practice means that a precise and rigorous definition that can encompass the diversity of relationships and contexts is difficult to achieve. However, this does not mean that there have been no attempts to define the concept deductively or to develop definitions inductively by identifying

characteristics of partnership from examples of partnership working. These are considered in the next section.

2.2   Defining partnership

Partnership is applied to a range of relationships among organisations, agencies and individuals. Attempts to define the concept range from the position adopted by Balloch and Taylor (2001) who 'lay claim to no single definition or model of this popular concept' (p.6) to deductive approaches which theorise partnership as 'quasi-networks' (Powell and Exworthy 2002) and collaborative governance (Huxham 2000). Within this range, partnership is inductively linked to a continuum of associated terms and characteristics that describe, analyse and account for the success or failure of collaborative activities and which inform the definitional debate about what constitutes 'partnership'.

Characteristics of partnership

Tennyson and Wilde (2000) point out that partnership is widely but often misleadingly used. In developing their own definition they point to two distinct meanings of partnership - firstly as a formal business relationship between professionals where the risks and profits are shared, as in a partnership of lawyers or accountants, and secondly as a relationship between two people e.g. as in a marriage. They define partnership as 'an alliance between organisations...that commit themselves to working together...share risks and benefits, review the relationship regularly and revise the partnership as necessary (Tennyson and Wilde 2000, p.12).

This is close to Poole's definition of partnership as 'an association between two or more persons, groups, or organizations who join together to achieve a common goal that neither one alone can accomplish' (Poole 1995, p.2).

Stuart (2002) suggests that the three elements to any partnership are a mutual sense of purpose, a joint agreement of future action and collaborative working and the Audit Commission describes partnership as a joint working arrangement where the partners:

- are otherwise independent bodies;
- agree to co-operate to achieve a common goal;
- create a new organisational structure or process to achieve this goal;
- plan and implement a joint programme;
- share relevant information, risks and rewards. (Audit Commission 1998, p.8)

The characteristics underpinning the notion of partnership appear to be that partners agree to collaborate, co-operate or jointly work to achieve common goals and share the risks and benefits of working together in this way. However, the terms that are used to clarify and characterise the concept of partnership are themselves not unambiguous and their meaning may be interpreted differently by individual partners so that one partner's understanding of 'collaboration' may differ from another's in terms of the obligations to other members.

Weak and strong forms of partnership

The characteristics discussed above constitute necessary features of a minimal definition of partnership. However, they do not constitute a *sufficient* definition as my reading of the literature on partnership and partnership working leads to what I

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interpret as a weak and a strong form of partnership. In the weak form, the concept is characterised by the necessary features identified above but in the strong form additional features underpin relationships between partners. These additional features relate to the *basis* of relationships among partners and the quality of such relationships.

Powell and Glendinning argue that a minimal definition of partnership:

> ...would also probably require a relationship between them [the agents or agencies] that involves a degree of *trust, equality or reciprocity* (in contrast to a simple sub/superordinate command or a straightforward market-style contract). (Powell and Glendinning 2002, p.3, emphasis added)

Fowler (1998) posits the notion of 'authentic partnerships' and contrasts them with the contract-based partnerships that are part of the policy agenda for international aid. He argues that non-governmental organisations involved in international development (NGDOs) need to build authentic partnerships to achieve genuine development and that such relationships are qualitatively different from contract-based relations. True partnership is based on equitable relations amongst the actors and relationships are characterised by trust and reciprocity, both dimensions of social capital. Fowler maintains that in the international aid system, 'authentic partnership, understood as *mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions*, remains vital' (Fowler 1998, p.144).

The aspiration of partnership proposed here goes beyond some of the inter-organisational relationships to which the term 'partnership' is applied. This stronger form of the notion of partnership alludes to something more transformational both for

the actors involved and the impact of their collaborative effort in the field of practice. Fowler acknowledges that in practice there are many barriers to achieving this ideal but argues that partnerships premised on solidarity rather than contracts need to be transformational if they are to achieve economic and social justice and reduce poverty. Trust-based partnerships, which he calls authentic partnerships, can achieve much more than partnerships based on contracts and furthermore, they are much more than 'old wine in re-labelled civic bottles' (Fowler 1998, p.144).

This vision of partnership appeals to ideals of participatory democracy and notions of promoting active citizenship through participatory approaches to policy implementation at the local level. Such partnerships may be internally rather than externally driven, or at least have the potential to become internally driven even if they initially formed as a result of externally driven policy incentives or initiatives. Mullinix (2001) argues that partnership represents a significant step beyond co-operation and collaboration and that it is a powerful tool which when properly understood can be applied to achieve goals and expand impact in a variety of contexts. She maintains that '*partnership* holds the promise of emerging as a cross-disciplinary theme of distinction' (Mullinix 2001, p.1) but also points out that as a practice it needs to be nurtured.

Mullinix (2001) proposes a continuum of flexible stages in partnership development based on grounded experience in Southern Africa. She puts forward a three-phased continuum of pre-partnership, where the focus is on the partners getting to know each other, then moving on to partnership (with a small 'p') where the partners work to achieve mutually valued objectives and finally Partnership (with a capital 'P') where

they develop and implement programmes together. These phases are mapped against nine dimensions of partnership relations, which identify how relations between partners vary across the three phases of the partnership continuum. The dimensions include the practical aspects of organisations and agencies working together, such as organisational structures and information access, as well as the basis of relations between actors, such as levels of trust and respect amongst partners.

The notion of authentic partnership as used by Fowler (1998) and Partnership (with a capital 'P') as used by Mullinix (2001) seems to be driving at a deeper relationship amongst the actors based on ideals of equal participation and influence, trust and respect for other partners and mutual agreement about goals. These may be desirable characteristics in theory and may well constitute sufficient conditions for true partnership but in fields of practice realising this vision of partnership is a major challenge. Implicit in this vision is the assumption that partners will be open and honest and share information for mutual benefit, however, this 'cosy' notion of partnership may not turn out to be the reality in practice.

Power relations and personalities in partnerships

In reality, partners may come to the table with different expectations and motivations for engaging in collaborative working and these will shape their understanding of the meaning of partnership and their relations with other members. Hastings *et al* (1996) report that expectations are rarely negotiated in partnerships and that differences may revolve around the aims of the partnership, the level at which it will have influence and the powers of different partners. Some partners will be able to exert more power than others, as although all may be technically equal partners as members of the

partnership in reality some actors will be weaker than others (Geddes 1997, Byrne 2001, Mayo and Taylor 2001, Blaxter *et al* 2003). The power of each actor may result from the size or type of organisation or agency they represent, the financial resources it is committing to the work of the partnership or the personal characteristics of the individual, including their gender, ethnicity and personality.

Partnerships generally have representatives from different organisations, agencies and groups and so involve establishing and maintaining relationships amongst disparate actors. Though partnership 'has a positive resonance and implies a measure of equality or at least balance and reciprocity between partners' (Mayo and Taylor 2001, p.39) such relationships are rarely equal. Geddes' research on the role of partnerships in promoting social cohesion found that there is 'a ladder of partnership involvement and influence' (Geddes 1997, p.108) in local partnerships involving public, private and voluntary and community sectors. Geddes reports that community groups have the least influence and leadership roles are taken by local government or other public sector agencies, especially Training and Enterprise Councils. He also states that some agencies and organisations that are strongly represented on partnership structures, for example employers and employer organisations, have a limited commitment to the partnership agenda but are merely involved for narrow economic interests.

Mayo and Taylor (2001) also point to the unequal power of partners in community regeneration partnerships and the tendency for more powerful partners to dominate the partnership. They argue that despite the rhetoric of partnership, regeneration partnerships can have the effect of reinforcing the unequal distribution of social

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capital. Power imbalances apply to the relations between partners from public, private, voluntary and community sectors and to relations within the sectors, for example between majority and minority community groups and between those with extensive networks and those with limited networks. Byrne (2001) challenges the ability of partnership to address empowerment by showing that in Education Action Zones there is no real element of power sharing amongst the actors but that partnership working merely focuses on a consumerist emphasis of parental choice.

In the conclusion to their edited collection of empirical studies of partnerships Balloch and Taylor (2001) argue that unless agencies are prepared to address issues of power, partnership will remain symbolic rather than real. As well as the power relations between different organisations and agencies that are represented in partnerships another aspect that can affect partnership is the power of personalities. The implementation of partnership takes place through the process of partnership working, essentially a social process that involves interactions with people from different organisations with varying backgrounds, experiences and skills. In the process of partnership working individuals can exert power and influence by using their personal and social skills, which Tennyson and Wilde (2000) call brokering skills, to accrue individual benefits for themselves and the organisation they represent.

In attempting to nail down the slippery concept of partnership and synthesising the definitions considered in this section of the chapter it is possible to distinguish between what I have called weak and strong forms of partnership. These are not polarised notions with clearly marked boundaries of meaning but resemble a

continuum of relations among actors where partnerships characterised by the necessary conditions are placed at the weak end of the continuum and those characterised by the sufficient conditions at the strong end. The characteristics found in the literature on partnership considered in this chapter are summarised in Table 2 below. The left hand column of what Mullinix (2001) refers to as a partnership development continuum and Seddon *et al* (2004) call a partnership matrix identifies the dimension of partnership working and the next column identifies the characteristic of this dimension as found in weak and strong forms of partnership.

Table 2: Characteristics of weak and strong forms of partnership

Dimension of partnership working	Characteristics of weak form of partnership	Characteristics of strong form of partnership
Benefits of partnership	Share risks and benefits (Tennyson and Wilde 2000) Achieve common goals (Poole 1995, Audit Commission 1998) Share information, risks and rewards (Audit Commission 1998) Mutual sense of purpose (Stuart 2002)	
Basis of relationships in a partnership	Contracts	Relationships based on trust, equality or reciprocity (Powell and Glendinning 2002) Equitable relations amongst actors based on trust and reciprocity (Fowler 1998) Mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions (Fowler 1998)
Describing the stages in the development of partnership	Alliance (Tennyson and Wilde 2000) Association (Poole 1995) Joint agreement and collaborative working (Stuart 2002) Joint working (Audit Commission 1998) Pre-partnership partnership	Authentic [trust-based] partnership (Fowler 1998) Partnership (Mullinix 2001)

These characteristics of partnership reveal the complexities of working with multiple organisations and agencies as partnership working depends upon relationships amongst actors, which are considered below.

2.3   The basis of relationships in inter-organisational partnerships

Contracts or trust

Some partnerships are explicitly contractual relationships between individuals or organisations where the risks and benefits for the people and the individual organisations are overt and specified in the contract.   Examples include the partnership models developed to deliver New Deal for Young People (EDRU 1999) and public-private partnerships funded through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) to deliver public infrastructure projects, such as hospitals in the National Health Service (Ruane 2002).   These types of relationships may be very closely linked to financial costs and benefits including penalties for not meeting targets and delivering objectives on time.   Other partnerships are less formal and based on social relations and networks amongst actors where the softer notions of trust, respect and reciprocity form the basis of the relationship rather than hard-nosed economics with financial obligations and sanctions articulated in written contracts.

The meaning of trust is influenced by personal, social, cultural and contextual factors so the concept is not easy to define but Coulson (1998) offers a useful working definition in which trust is seen as 'one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party' (p.14). He maintains that this willingness is based on the belief that the other party is competent, open, concerned and reliable.   Coulson's definition

attempts to cover formal contractual relationships as well as the less formal relationships that we may more commonly link to trust. His definition is helpful in revealing that there is an element of faith in trust-based relationships.

Relationships based on contracts or trust do not represent a dichotomy of contracts *vs* trust, where relations are based on one or the other but provide a basis for conceptualising partnership by contrasting the basis relationships in a partnership. In reality the picture is much more complex as relations may be formalised in a contract but still involve an element of trust or different degrees of trust amongst actors to enable effective partnership working.

Different forms of trust

Coulson (1998) argues that trust is the foundation of successful relationships between individuals and organisations in the public sector. He explores the basis for constructive relationships between organisations, departments and agencies, and public and private sector joint working through the concepts of trust and contract. He points out that 'underlying almost every relationship is a network of rights and obligations' (Coulson 1998, p.4) and that organisations and societies where these are fulfilled on the basis of trust are more efficient as the transaction costs of contracts are avoided. Transaction costs refers to the cost of creating, supervising and enforcing a contract, through the courts if necessary. In addition, organisations and societies marked by high levels of trust are happier places to work and live and this is why trust is part of utopian visions of communities and societies promoted by theorists such as Fukuyama (1995) and Putnam (1993; 2000) and found in communitarian philosophy (Etzioni 1995).

Drawing on the work of Lewicki and Bunker (1996) Coulson distinguishes three categories of trust. The first, 'calculation-based trust' applies in situations where an individual or an organisation makes choices based on a calculation of the risks for one course of action rather than another. The second, 'experience-based trust' occurs when an individual or organisation anticipates how the other person or organisation will behave based on previous experience of dealing with them. The third category, 'instinctive trust' occurs when a relationship of trust has reached a stage where actions are almost instinctive and without calculation based on previous experience of relating to the individual or organisation involved. One type of trust can grow into another with the intensity of trust increasing in relationships based on calculation to those based on experience through to those based on instinct. This continuum of trust based relationships moving from calculation of the benefits and disbenefits of co-operation through to more trusting behaviour amongst actors maps closely to the notion of weak and strong forms of partnership discussed in Section 2.2 of this chapter and illuminates the complexity of relationships based on trust.

Relationships based on trust do not mean that there is no risk involved. Irrespective of whether the relationship stems from trust based on calculation, experience or instinct one party may let the other party down, be dishonest or be engaging in the relationship on the basis of a different category of trust to the other. So though trust, like partnership, carries a positive resonance as a concept and implicit assumptions about actors being open and honest its practical application to relationships reveals different levels of co-operation and different motivations for engaging in the relationship. This can lead to opportunistic behaviour as self-interest may override mutual interest and mistrust replace trust in the relationship. Despite this, trust 'has

become a highly promiscuous concept' (Newman 1998, p.36) and central to debates in economics, politics and organisational studies on issues ranging from the operation of markets and contracting to those of social exclusion and community regeneration.

Levels of trust

In debates about the role of trust the concept 'is often treated as something which is either present or absent, rather than something which is rooted in dynamic sets of social, political and cultural forces' (Newman 1998, p.36). Newman's analysis of the dynamics of trust in the discourse of governance, management and contract reveals that trust is not an undifferentiated concept which is either present or absent in relationships but that power, culture and history all contribute to the level of trust between groups, individuals and organisations. In relationships between providers and users of public services, between managers and workers in organisations and between clients and contractors in inter-organisational relationships different forms of trust are formed and eroded in response to political and economic change. This leads to complex shifts in relationships that are shaped by the realties of power and the demands of legitimacy and accountability as actors respond to structural changes arising from developments such as marketisation of services, decentralisation and devolution. In an increasingly diverse and fragmented society the desire to build trust between individuals, organisations, citizens and the state may aspire to trust based on instinct but in reality be driven by calculation. Furthermore, the notion of trust based on instinct implies that this behaviour is not learned but this type of trust may be based on tacit knowledge rather than instinct in the behaviourist sense. It may thus be more accurately labelled implicit, unconditional or unreserved trust.

The complexity of the dynamics of relationships based on trust is also central to Ebers' (1997a) analysis of inter-organisational networking. He, like Newman, points out that trust is not a monolithic concept or 'a dichotomous variable that either exists among parties or does not exist' (Ebers 1997a, p.28) but that there are different kinds of trust that have different impacts on the relationships that evolve between actors. Ring (1997) distinguishes 'fragile trust' from 'resilient trust' where relations based on fragile trust are supported by formal mechanisms, such as contractual safeguards, whilst those based on resilient trust depend on the moral integrity or goodwill of the actors in the relationship.

The distinctions emanating from the more fine-grained analysis of trust by Coulson, Newman, Ebers and Ring provides a useful framework for analysing and understanding the complexities of trust-based relationships in inter-organisational partnerships. The analysis also confirms the power and potential of trust in contemporary society. Newman writes:

> The potency of trust derives from its role as a symbolic carrier of lost values, acting as a counter to economic individualism in the marketplace, to hierarchy within organisations, and to the effects of fragmentation across contractualised relationships. (Newman 1998, p.51)

The centrality of trust in regulating relationships seems to be evident though the level and type of trust will vary according to the basis of the relationship(s) amongst the actors. Contract based relations may be marked by low or fragile trust whilst relations based on social networks may be characterised by high or resilient trust. The quality of relations based on trust may change and develop from calculation-based trust to instinctive (unreserved) trust as actors develop more intensive trust as a

result of working together whilst trust may change into distrust if one party is opportunistic and pursues self-interest at the expense of mutual interest. The dynamics of the concept mean that analysis of relations among actors based on trust is not easy but forming, building, maintaining and extending trust is an essential part of partnership working. These processes lie at the heart of formal and informal networks which underpin partnership working. Networks and networking, like trust, constitute a strong theme in the conceptualisation of partnership.

Networks and networking

The link between partnership, networks and networking comes from a number of fields including social and community development, economics, political science and business management. In these fields notions of transcending sectoral boundaries, networked governance and inter-organisational relations bring out the significance of networks in developing and managing relationships between actors. Castells' (2000) monumental analysis of the upheaval and transformation of relationships between the economy, the state and society resulting from globalisation and the impact of ICT goes as far as characterising 'our new world' as the network society:

> ...as an historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organised around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture...Presence or absence in the network and the dynamics of each network *vis-à-vis* others are critical sources of domination and change in our society: a society that, therefore, we may properly call the network society...(Castells 2000, p.500)

In Castells' analysis the revolution in information technologies lies at the heart of the scale and pace of transformation and change in the global economy and society as networks and networking are no longer constrained by distance. Knowledge and

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financial capital can be moved easily around the world by computer networks and relationships between individuals and organisations developed and maintained in virtual environments. For someone who places networks at the centre of his analysis it is surprising that Castells does not attempt to define the concept of network until the end of his work and even there offers what Schuller *et al* describe as a 'somewhat sparse definition' (Schuller *et al* 2000, p.19) which reads:

> A network is a set of interconnected nodes. A node is the point at which a curve intersects itself. What a node is, concretely speaking, depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak. (Castells 2000, p.501)

Castells' examples of nodes in concrete networks include stock exchange markets in global financial networks and television systems, computers and entertainment studios in global media networks so that a node is linked by a relationship or connection with the other nodes in an actual network. Ebers (1997a) also characterises a network as a set of nodes (e.g. individuals, organisations) with a set of recurring ties (e.g. resource, friendship, informational ties). The network can expand by integrating new nodes 'as long as they share the same communication codes (e.g. values or performance goals)' (Castells ibid.). Thus although Castells conceptualises networks as open structures that are able to expand without limits the proviso about communication codes reveals that actors need to have something in common, such as shared values or mutual goals as the basis for inclusion in a network. The situation is complicated by the fact that networks are multiple and the switches connecting networks are the instruments of power so the switchers, e.g. those that control financial flows, are the power holders. This means that the codes and switches between networks become fundamental 'in shaping, guiding, and misguiding societies' (Castells 2000, p.502).

The features of networks that I have drawn from Castells' writing and which are useful for understanding partnership cannot do justice to the complexity and detail of his conceptualisation of networks but indicate the significance of networks in society and the basis of network formation and expansion. Network formation and expansion depend upon shared communication codes so that actors (nodes) are connected by shared values or goals and new actors can become part of the network provided they share those values or goals. The characteristic of shared or mutual goals is strongly emphasised in the partnership literature, as shown in Section 2.2, but Castells' writing also brings out the significance of values in the functioning of networks. Schuller *et al* (2000) concur that 'norms and information flows are seen as essential features of functioning networks' (p.19) though in their analysis of social capital they focus only on trust and networks arguing that norms are too general to be properly encompassed in their review and critique of the concept.

Thus information flows based on shared values, goals and norms emerge as features of networks. These features overlap with the vision of partnership as a concept, in some cases to the extent that network and partnership are synonymous as in Powell and Exworthy's (2002) theorisation of partnerships as 'quasi-networks' (p.16). Tett (2003) does not regard network and partnership as being identical though she does include being part of a network as one of the variety of activities to which the term partnership is applied. In conceptualising the differences between networks and partnerships certain characteristics emerge to distinguish one from the other. Partnerships tend to have more formalised structures, e.g. partnership boards, to manage relationships between the actors whilst networks tend to remain as informal links between people with shared interests. Partnerships tend to include actors with

differing levels of power, e.g. representatives from government departments and voluntary groups in the same partnership, whilst networks tend to include people of equal status, e.g. fellow professionals, coming together to share ideas and practice. Partnerships also tend to be characterised by multiple networks so that if the partnership is conceptualised as a formal network, there are often smaller informal networks operating within the formal structure, as in MUP. Thus, although there is overlap between networks and partnerships there are also differences. The networks that underpinned the formation, expansion and continued existence of MUP are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Networking, cross boundary linkages and partnership working

Trevillion (1999) offers further insights into networks and networking in developing a general theory of networking and exploring how networking works in practice within the context of social and community work. His theory draws on empirical data from research projects undertaken in the UK and Sweden from 1992-96 and case notes from his professional experience as a social worker from 1980-86. These data sets are all accounts of social interaction exploring collaboration, the relationship between the rhetoric of partnership and the extent of actual purposeful linking between teams and organisations in practice and cross-boundary working among professionals, service users and carers.

The term networking, like partnership, suffers from vagueness. The range of meanings includes any kind of linking with other organisations (Payne 1993, Sako 1992, Hage and Alter 1997, Ebers 1997a) to networking being a route to securing personal influence and advancement through informal social contacts. Trevillion

offers a useful definition that recognises the diversity of networking practices and the commonalties that characterise the practice:

> Networking is the development and/or maintenance of any set of cross-boundary linkages designed to promote choice and empowerment which enables its constituent individuals, groups or organisations to work with one another for common purposes without merging their identities. (Trevillion 1999, p.6)

He argues that the key feature shared by examples of networking and new welfare partnerships is boundaries and boundary crossing. Conceptualising networking as crossing boundaries, whether these are organisational, professional or geographical, rather than seeking to dissolve or abolish boundaries gives clarity to the foundation of networks and guidance to networkers seeking to develop structures and models for practice. Trevillion's work shows that in practice boundary crossing can enable the achievement of common purposes without merging of individual identities.

Furthermore, theorising networks as sets of cross-boundary linkages designed to promote choice and empowerment provides a conceptualisation of relationships that is enabling rather than constraining for the constituent members. The core values of choice, empowerment and partnership are the basis of Trevillion's theory and though he recognises the elusive nature of these notions he maintains that they are fundamental to social welfare policy and practice and that they permeate the structural characteristics of networking. He points out that social networks grow, diminish and change as a result of choices made by individuals and groups and that networking opens up the capacity for developing new relationships and for empowering groups and individuals by enabling access to information, emotional and social support and the potential to challenge injustices through collective action. In

this conceptualisation partnership is 'integral to all the cross-boundary linkages with which networking is concerned' (Trevillion 1999, p.6).

Trevillion (1999) uses the principles of social network analysis such as connectedness or density, degrees of reciprocity and social support to develop his theory and considers the role of brokers and brokerage and the potential for networks to become exclusionary as well as empowering. I draw on these ideas to discuss networks in MUP in Chapter 5. Here, the purpose is to examine the characteristics of networks and networking and the link to relationships in partnerships.

The characterisation of networks as linkages that cross boundaries and nodes that promote information flows, access to resources and social support for actors which emerge from Castells' (2000) and Trevillion's (1999) theories are supported by management researchers and theorists analysing relationships between business organisations.

Ebers (1997a) in an edited collection of studies focusing on the formation of inter-organisational networks highlights the processes by which such networks emerge and take form and analyses three kinds of micro-level relationships that link organisations: resource flows, information flows, and mutual expectations among actors. His conceptual framework and the studies included in the collection (Ebers 1997b) focus specifically on the roles of activity links (an element of resource flows) trust (an element of mutual expectations) and catalysts (an element of information flows) in explaining the formation of inter-organisational networks. Ebers' (1997a) conceptualisation comes from the perspective of business management and the

private sector but the marketization of public sector services, changing governance structures and calls for partnership between public and private sector organisations mean that it also relates to working in the public sector. The issues of boundary crossing and the role of intra- and inter-organisational relationships in harnessing resources, knowledge and skills in achieving goals apply in the public sector just as much as in the private sector. Ebers' conceptualisation (op.cit) shares commonalties with Trevillion's, which comes from the perspective of the public sector, and Ebers also points up the capacity for organisations to retain individual identity whilst engaging in joint activities:

> While networking can take different forms, all these forms are characterized by recurring exchange relationships among a limited number of organizations that retain residual control of their individual resources yet periodically jointly decide over their use. (Ebers 1997a, p.4)

Ebers (ibid) enumerates the growth in various forms of co-operation among organisations and the rise of inter-organisational alliances during the 1980s in a range of industries in different countries, including high technology, car, film, electronics, and calls these forms of co-operation, inter-organisational networking relationships. He cites research from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, undertaken in different countries in diverse settings, and argues that though inter-organisational networks are heterogeneous they share complementary elements that can produce joint gains for firms that develop such intensive linkages. Though actors' motivations for developing such linkages may vary and the conditions which facilitate and constrain the formation of networks depend on a range of factors, including pre-existing ties and institutional contingencies and cultures, the growth in these types of relationships

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is evident from the literature on organisation studies (Alter and Hage 1993, Contractor and Lorange 1988, Jarillo 1993 cited in Ebers 1997a).

Networked governance and collaborative advantage

Theory and practice show that the networked firm has emerged as an organisational alternative to markets and hierarchies and that joint ventures, strategic alliances, networks and 'other intermediate forms of organisation' (Powell and Exworthy 2002, p.15) have become established as co-ordinating structures for gaining and sustaining competitive advantage. Ebers states 'network forms of conducting business have now established a formidable presence in both organizational practice and research' (Ebers 2001, p.ix). Ebers' conceptualisation is grounded in economics but the gains from governance structures based on network principles is also evident from the perspectives of political science (Rhodes 1996).

Ebers compares (1997a) the relative merits and shortcomings of network forms of organising from the alternatives of the market and the firm in economic exchange relationships. He uses an ideal-typical approach, in Weber's sense of a theoretical construction, to delineate the common dominators of markets, firms and networks as governance structures for co-ordinating relationships among organisations using the three dimensions of resource flows, mutual expectations and information flows. The economic gains from inter-organisational networking include the potential to increase revenues and reduce costs through access to complementary resources and capabilities and different ways of enhancing market power, e.g. through joint research and development activities, realising economies of scale and sharing risks. Organisations can also learn from each other and short-circuit the process of

acquiring knowledge and skills (Dodgson 1993, Borzsony and Hunter 1996, Takahashi 2002) particularly in innovating firms working in industries experiencing rapid technological change (Teece 1992).

In political science, the notion of networked governance is seen as an alternative to traditional command and control hierarchies (Powell and Exworthy 2002, Jones and Bird 2000, Rhodes 1996; 2000, Cabinet Office 1999) and a way of achieving horizontal integration and avoiding the 'silos'of vertical organisation structures (Seddon 2001). In hierarchical organisational structures lines of authority come down vertical structures, characterised as 'silos' or 'bunkers that stand alone' (Seddon 2001, p.184) and so suffer from problems of linkage between administrative fields and functions. This can happen between central government departments and local government agencies or between different departments of the same organisation. The notion of *governance* as contrasted with *government* reflects moves towards the minimal state and Rhodes (1996) who defines governance as 'self-organizing, inter-organizational networks' (p.652) argues that such networks complement markets and hierarchies as governing structures for allocating resources and exercising control and co-ordination. In networks, trust and mutual adjustment are the co-ordinating mechanisms that articulate relationships rather than the command and control of hierarchies and the price competition of markets.

It has been argued that the complexities of modern societies and the shortcomings of bureaucratic hierarchies and markets for co-ordinating relationships has led to a systematic shift towards networked forms of governance (Rhodes 1996, Stoker 2000). According to the 'governance narrative' (Rhodes 2000) contemporary

governments cannot impose policies but need to work more indirectly to achieve their objectives, by adopting a steering role and bringing in other social actors and organisations to shape and implement policy. These ideas constitute part of the collaborative discourse (Powell and Glendinning 2002) associated with New Labour's third way approach to governance and underpin policies promoting partnership.

The language of networks speaks of crossing boundaries, forging links and developing intensive linkages through nodes that promote resource flows, knowledge flows and social support enabling actors to achieve mutual goals and engage in inter-organisational learning. This image conveys both the challenges of developing and maintaining relationships in a network(s), including the skills needed to manage networked forms of governance, and the economic, political and social gains that can flow from such linkages, which Huxham (2000) terms 'the principle of collaborative advantage' (p.348). The gains may be potential, rather than actual, but are identified both by research offering conceptualisations of networks and networking from a theoretical perspective and empirical studies of inter-organisational relationships. The conceptual discourse is marked by overlaps in attempts to clarify and explain the formation and functioning of relationships in networks and partnerships. For example, Ebers (1997a) in his conceptualisation of inter-organisational networking relationships does not distinguish between co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration and tends to use the terms interchangeably. However, these terms are defined as being distinct and different by other researchers and practitioners.

Co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation

Robinson *et al* (2000) propose a typology of three ideal types for understanding inter-organisational relationships: competition, associated with market processes; co-ordination, involving hierarchical control; and 'co-operation [which] covers forms of organization such as those described as co-operative arrangements, partnerships, collaboration, coalitions, alliances or networks' (Harriss 2000, p.225).

Harriss (ibid) links co-operation with partnership and maintains that co-operative relationships are controlled by trust and 'self-organisation' while price is the control mechanism in markets and authority in bureaucratic organisations. This is in terms of an ideal type conceptualisation, meaning that these are the common features which distinguish one organisational form from the other rather than implying that in reality they are clearly distinct. The core idea of trust as the basis of partnership relationships has already been examined but the notion of self-organisation illuminates a further aspect of relationships indicating that people and organisations work together voluntarily and for mutual benefit. As Harriss puts it:

> ...this way of organizing [co-operation] is more social, being dependent upon the existence of affectivity in relationships, mutual interests and reputations (or solidarity), and upon voluntary action, rather than on guidance by a formal structure of authority. (Harriss 2000, p.226)

This understanding of inter-organisational relationships implies obligational relations based on reciprocal rights and responsibilities amongst actors and highlights the role of social relations in the development of co-operative relationships. As Robinson *et al* (2000) point out such relationships emerge over time as trust, joint working and common goals emanate from regular interactions and detailed knowledge of all

parties. These aspects of partnership are explored in the fieldwork data, in particular Chapter 7.

The basis of relationships in a partnership can be mapped against the notion of weak to strong forms of partnership, discussed earlier in this chapter and summarised in Table 2. Table 3 below maps the characteristics found in the literature on inter-organisational partnerships against the continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership.

Table 3: The basis of relationships in a partnership

Basis of partnership working	Characteristics of weak form of partnership	Characteristics of strong form of partnership
Trust		
Forms of trust	Calculation-based Experience - based	Instinctive trust (Coulson 1998)
Levels of trust	Low, fragile trust	Deep, resilient trust (Ring 1997)
Networks	Developing networks and nodes for communication and resource flows (Castells 2000, Trevillion 1999, Ebers 1997)	Effective information flows, shared communication codes shared norms and values (Castells 2000, Schuller *et al* 2000) Resources flows (Ebers 1997) Reciprocity, recurring ties, mutual expectations and obligations (Ebers 1997, Harriss 2000)
Networking	Forging cross-boundary linkages (Trevillion 1999) Inter-organisational alliances, networked firms, competitive advantage (Ebers 1997) Networked governance (Rhodes 1997; 2000, Field 2000) Collaborative advantage (Huxham 2000)	Dense networks giving access to information, emotional and social support (Trevillion 1999) Self-organising networks (Harriss 2000) Co-operative relations based on trust (Harriss 2000)
Form of partnership working	Collaboration Co-operation	Partnership (Robinson *et al* 2000, Harriss 2000)

Table 3 shows that different forms and levels of trust, networks and networking are considered to be key characteristics underpinning relationships in partnerships by researchers working from different disciplinary perspectives. These concepts are also linked by some researchers (e.g. Harriss 2000) to the notion of a continuum of forms of partnership in which some types of relationships are considered to be a stronger basis for partnership working than others. The characteristics summarised in Table 3 will be used to discuss features of partnership working found in MUP on the basis of empirical evidence from the fieldwork data.

Trust, networks and networking which underpin relationships amongst actors in inter-organisational partnerships resonate with the concept of social capital, which emerged as the conceptual framework for theorising partnership in this study. The significance of social capital in policy and research and its role in explaining partnership working in MUP is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Social capital as a conceptual framework for understanding partnership working

This chapter examines the concept of social capital and its significance in policy and research. It considers the application of the concept to the analysis of empirical data by researchers working in different disciplinary fields and discusses why social capital is relevant to a study of partnership.

The first part of the chapter outlines the significance of the concept in general and how it emerged as a key concept in the present study. The next section analyses the origins and application of social capital in different fields including education, political science, economics and sociology and explains why it provides a way of theorising partnership working. This is followed by an exploration of the dimensions of social capital and its use as a framework for analysis in this study.

3.1 The significance of social capital in policy and research

The last chapter identified the role of different forms and levels of trust, and networks and networking as highly significant in the partnership literature. This links to the concept of social capital which in the context of this study is broadly defined as networks, norms, values and trust although other dimensions of social capital are considered in this chapter. This definition draws on the one used by Field and Schuller (2000) who define social capital as networks, norms and trust and the work of Putnam who also includes the triad of trust, norms and networks in his slightly shifting definitions of the concept in his prolific exposition of social capital (Putnam 1993; 2000; 2001).

The significance of social capital is recognised by researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a number of disciplines and its usage 'has almost become exponential' (Szreter 2000, p.56). It has become an influential concept in policy debates (Schuller *et al* 2000, Woolcock 2000; 2001, Putnam 1993; 2000, Giddens 2000) as economists, sociologists and political theorists have acknowledged the key role of social relationships in economic, social and political life. Evidence from small-scale empirical studies undertaken in different fields of policy and practice including urban regeneration (Hibbitt *et al* 2001), health, (Davies 2001), community-based voluntary activity (Morrissey and McGinn 2001) and lifelong learning (Field and Schuller 2000) are providing insights into the role of social networks in developing and maintaining a healthy, active and inclusive society. Furthermore, the thrust towards evidence-based practice has led to larger scale research to identify the potential of social support in addressing inequalities, for example in health (Cooper *et al* 1999), and to investigating the wider benefits of learning for the individual and for society (WBLRC 2001).

Social capital is generally regarded as a positive attribute although it is acknowledged that it can have negative as well as positive impacts (Schuller 2000, Granovetter 1973). In policy and in practice the nature and role of social capital is being contested and appraised in different fields including health (Cooper *et al* 1999), lifelong learning (Field and Schuller 2000, Kilpatrick *et al* 2001), civil society (Kellner 2001, Putnam 2001) and international development (Woolcock and Narayan 2000, OECD 2001).

As an analytical category the concept 'offers much promise' (Schuller *et al* 2000, p.35) as it opens up the possibility of developing a much deeper understanding of the way 'in which real, rather than theoretical, market economies, businesses and competition function …by explicitly incorporating, instead of excluding, the complex social, institutional and political contexts' (Szreter 2000, p.56) in which transactions take place in the modern world. Though social capital is contested both in terms of its meaning and the ways in which it impacts on individuals, communities and society, I found that in the context of this study it provided the framework for a deeper understanding of partnership.

I came to use social capital through a grounded approach as my search for an explanation of the basis of continued partnership in MUP pointed to the importance of social relations and connections amongst the actors. Social capital proved to be 'a powerful horizontal framework' (Helliwell 2001, p.7) for understanding partnership working as it shifted the focus from individuals (and hierarchical forms of organising) to relationships *between* individuals, organisations and groups (and networked forms of organising).

3.2 Origins and development of the concept of social capital

Social capital is described as a heterogeneous rather than a homogenous concept (Schuller *et al* 2000) as there are diverse understandings and applications of the concept. The purpose of this section is not to provide a full critical appraisal of the genealogy of social capital, which can be found elsewhere (Woolcock 1998, Baron *et al* 2000), but to identify the aspects that are applicable to the analysis of partnership. In terms of the conceptual debate the contributions of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman

(1988) and Putnam (1993; 2000) are seminal. Other more recent discussions (Szreter 2000, Woolcock 2001, Schuller 2001, Field 2003) and applications (Gilchrist 2000, Woolcock and Narayan 2000, Hibbitt *et al* 2001) show its potential as a theoretical concept and policy goal for achieving individual and collective well-being in communities and countries.

Social capital is described as 'a relatively recent' (Field and Spence 2000) 'important new concept' (Szreter 2000) and an addition to other forms of capital distinguished in capital theory. Some theorists draw comparisons between established forms of capital, such as financial capital and the newer concept of social capital. Giddens writes:

> Social capital refers to trust networks that individuals can draw upon for social support, just as financial capital can be drawn upon to be used for investment. Like financial capital, social capital can be expanded - invested and reinvested. (Giddens 2000 p.78)

Viewing social capital as a resource that is available to individuals in the same way as financial resources is helpful in understanding the role of different forms of capital in partnership working as partnerships consist of individuals and organisations with varying resources. In order to achieve their goals the actors may need to call on a combination of different forms of capital and as Schuller (2000) points out the list of types of capitals is growing as researchers and theorists make further distinctions to more established categories. Forms of capital that are important to the analysis of partnership in the context of widening participation in post-16 learning include financial, human, cultural, symbolic, intellectual and social capital.

Different forms of capital

Human capital is well established as a theoretical and policy concept and defined by the OECD as 'the knowledge, skills and competences and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity' (OECD 1998, p.9). The role of human, and increasingly social capital, in achieving and maintaining economic competitiveness is embodied in contemporary lifelong learning policies, as Chapter 1 has shown. Human capital theory assumes that individuals, organisations and nations that invest resources in education and training can expect measurable returns on their investment in terms of increases in productivity and wealth and this supposition forms the basis of the economic arguments that are put forward for promoting lifelong learning. The standard measures used in international comparisons are duration of schooling and levels of qualification even though these quantifiable measures do not capture all the skills, competences and knowledge in a society, for example those arising from informal learning. However, despite these shortcomings the development of human capital though increased participation in post-16 learning has been promoted as 'the royal road to economic success and social cohesion' (Field *et al* 2000, p.243).

In his essay 'The Forms of Capital' Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital, which he equates with power, can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic, cultural and social capital. He claims that economic capital is directly convertible into money, cultural capital is convertible into economic capital in the form of educational qualifications and social capital or 'connections' can be converted into economic capital e.g. in the form of a 'title of nobility' (Bourdieu 1986, p.47). Bourdieu's interest is not in the study of economic capital but in cultural and social

capital (Bourdieu 1993) as he maintains that these notions have not been rigorously investigated. In other work, Bourdieu refers to symbolic capital which he associates with prestige and social honour (Jenkins 1992) and uses other terms to describe different types of capital but according to Schuller *et al* (2000) does not define them fully. Bourdieu is credited with introducing the term social capital to the theoretical debate (Field and Spence 2000, Schuller *et al* 2000) and so is regarded as influential in establishing the concept as a subject of study but his major contribution to understanding the social world is the notion of cultural capital.

Power relations and predominant theories of social capital

Bourdieu's use of capital is different to that of other writers on social capital, such as Coleman and Putnam in that Bourdieu uses the related constructs of field and habitus as the theoretical frame for understanding the inter-relationship between the various forms of capital. For Bourdieu, field is a social arena and site of struggle (Jenkins 1992) where manoeuvres take place over the resources that are at stake and who has access to them. These resources are economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital and it is the power relations between people from different social classes that enable or inhibit access to the various forms of capital. Habitus is conceived of as a system of lasting 'dispositions', a combination in each person of their past experiences, perceptions, personality, class, values, beliefs and attitudes (Colley 2002). Habitus impacts on the ability to access forms of capital as the 'strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.18) means that power relations of domination and subordination in the field, as in class relations, support the reproduction of social hierarchies. It is this theoretical frame that makes critical theorists turn to Bourdieu for explanations

of social capital as by focusing on power relationships his frame of analysis offers an antidote to predominant theories of social capital (Blaxter and Hughes 2003) which do not seek to challenge existing power structures. Critical theorists contend that social facts are not neutral but are 'brutal and concerned with inequality between social actors' (Blaxter and Hughes 2000, p.83) and Bourdieu's inter-related constructs of field and habitus provide an analysis of the structural causes of inequality such as distribution of wealth, power and influence.

Habitus does not just relate to individuals but also has a collective aspect as the habitus of particular social classes enables families from those classes to secure advantages for their children in education and in social life. This can be seen in Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and Coleman's analysis of the role of family and community networks in educational achievement. Cultural capital focuses on the way power structures are reproduced in society and emerged from research which sought to explain the 'unequal scholastic achievement of children' (Bourdieu 1986, p.47) from different social classes. The family, through the domestic transmission of cultural capital, and the educational system through the transmission of 'what is called culture' (ibid p.48) were identified as determinants of achievement rather than just the individual's natural aptitudes. Cultural capital refers to the credentials and cultural assets embodied in individuals and their families (Schuller 2000) that enable them to maintain or improve their position in society. It explains how elite families succeed in maintaining their position by passing on their cultural and social capital, through their social networks, to their children. It also explains how individuals move from lower social positions to more prestigious ones by using their

accumulated cultural capital and how middle class families are able to secure a more advantageous education for their children (Brown 1990).

Cultural capital and its relationship to social and human capital clearly has implications for the ways in which actors use their individual and collective resources to achieve their goals. Human capital resides in the individual whilst social capital resides in the relationships that link individuals. Coleman (1988) explores the contribution of social capital to the creation of human capital drawing on empirical work from a set of longitudinal studies of high schools comparing outcomes in state schools with those in Catholic schools in the United States. He shows that strong bonds in the family and the community through social networks with 'closure' have extremely beneficial effects on educational achievement as they reduce the probability of young people dropping out of high school. Coleman argues that social capital makes a key contribution to the formation of human capital in the next generation. Although some of Coleman's ideas have been criticised (summarised in Schuller *et al* 2000), his work established the relevance of social capital to the study of educational attainment and was influential in the development of social capital as a concept.

Social capital as a resource for achieving mutual goals

Coleman's definition of social capital as 'a particular kind of resource available to an actor' (1988 p.98) and something which 'inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors' is a useful contribution to conceptualising relationships in partnerships. His use of the term actors to mean both ' persons or corporate actors' is also helpful in interpreting partnership working as the resources available to actors

apply at both individual and organisational level. At the individual level, the personal qualities, skills and knowledge of key individuals in forming, managing and sustaining relationships in partnerships is significant (Tennyson and Wilde 2000) and at the organisational level the actors represent organisations, agencies or other stakeholders who choose or are incentivised to develop inter-organisational relationships and structures for mutual benefit. In this context, social capital is a resource that is less tangible than other forms of capital such as physical, financial or human capital but its function in achieving goals can be as significant as the other forms. This was found to be the case in MUP. Coleman argues that 'social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible' (Coleman 1988, p.98).

Coleman, like Putnam, has been criticised for offering a very functionalist conceptualisation of social capital (Schuller 1999, Riddell *et al* 1999) as he focuses on the function of social capital as a resource in enabling actors to achieve their ends. He has also attracted criticism for emphasising the positive impact of what has become known in the social capital literature as 'strong ties'. The distinction between strong and weak ties is examined in Section 3.3.

Coleman (1988) identifies three forms of social capital: firstly, obligations, expectations and trustworthiness of structures, secondly, information channels and thirdly, norms and effective sanctions. These aspects constitute useful resources for actors as interactions in an environment where there are high levels of trust produce obligations and expectations of reciprocation. The processes of interaction create

channels to facilitate the flow of information and establish norms and effective sanctions.

Coleman acknowledges that a given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others but has been criticised for emphasising the positive impact of networks with closure and not recognising that dense ties may operate in a negative way e.g. to stifle difference, reinforce existing power structures and create new sources of inequality. These aspects of the downside of social capital form part of contemporary debate (Aldridge *et al* 2002) and emerge from both the discourse focusing on the meaning of the concept (Portes 1998) and empirical evidence of the harmful outcomes of strong social ties (Putzel 1997). The harmful outcomes can be seen in the activities of gangs and groups such as drug cartels and terrorist organisations, characterised as the 'dark side' of social capital, and in the functioning of organisations situated in communities and societies marked by strong nepotism (Woolcock 2001). However, although recent discussions point to inadequacies in Coleman's conceptualisation of social capital they also confirm the influential contribution of his work to the development of the concept (Field *et al* 2000, Cooper *et al* 1999).

Robert Putnam, working from the perspective of political science, is credited with popularising social capital and bringing it into mainstream discourse in contemporary society. His seminal study of regional government in Italy (Putnam1993) and his later study of the demise of social capital in civic society in the United States (Putnam 2000) 'captured the imagination of many' (Schuller *et al* 2000, p.9) and brought the concept to the attention of policymakers and governments as well as

academics and researchers. His work has led to a burgeoning of the literature on social capital and prominence in national and international policy contexts including active patronage and promotion by the World Bank (www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/library).

Social capital as networks, trust and norms of reciprocity

Putnam draws on the work of Coleman and emphasises the function of networks in facilitating collaborative action. He writes 'social capital...refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions' (Putnam 1993, p.167). The triad of networks, norms and trust are central to Putnam's definition of social capital and appear in his extensive published work in slightly re-arranged and rephrased versions. In some of his writing, he refers to social capital as the features of social life that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam cited in Morrissey and McGinn 2001, p.9) and elsewhere he states that social capital enables participants to pursue shared objectives more effectively (Putnam 1995 cited in Hibbitt *et al* 2001, p.144, Putnam 1996 cited in Schuller *et al* 2000, p.9). In more recent exposition, in the Alfred Marshall lectures delivered at Cambridge in 1999, he shifted his position and identified social capital with networks alone (Schuller *et al* 2000, p.11).

In his seminal study Putnam (1993) draws on game theory and empirical evidence collected over two decades in Italy, from 1970-89, to develop and present a conceptualisation which emphasises the role of networks of civic engagement in building the stocks of social capital needed for co-operation to sustain democracy

and economic prosperity. The operation of social networks lies at the heart of his explanation. He argues that 'any society - modern or traditional, authoritarian or democratic, feudal or capitalist - is characterised by networks of interpersonal communication and exchange, both formal and informal' (Putnam 1993, p.173).

These networks are underpinned by trust and norms of reciprocity which facilitate co-operation among participants, as in rotating credit associations which function as voluntary associations of members to raise capital for small scale events or purchases. These types of associations have been reported in many countries as far apart as Peru and Vietnam and Putnam uses them as examples of the ways in which trust and norms of reciprocity can regulate co-operative activity. The participants in the association co-operate for mutual benefit and trust each member to reciprocate and not default on payments into the pot. Relationships amongst the participants are regulated by norms of generalised reciprocity which refer to a continuing relationship of exchange based on the expectation that 'I'll do this for you now, in the expectation that down the road you or someone else will return the favor' (Putnam 1993, p.3). For the participants in the association sanctions such as withdrawal of privileges and ostracism in the wider community operate to prevent abuse of trust.

In this context trust is not viewed as a morally desirable characteristic in its own right but as a means to achieving ends and so motivated by a pragmatic long-term self-interest rather than altruism towards fellow community members. Trust thus functions in the way that a contract would function in more formalised forms of co-operation, such as partnerships between public and private sector organisations and agencies and between different sizes and types of firms in business. This conception

of trust is close to the notion of calculation-based trust (Coulson 1998) and is the way that trust is viewed by actors in inter-organisational partnerships where it is the basis for reducing transaction costs in collaborative ventures, discussed in Chapter 2.

According to Putnam (1993) networks are primarily horizontal or vertical. Horizontal networks bring together agents of equivalent status and power whilst vertical networks link unequal agents in asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependence. In Putnam's view it is the social capital embodied in horizontal networks of civic engagement, like neighbourhood associations, sports clubs, mutual aid societies and cultural associations, that has powerful beneficial effects on a community and 'bolsters the performance of the polity and the economy' (Putnam 1993, p.176). Such networks do this by fostering strong expectations of reciprocity, facilitating information flows about the trustworthiness of individuals, penalising those who do not communicate and co-operate and embodying the benefits of past successful collaboration. Putnam's evidence for this claim was based on the regional differences which had emerged between the North and the South of Italy following the introduction of decentralised regional government in Italy in 1970. He and his co-researchers found that the North of Italy with its history of vibrant horizontal networks of civic engagement had prospered more than the South where fragmentation, distrust and vertical social ties had resulted in less economic prosperity and less 'good government'. For Putnam good government means specific forms of democracy and democratisation and he argues that building social capital is necessary both for making democracy work and for increasing economic prosperity.

There have been many criticisms of Putnam's ideas (summarised in Cooper *et al* 1999, Schuller *et al* 2000, Hibbitt *et al* 2001) and critiques of his conception of social capital constitute a significant part of the literature on social capital. Both supporters (World Bank 2003) and critics (Blaxter and Hughes 2003), however, acknowledge the prominence of his ideas, as Putnam has led the global debate about the meaning and application of social capital. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) list nine primary fields of investigation including schooling and education, community life, democracy and governance and economic development where social capital is being applied. What is social capital? How do we measure it? What are its beneficial effects? What are its downsides? These questions lie at the heart of the theoretical and policy debate and inform policies and initiatives to build social capital in rich (SCWG 2003) and poor countries (World Bank 2003). Putnam's role in the debate has not been to provide the definitive answers to all these questions but to offer a conceptualisation which has opened up the debate about the role of collective social resources in achieving economic outcomes and democratic forms of governance.

Recent policy and research interest in social capital

In recent years there has been a hive of activity in defining and assessing the role of social capital in the economy and in society. Governments, international agencies and organisations and researchers are all represented in the debate. The exponential growth in references to social capital in the academic literature from 1985-2000 is graphically shown in Halpern's table (in Aldridge *et al* 2002, p.9). The table shows the marked growth in references since the publication of Putnam's work culminating in a projected figure of 170 articles on social capital in 2000 in comparison to less than 10 in 1988. The increase in the level of discussion and debate is also evident in

other forms of research outputs, such as the publication of books (Baron *et al* 2000, Putnam 2000, Field 2003; 2005), chapters in books (Field and Schuller 2000, Field and Spence 2000) and international discussions in colloquia and symposia (OECD 2003, Woolcock 2000, Schuller 2000).

The evident increase in research interest is mirrored in the take up of social capital by governments and international agencies in national and international policies. The active patronage of the World Bank and the role of the OECD has already been mentioned but the EU has also been active in promoting research and policies to build social capital (European Commission 2002; 2003). National governments, for example in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (ABS 2000, Statistics New Zealand 2002) have set up research centres to define and disseminate theoretical and empirical understandings of social capital as part of their strategies to build and measure social capital. In the UK, the social capital project set up in 2001 has developed a social capital workplan (SCWG 2003) as well as publishing a literature review and articles on the role of social capital based on UK data of formal and informal voluntary activity and its impact on the community. In Australia, the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA) has also published definitions, discussion papers and reports on social capital and undertaken projects, case studies and other empirical work in a range of contexts (CRLRA 2003, Kilpatrick *et al* 2002). All three countries have developed frameworks to measure social capital (Office for National Statistics 2003, Statistics New Zealand 2002, ABS 2003).

Schuller *et al* (2000) and Blaxter and Hughes (2000) suggest that social capital is a concept of its time. It shifts the focus from economic individualism and self-interest to collective social relations and the nature of society. The interest in social capital has been accompanied by wider debates about falling levels of trust in society, in particular in politicians and the consequences for democracy. This level of interest and activity in social capital has a positive side as it has promoted dialogue between different disciplines and opened up new ways of interpreting the social world. However, there is also a negative side, as the level of interest has led to some confusion and a dilution of the concept so that the concept has become fuzzy and blurred (Blaxter and Hughes 2000). Social capital is used by researchers and policymakers to cover a range of relationships and contexts and it is not always clear in which sense the term is being used or what it means. As Kilpatrick *et al* point out:

> The concept of social capital is unusual in that it is apparently understood across disciplines and by researchers, policymakers and practitioners. It attracts sociologists, economists, political scientists and historians. (Kilpatrick *et al* 2001 p.2)

Furthermore, the extent to which it is re-naming or re-describing phenomena in new ways e.g. policymakers use of 'social capital' as another way of describing 'community' (Aldridge *et al* 2000) is another source of ambiguity. In their review of the scholarship on social capital, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) distinguish between four perspectives on social capital: the communitarian view, the networks view, the institutional view and the synergy view. This study draws on the use of the concept as the networks and the synergy view to conceptualise partnership working.

Woolcock suggests that:

...there are different types, levels, or dimensions of social capital, different performance outcomes associated with different combinations of these dimensions, and different sets of conditions that support or weaken favourable combinations. (Woolcock 1998, p.159)

3.3 Dimensions of social capital

Networks, norms and trust, as the discussion in the previous section shows, are generally regarded as part of the concept of social capital. Schuller *et al* (2000) choose not to include norms in their review and critique of social capital arguing that they are too diffuse and focus instead on networks and trust as the two key components of the concept. However, my use of social capital emanates from a grounded approach in which norms and values emerged from the qualitative data as significant in explaining the lifecourse of MUP. In the context of this study, I am defining social capital as the networks, trust, norms and values which enable individuals and organisations to achieve mutual goals.

The terms included in the above definition of social capital are understood and operationalised in slightly different ways by researchers coming from differing disciplinary and research traditions and working in varied contexts. The most variation is associated with norms which are portrayed by some researchers in a rather negative way, e.g. as a sanction to control undesirable behaviour as in Putnam's norms of generalised reciprocity which serve to regulate co-operative activity in rotating credit associations. Other researchers portray the more positive side of norms as ways of establishing and maintaining particular values as the basis of social relations, e.g. 'the norm of inclusion of diversity' (Kilpatrick *et al* 2001, p.7). CRLRA (2003) use the terms social values and norms interchangeably in their definition of social capital and norms and values feature in a number of definitions

from other sources. Shared norms and values are part of the OECD's definition of social capital (OECD 2001) and norms and values are part of Aldridge *et al*'s (2002) definition.

Woolcock (2001) includes norms in his definition but not trust arguing that any definition of social capital should focus on what social capital *is* rather than what it *does*. For Woolcock, the source of social capital is norms and networks (i.e. what it *is*) and trust is one of its consequences (i.e. what it *does*). In Woolcock's view it is norms and networks that facilitate collective action and lead to desirable social and economic outcomes whilst trust, though important as an entity, is better understood as an outcome of things like repeated interactions, credible legal institutions, reputations. These different perspectives of norms and values are explored in the context of MUP in Chapter 7 whilst Chapters 5 and 6 reveal the role of networks and trust in partnership working.

Vertical and horizontal networks

Theorisations of social capital based on empirical work distinguish horizontal from vertical relationships amongst actors. Horizontal relationships in flat social structures are regarded positively in comparison to vertical relationships in hierarchical structures. Aldridge *et al* (2002) list the main determinants of social capital and whether social structures are flat or hierarchical is listed as a key factor together with a range of others relating to history, culture, economic inequalities, social class, the nature of civic society, and personal values.

Putnam (1993) has shown how horizontal networks of civic participation have beneficial economic and social effects and can promote democracy. He distinguishes horizontal networks that bring together agents of equivalent status and power from vertical networks that link unequal agents in asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependence (Putnam 1993, p.173). He acknowledges that in reality all networks are mixes of horizontal and vertical but argues that there is a contrast between web-like and may-pole like networks. This is a useful distinction that can be applied to interpreting relationships amongst actors in inter-organisational and multi-agency partnerships, such as MUP, and links to notions of networked governance in the partnership literature.

Types of linkages in social networks

Conceptualisations of social capital distinguish between different types of linkages or ties in social networks. Some fundamental distinctions, mainly dichotomous, are made in attempts to capture the nature of social relationships between people and the way(s) in which ties function in groups, organisations, communities and society in general. Analyses of social capital from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives differentiate between bonding, bridging and linking social capital, between strong and weak ties and contrast close-knit networks with loose-knit networks and effective networks with extended networks. Social network analysis utilises notions such as interdependency, connectedness, and density (Trevillion 1999, Bott 1957 cited in Granovetter 1973) to gauge and attempt to measure the interrelationships between people in a network and the significance of these interactions for the network members and for other people in the community.

Gilchrist (2000) has applied these notions to the analysis of networking in community development work and uses the notion of connectivity to convey the sense of 'community' that develops from the operation of informal networks. She found that the function of informal networks was to co-ordinate collective action, enable mutual learning, complement formal organisation and provide access to resources and information. She highlights the importance of social capital in the form of trust in supporting and shaping patterns of connectivity but also points to other aspects of networking such as power relations and the operation of serendipity. Drawing on her experience as a community development worker in diverse inner-city neighbourhoods Gilchrist argues that networks can range from temporary alliances and coalitions to more stable configurations, especially when linked to funding, as in partnerships. Such networks rely on the connectivity between people that generates a sense of 'community', something which is not necessarily a geographical phenomenon as it depends on the connections between people and ties of affinity, obligation and previous experience.

As well as attempting to describe the strength of inter-relationships between people, network analysis also offers a useful tool for distinguishing between key relationships and those that are less significant by mapping out relational links between actors. These can be visualised in the form of clusters of direct and indirect links between the individuals in a network as illustrated in Figure 1.
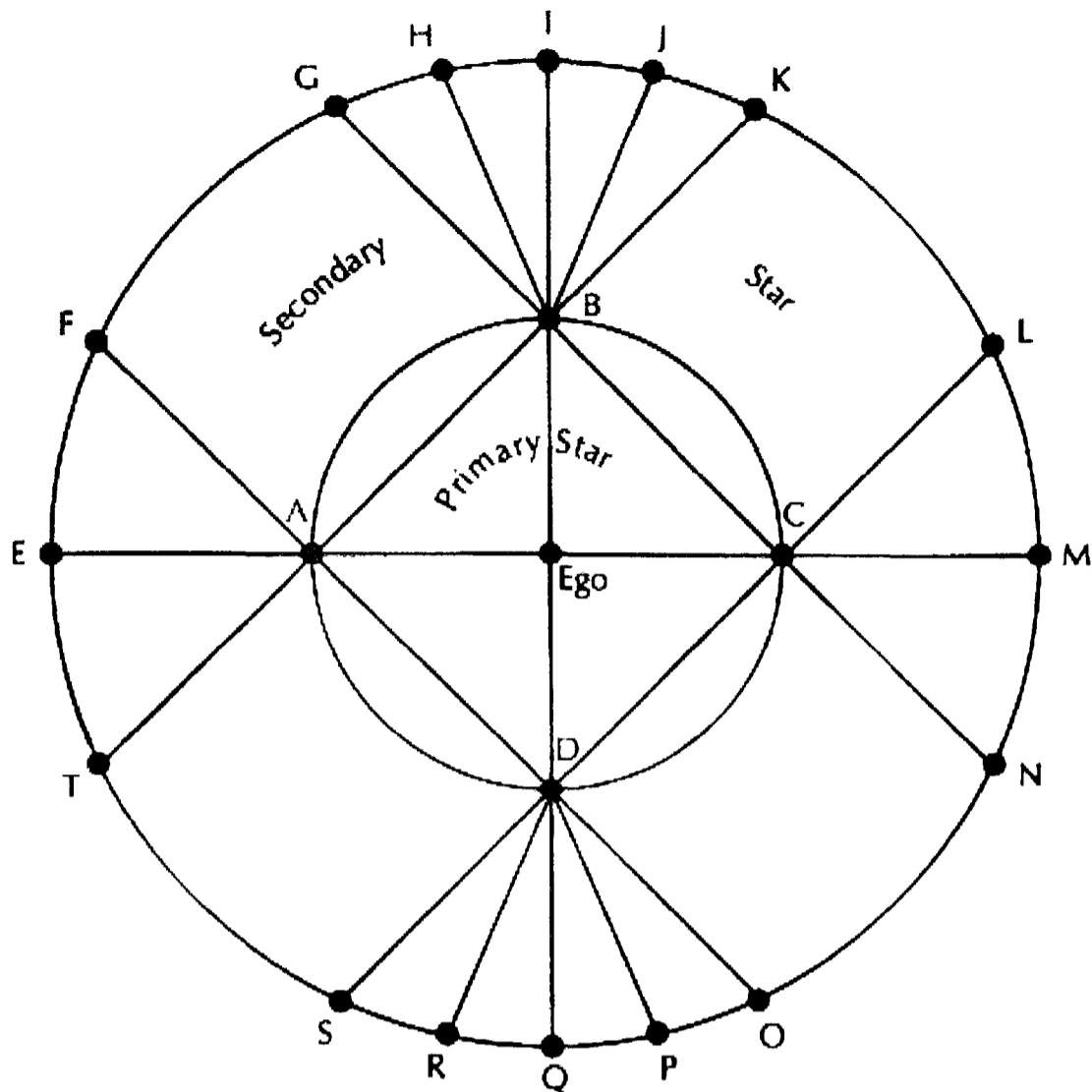
Figure 1: Primary and secondary 'stars' in networks (Trevillion 1999, p.23)

The full set of individuals linked directly to a person (Ego) is the primary network or *primary star* and the set of individuals linked to the primary star is the secondary network or *secondary star* with the set of individuals linked to the secondary network being the *tertiary star*. This technique is useful for defining the boundaries of a network in order to make analysis of relationships manageable and the present study draws on this to discuss the relational ties amongst the participants in MUP, presented in Chapter 5. The notion of primary, secondary and tertiary stars conveys the multiple layers of collaboration that developed between actors and the links (A,B,C...T) provide a way of representing formal and informal links between key actors in the networks which underpinned partnership working in MUP.

Strong and weak ties

The notion of connectedness is further developed in the sociological literature by the distinction between strong and weak ties, a dimension of social capital that focuses on the strength of interpersonal ties and their role in enabling individuals to achieve individual and collective goals. Granovetter proposes that interpersonal ties can be strong, weak or absent and that:

> ...the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie. (Granovetter 1973, p.1361)

On the basis of this definition, and intuitively, strong ties to family, close friends and neighbours can be distinguished from weak ties to distant friends, associates and acquaintances. Degenne and Forse (1999) point out that not all researchers distinguish between strong and weak ties in the same way, however, the differentiation is generally accepted in the social capital literature and further elaborated in the bonding, bridging and linking distinction. Contrasting strong with weak ties is a useful distinction but a complication in regarding them as binaries is that weak ties may develop into strong ties. For example, someone who joins a voluntary organisation may start with many weak ties but one of these may change into a strong tie as that person develops a close friendship with another member of the group. Furthermore, implicit in the distinction between strong and weak ties is the assumption that strong ties are more positive and hence more beneficial than weak ties. However, this is not necessarily the case as working class families with strong ties may not be able to achieve individual or collective benefits in society on the basis of these ties.

Granovetter's work on operational networks has shown that weak ties are better than strong as he argues for the *strength* of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). In his study of how people had found jobs in the Boston suburb of Newton in the USA he considered the three possibilities of personal contacts, formal application and direct approach. He found that 56% of the people in the study had found jobs through personal contacts and 19% through each of the other two methods. Of those who had obtained jobs through personal contacts, 31% had done so through family members and 69% through professional contacts (Degenne and Forse 1999). Those most successful found their job through a professional contact, not family or friends which shows that weak ties and short relational chains work better than strong ties.

Granovetter's pioneering work on the efficacy of weak ties has been used as an explanatory framework and the basis for developing strategies associated with 'getting ahead' as opposed to 'getting by' through connections to people with influence and power. This is supported by the work of Nan Lin (cited in Paldam 2000) who posits the notion of 'good connections' based on empirical evidence from his work on networks in China. Lin has shown that links are more useful the higher the rank of the person with whom they are formed, so good connections for achieving ends are related to the power and influence of individuals and not just the strength of the tie. This is particularly the case in hierarchical societies such as China but also the case in any network where those with friends or acquaintances in powerful positions can draw on more resources than those whose friends are poor and far from seats of power in society. Theoretically and empirically this does not seem surprising as reflexive experience suggests that if individuals, groups and communities want to leverage resources they need to build linkages to those who

control resources or who have the knowledge/power to access them more effectively. In order to achieve this leverage, weak ties or bridging and linking social capital are more important than strong ties or bonding social capital.

Bonding, Bridging and linking

Recent policy analyses distinguish between bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Aldridge *et al* 2002). Bonding social capital is characterised by strong bonds, as amongst family members and close friends, whilst bridging social capital refers to weaker, less dense cross-cutting ties, as with business associates and acquaintances. Linking social capital denotes connections to people with differing levels of power and status, as links with the political or social elite. Aldridge *et al* (2002) acknowledge that linking social capital is a dimension first proposed by Woolcock, which is discussed below. Gewirtz *et al* (2005) point out that bonding social capital refers to dense tight-knit homogenous social networks prevalent in working class and religious communities whilst bridging social capital refers to 'more heterogeneous horizontal social networks that give people access to valuable resources and information' (Gewirtz *et al* 2005, p.668). These are the type of networks found in MUP.

Woolcock (2000) characterises bonding as connections to people 'like you' (strong ties), bridging as connections to people 'not like you' (weak ties) and linking as connections to people in positions of power used to leverage resources. He argues that the language of social capital makes it a potentially powerful tool for critical researchers and academics to promote social justice by helping poor marginalised communities to leverage resources, ideas and information and move from survival to

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mobility by bringing about change in the community. However, existing power structures and perceptions of 'community' reveal assumptions about which type of social capital is valued in policy (Thompson 2000). In the UK, strategies to build 'community' are focused on areas of crisis and poverty and not on areas of power and status (Baron 2000) as a sense of 'community' is perceived as being necessary for people living on deprived housing estates in Glasgow but not for stockbrokers living in Surrey. Despite the constraints of existing power structures and assumptions underlying contemporary policies that claim to build social capital, an understanding of Woolcock's analysis provides a powerful tool for networkers seeking to forge links to access resources in partnerships.

Woolcock (2001) argues that social capital is multi-dimensional and dynamic and that it is different *combinations* of bonding, bridging and linking social capital that enable the range of outcomes discussed in the literature on social capital to be realised in practice. He also stresses that the institutional context in which networks operate, including the state, need to be part of understanding how social capital works and what combination of bonding, bridging and linking will enable the achievement of specific goals. In the context of inter-organisational and multi-agency partnerships, knowledge of how different dimensions of social capital function can be as valuable in achieving goals as other types of assets, such as financial capital. If used strategically, e.g. to forge bridging and linking ties rather than concentrating on bonding, this understanding can be more effective in harnessing the necessary resources for collaborative activities. It can also empower actors to use institutional structures to achieve goals which they feel are of value

rather than just being driven by the command and control mechanisms of regional development agencies and funding councils, as happened in MUP.

Measures and indicators of social capital

Much time and effort is being devoted to develop measures of social capital by governments, agencies, organisations and researchers (Falk and Harrison 1998, Paldam 2000, Putnam 2001). The literature and research practice shows that the question of how to *measure* social capital is regarded as equally important and as worthy of investigation as the question of *what is* social capital? The quest to develop indicators of social capital, measure it and quantify the results for comparison of levels of social capital in communities and countries has resulted in banks of questionnaires designed to measure aspects of social capital. In the UK, the interactive social capital question bank provides on-line access to fifteen surveys that measure social capital (Office for National Statistics 2003). The World Bank has invested heavily in developing surveys and measurement tools culminating in an integrated questionnaire for the measurement of social capital with questions which attempt to 'capture the essence of social capital' (Grootaert *et al* 2002). The OECD has included items relating to social skills relevant to working and living together in adult populations in its International Adult Literacy Survey as part of its project to attempt to measure social capital in ways that it tries to measure human capital (OECD 2003).

Researchers from different parts of the world have contributed to the development of instruments, such as The World Values Survey (cited in Paldam 2000) which has been used to draw up comparative measures of trust in OECD and non-OECD

countries. The comparative data based on responses to the question 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?'(cited in Aldridge *et al* 2002, p.15) is used to give a statistical measure of levels of trust in each country. So for example in the1990s 31% of people in the UK said that most people could be trusted whilst the figure for Norway was 65.3% and for Brazil 2.8%. Paldam (2000) points out that the question is designed to measure generalised trust, that is trust in people in general rather than special trust, that is trust to known people or trust in particular institutions.

The drive to develop measures of social capital however, begs the fundamental question of whether it is possible to measure an entity like social capital, which as Baron (2000) has pointed out, is at heart a social relationship. There seems to be a contradiction in attempting to measure a qualitative process. Alheit and Kreitz (2000) state that social capital is not a quantifiable entity but a learning system of cohesive cycles distributed unevenly in social space. Applying aggregation and economic models to a social construct reflects attempts to turn a soft social science concept into a hard economic measure which is quantifiable and comparable across communities, regions and countries in ways that human capital has become a measurable commodity in the form of schooling and academic qualifications. So measures of generalised trust in OECD and non-OECD countries and comparative levels of social capital in different states in the USA (Putnam 2001) become like comparative measures of skills and qualifications. However, the flaw in this endeavour is that by applying the approach used in economic measurement models there is the danger of losing or even destroying the very qualities of the entity that the approach is trying to measure. This is especially the case where the capital lies in

group and community relationships, as it often does in partnerships, and so is less tangible then other forms of capital such as physical or financial capital.

The dominance and predominance of measurement in the social capital debate fails to distinguish between *measures* and *indicators* of social capital. Although indicators can be useful, regarding them as measures fails to account for the complexity of the context in which social capital operates to enable individuals, groups and communities to achieve their goals. This study does not attempt to measure social capital but does use indicators to discuss, for example, commitment to MUP and levels of participation in partnership working to explore and explain the lifecourse of the partnership.

Deriving indicators of social capital from empirical research

Researchers in Northern Ireland and Australia have attempted to derive indicators of social capital from empirical research. Morrissey and McGinn (2001) identify nineteen possible indicators of social capital in community-based and voluntary activity in Northern Ireland using the World Bank's indicators of social capital. The researchers state that the empirically derived indicators 'enable measurement of what are sometimes vaguely defined processes that are the additional benefits of funding community and voluntary organisations' (Morrissey and McGinn 2001, p.23). The indicators are not turned into numerical measures but are expressed as range and depth statements e.g. range of collective action undertaken by communities, depth of participation in partnerships.

Falk and Harrison (1998) use a grounded theory approach to develop tentative indicators of social capital through a whole-community case study of 'Rivertown', a typical township in rural Australia. The research is concerned with the role of learning and social capital in responding to change and sustaining community viability premised on the assumption that networks, norms and trust constitute the necessary resources for individuals, workplaces, groups, organisations and communities to strive for sustainable futures in a changing socio-economic environment. The researchers acknowledge the complex conceptual, definitional and methodological issues involved in such an undertaking and in particular focus on 'two dimensions to learning as the *process* of interaction between people and groups which builds or accumulates social capital as the *outcome*' (Falk and Harrison 1998, p.40). In Rivertown, social capital is the result of interactive learning processes and the tentative indicators of social capital that emerge from the study are grouped around three main categories: knowledge resources, identity resources and consolidated resources. In the category of knowledge resources the interactions between people and groups draw on the resource of shared knowledge of community, personal, individual and collective information. This category includes, for example, knowledge of what people are good at and one indicator of this dimension is, sharing skills and knowledge. The researchers argue that:

> ...it cannot be expected that a fairly traditional pseudo-scientific survey-research design can 'test' the existence of a commodity such as social capital...only...grounded theory development can meet that challenge.
> (Falk and Harrison 1998, p.55)

Despite this stance, the pervasive language of measurement models manages to infiltrate their verbalisation of this argument as they describe social capital as a 'commodity' in the quote given above. Another aspect of the discourse is that

although indicators can be useful they are often transformed into measures by governments and agencies in the performative managerial culture of organisations that deliver public sector services (Clarke *et al* 2000, Phillips and Harper-Jones 2003). In a culture where targets, performance indicators and league tables of performance drive policy implementation and funding, it is easy to confuse indicators with measures. This can lead to the interpretation of an *indicator* of social capital, such as membership of voluntary organisations, as a quantitative *measure* of social capital. However, 'the concept of social capital does not boil down to the volume of contacts because not all contacts have the same *value*' (Degenne and Forse 1999, p.117).

This is particularly pertinent in the context of partnership working where collaborative activities depend upon the quality of relationships amongst actors. Such relationships, developed through existing and new networks based on norms and values depend upon levels of trust at both individual and organisational level. These dimensions of social capital are difficult to quantify. It is possible to log the volume of contacts between actors, such as attendance at partnership meetings and number of member organisations and this was done as part of the present study. However, although this information provides some useful indicators of commitment to the partnership without the depth which comes from interrogating the *value* of these contacts, understanding of partnership working remains very superficial. The value of these contacts emerges from in-depth qualitative analysis of partnership working and this study aims to interpret the role of networks, trust, norms and values in shaping and sustaining partnership.

3.4 Using social capital to theorise partnership working in MUP

In this section I discuss how social capital has informed my understanding and analysis of partnership working in MUP. To my knowledge there is no study that attempts to apply social capital to partnership working in the field of post-16 learning either deductively or inductively. I have come to use the concept inductively as an explanation of the basis and effectiveness of partnership in the context of widening participation in post-16 learning. In particular, social capital emerged as a significant concept in seeking to answer the question: what factors contribute to continued and successful partnership working and what sustains a partnership? Like Coleman who used social capital as a *post hoc* explanation of his findings of educational outcomes in US high schools (Schuller *et al* 2000, p.6), I found retrospectively that social capital was the concept that explained my empirical findings.

Other researchers have used the concept similarly though not in the context of partnership working. A number of studies of post-16 learning use social capital (Field and Schuller 2000, Field and Spence 2000, Riddell *et al* 1999, Kellner 2001, Kilpatrick *et al* 2001), including three that were part of The *Learning Society Programme*, a £2.5 million ESRC funded research programme in the UK. In these studies, research teams turned to social capital to explain their empirical findings and I have drawn on their work in defining and using social capital in this study though the context is different.

Field and Schuller (2000) use social capital to explain patterns of participation in lifelong learning in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In another study, Field and Spence (2000) suggest that low levels of participation in formal education in

Northern Ireland may be due to informal learning which is facilitated by social capital in the form of high levels of networking and communal trust. In their Glasgow based study, Riddell *et al* (1999) explore the implications of access to social capital for people with learning difficulties among whom there is a particular concentration of poverty. The application of social capital as a theoretical framework has not been easy however as scholars have been criticised for 'neglecting the role of inequality and power' (Field 2003, p.1.).

There is also continuing debate about the meaning of social capital and its benefits. McClenaghan (2000) and Kilpatrick *et al* (2001) dispute the link between social capital and community development education. An outcome of this debate has been a distinction between two main approaches to defining social capital: 'collective benefit' and 'individual benefit'. 'Collective benefit' definitions, such as those of Putnam and Woolcock, emphasise that 'norms and networks are capable of being used for mutual or collective benefit' whilst 'individual benefit' definitions, such as those of Bourdieu and Coleman, 'emphasise the benefits accruing to individuals' (Kilpatrick *et al* 2001, pp.4-5). The collective benefit view is the one most applicable to partnership working though individuals can accrue considerable personal benefit from their involvement in a partnership.

Weaknesses in conceptualisations of social capital

The use of social capital to analyse the experiences of adults with learning difficulties reveals weaknesses in theorisations of the concept in accounting for differences that may affect access to forms of social capital and ability to contribute to stocks of social capital in a community. Riddell *et al* (1999) found that adults with learning difficulties were perceived by others in the community as not being

'normal' and that this led to great variation in their access to social capital. Feminist researchers point to the gender blindness in accounts of social capital. This, as Blaxter and Hughes (2003) point out, is significant given that the language of social capital includes concepts such as trust, reciprocity, connections, social networks, norms, social support and mutual aid which are central to feminist theorising and female experience.

Conceptualisations of social capital not only fail to account for inequalities arising from gendered experience but also ignore other differences such as ethnicity, religion, language, culture, disability and sexuality which may affect access to social capital and the type of social capital available to individuals and communities. In an inter-connected globe of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic communities and societies issues of race, class, gender and disability interact to contribute to the social capital of individuals, communities, regions and countries. People from different social classes, religious and ethnic backgrounds bring their habitus to interact with others in different fields where they use their capital(s) to achieve personal and professional goals. The kinds of social networks they can access and build, the level of trust they have in others and the values which underpin the relationships they forge with individuals and groups are shaped, and to some extent determined, by such differences. This does not seem to feature in accounts of social capital but gender, in particular, emerged as significant in achieving successful outcomes in MUP.

Despite its limitations as a theoretical framework, social capital provides a useful frame for analysing partnership working and exploring the basis of sustainability in a partnership as networks, norms, values and trust, defining dimensions of social

capital, are found in partnerships. My use of social capital draws on two aspects of the way it is used by Field and Schuller (2000). Firstly, the definition of social capital as 'networks, norms and trust' (Field and Schuller 2000, p.95) to which I have added values as they emerged as significant in sustaining MUP. Secondly, the notion of a simplified loose network, shown in Figure 2, which Field and Schuller use to visualise the relationships that are supportive of lifelong learning in any given society and which I have used to inform my simplified representation of networks in MUP shown in Figure 4 (see Chapter 5).

For Field and Schuller (2000) the sources of social capital include the family, government, the workplace, the neighbourhood, continuing education and training providers, the initial education system and voluntary organisations, and the web-like linkages (or possible relationships) between and amongst them, as shown in Figure 2.
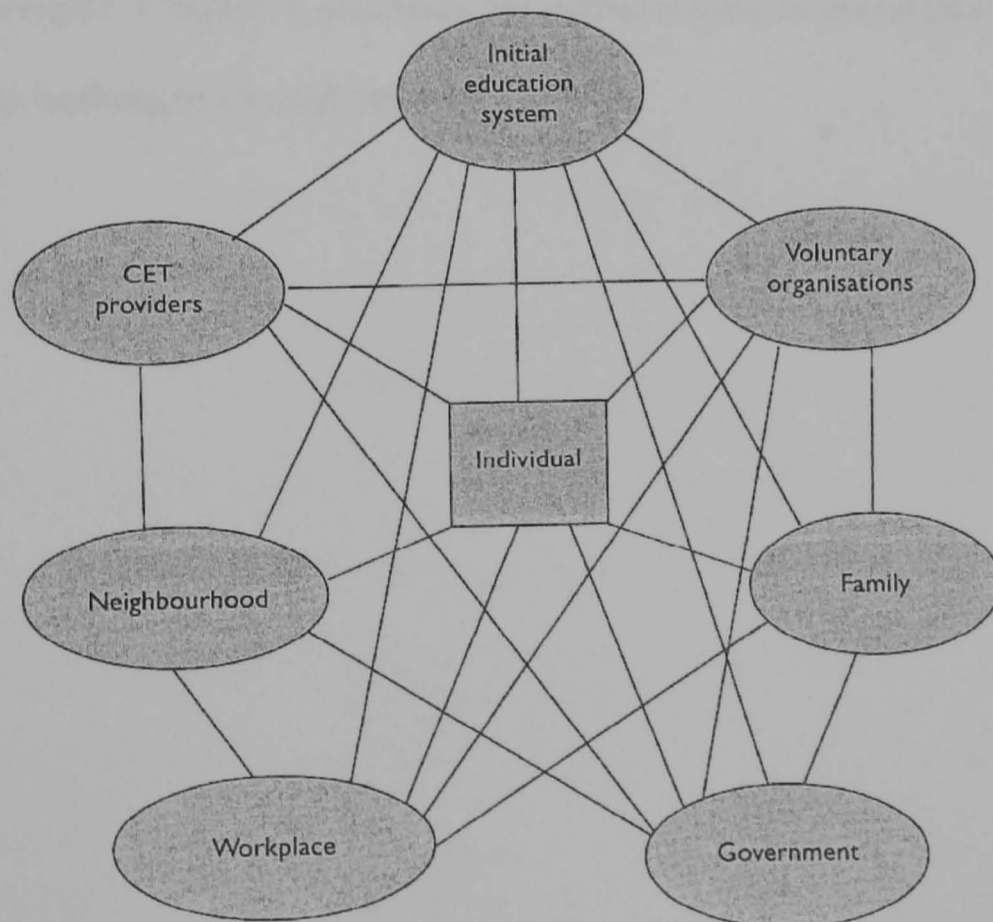
Figure 2: Sources of social capital (Field and Schuller 2000 p.108)

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They explore the significance of these relationships and their implications for adult learning and come to tentative rather than firm conclusions but argue that the use of social capital opens up lines of reflection and argument which have been neglected in the debate about the relationship between education, economy and society due to the dominance of models derived from human capital approaches. I found that in analysing partnership working social capital provided a focus for exploring relationships amongst the actors and an explanation for the stages in the lifecourse of MUP. The fieldwork data, presented in Chapters 5-7, reveal the role of formal and informal networks in the development and progress of MUP and the levels of trust amongst the participants. The data also show the shared norms and values that held the partners together through high and low points in the lifecourse of the partnership and the role of the policy context in driving and constraining partnership working.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, discusses the methods used to investigate and interpret partnership working in the case study partnership.

Chapter 4

The methodology and fieldwork used to construct an understanding of partnership processes

This chapter sets out the development of the methodology used for this study. I discuss the considerations which shaped the research process and the methods chosen for data collection, analysis and interpretation. The chapter begins by positioning the study in research terms and discusses the nature of my developing relationship with the managers, practitioners and administrators in MUP, including the transition from observer to participant observer, which enabled me to gain a deeper insight into the process of partnership working than would have been possible through non-participant observation. The second part of the chapter provides an account of the qualitative methods used to undertake the fieldwork.

4.1   Contextualisation of research approach

The methodology and the conceptual framework used to investigate and interpret partnership working are rooted in multi-disciplinary approaches which encourage boundary crossing (Griffiths 2000, Schuller *et al* 2000, Hughes 2001). They reflect my interests, multi-disciplinary background and craft skills as a researcher but the overriding consideration that shaped the methodology was the appropriateness of the methods for investigating the research questions. In addition to the main research questions provided in the introduction, the twin threads of asking questions at all stages of the research process (Blaxter 1999, Mason 2002) and being reflexive in interpreting the data were dominant considerations in crafting the research approach. The conceptual framework emerged from the methodological approach which sought

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understanding (*verstehen*) of the phenomena of partnership rather than a positivist search for objectivity and causality. The process of making meaning and theorising from the empirical data led to the concept of social capital as a framework for understanding partnership working as I spent 'substantial time...personally in contact with activities and operations ...reflecting, and revising meanings of what [was] going on' (Stake 1994, p.242).

The study is positioned as a qualitative study located in the interpretive paradigm. It is my reading of the story of partnership which other researchers may have interpreted differently. My analysis has been shaped by the research questions, the situated context of the case study, the empirical data and the nature of my relationship with the people who participated in the study. There is a narrative to the lifecourse of the case study partnership but I have not followed any particular approach to narrative research. Instead my approach has been more influenced by questions about the basis of continued and sustained partnership working. As Crotty (1998, p.1) points out, given the 'array of methodologies and methods' available to the researcher and the 'far from consistent' use of the terminology by different researchers I discuss below the notions which have contributed to crafting my approach.

Crotty offers a useful framework for scaffolding and justifying social research consisting of four elements that inform one another: epistemology; theoretical perspective; methodology and methods (Crotty 1998). The purpose of these elements is to enable a 'penetrating analysis' of the research process and to point up the theoretical assumptions underpinning its findings. Crotty's model is not presented as

a definitive or linear model and I did not set out to plan my study on the basis of the framework but I have used it reflexively to draw out the assumptions embedded in the research and found it a helpful framework for this purpose.

Each of the elements proposed by Crotty represent choices in the research design and the fieldwork which need to be justified and defended from theoretical and empirical perspectives. The selection is not a random process or eclectic in the sense that any combination will do as 'empirical research is not simply a choice of method' (Gill and Johnson 1991, p.125) but the methodology carries implicit and explicit assumptions about the researchers 'mode of engagement' (Morgan 1983, p.19). The philosophical and epistemological grounds for reaching decisions about the methods and the researcher's values and assumptions about the social and natural world need to be examined to enable others to judge the findings. Researchers need to sensitise themselves to the methodological debate or the 'paradigm wars' (Blaxter 1999) to clarify their own position and locate their work within a research tradition. The discourse in this debate is marked by dualities and dichotomies, for example, positivist *vs* interpretive, quantitative *vs* qualitative, as researchers position themselves in opposing camps to point up differences in perspective and locate themselves in contrasting paradigms.

Research paradigm

Paradigms offer a way of categorising complex beliefs about the world and as they are often presented as competing alternatives indicate the contested nature of knowledge construction (Blaxter *et al* 2001). They represent ontological and epistemological differences in perspective. Researchers who locate themselves

within the positivist paradigm may view interpretive research as being subjective, unreliable, not generalisable and consequently of little value in extending current knowledge. In contrast, researchers working from an interpretive perspective may view research conducted within a positivist paradigm as generating bland statistical data but failing to reach the depth of understanding which comes from the 'lived' or 'felt' experience of the researched (Sherman and Webb 1988). Thus, the debate is not only about research findings and the researcher's technical competence in designing and carrying out research, as *bricoleur* (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), but also about fundamental differences in perspective and ontological assumptions about the world. Oakley writes:

> Paradigms are essentially intellectual *cultures,* and as such they are fundamentally embedded in the socialization of their adherents; a way of life rather than simply a set of technical and procedural differences. (Oakley 1999, p.155)

Sparkes (1992) identifies three paradigms for social research: positivist, interpretive and critical which he suggests 'offer differing visions of the research process' (p.45). Others have extended this categorisation (e.g. Crotty 1998, Blaxter *et al* 2001) but for my purposes Sparkes' categories are sufficient to point up the perspectives underpinning this study. The paradigms emphasise differences in theoretical perspective and have implications about how research is seen and undertaken. Positivist discourse assumes that there are hard objective facts in the real world which are true and can be objectively measured by a technically competent researcher (Bassey 1990). Researchers working within this paradigm favour surveys, experiments and the collection of quantitative data for statistical analysis. The origins of positivist discourse, in the natural sciences, explains the procedural

emphasis on replication and tight controls in research design and collection and manipulation of statistical data in striving to make the findings valid and reliable. However, the most serious weakness of this perspective lies in the fundamental assumption that there are objective facts about the social world in the same way that there are true 'facts' about the natural world and that there is one reality rather than realities which are constructed by people. In the literature and in social research practice, positivism has acquired negative connotations and is often used as a derogatory term:

> ...all one can reasonably infer from the unexplicated usage of the term 'positivism' in the social research literature is that the writer disapproves of what he or she is referring to. (Hammersely 1995, p.2)

Despite this intellectual 'war', my position is that the weaknesses of positivism should not lead us to disregard the contribution that the approach can make to research practice as it offers useful tools for planning and carrying out a study, particularly in providing a framework for identifying the stages in the research process. As a qualitative researcher, I am less interested in carrying out surveys and analysing quantitative data but I think that the findings of such research are useful and complement qualitative data. The dualities of theoretical perspective should not result in dismissal of research strategies or findings on the grounds that they emanate from a positivist paradigm but they should be evaluated and judged with the same rigour as research in other paradigms. My decisions and practice are based upon judgements about whether a particular approach is appropriate to the research questions of the study. This type of pragmatism is close to the position adopted by Burgess (1984) and articulated by Schatzman and Strauss:

The field researcher is a methodological pragmatist. He sees any method of inquiry as a system of strategies and operations designed - at any time - for getting answers to certain questions about events which interest him. (Schatzman and Strauss 1973, cited in Burgess 1984, p.5.)

This pragmatism is not inconsistent, in my view, with researching within an interpretive paradigm. Whilst acknowledging the powerful discourse and traditions of positivism, its weaknesses in trying to research people's lives without recognising that human beings make meaning of their world leads a reflexive social researcher to find an approach which seeks a deeper and richer understanding of different realities. As Gill and Johnson point out:

...human beings are able to attach meaning to the events and phenomena that surround them, and from these interpretations and perceptions select courses of meaningful action which they are able to reflect upon and monitor. It is these subjective processes that provide the sources of explanation of human action and thereby constitute the rightful focus for social science research. Thus the aim of such interpretative approaches is to understand (verstehen) how people make sense of their worlds. (Gill and Johnson 1991, p.126)

My research is located within the interpretive paradigm. It seeks to understand partnership working from the perspective of the actors involved in the formation and development of a partnership and to interpret the work of the partnership in the context of post-16 learning. The cluster of assumptions that underpin the interpretive paradigm recognise that there are many realities; different viewpoints, values and beliefs that shape the world for people. Research contributes to understanding of specific social contexts and is an iterative process where the researcher produces an interpretation based on her or his engagement with the researched. The researcher's own engagement, social skills and ability to understand the culture and context of the research contributes to the insight which comes from interpreting experiences and

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realities in the social world which are 'culturally derived and historically situated' (Blaxter *et al* 2001, p.61).

The epistemology underpinning my approach is constructionism. I use the definition given by Crotty:

> ... all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (Crotty 1998, p.42)

The notion of constructing rather than discovering knowledge which is out there in the natural world as assumed by positivists, gives prominence to the role of interaction and the situated context in developing knowledge and understanding. We construct meaning from 'the world and the objects in the world' (Crotty 1998, p.44). In the process of research, the researcher does not just produce a subjective account but constructs an interpretation through interaction with the researched (Bassey 1990). The nature and quality of my engagement with the actors in the partnership during the research process contributed to my interpretation and re-interpretation of partnership working. A major element in the process of knowledge construction was the relationship between researcher and researched, which changed and developed during the fieldwork from outsider and observer to more of an insider and participant (Robson 1999). Notions of the researcher as an instrument for knowledge construction and as interpretive *bricoleur* (Denzin and Lincoln 2000) reflect the way I have conceived my role and crafted my approach to researching partnership working.

The researcher and the researched

The person of the researcher is recognised as affecting the research study (Acker *et al* 1991, Coffey 1999). Blaxter *et al* maintain that research is 'a social activity powerfully affected by the researcher's own motivations and values' (Blaxter *et al* 2001, p.15).

The motivations, values and interests that led me to this study have been mentioned in the introduction to the thesis and I discuss here the particular aspects that shaped my understanding and interpretation of partnership in post-16 learning. My experience of teaching in multi-ethnic FE colleges in the West Midlands and of training teachers to work in post-compulsory education and training have made me acutely aware of inequalities in educational provision. This experience contributes to my interest in initiatives to widen participation in post-16 learning. Though my aim to seek *verstehen* (understanding) locates my research in the interpretive paradigm my approach has some resonance with some of the values and beliefs underpinning research in the critical paradigm (Sparkes 1992, Crotty 1998). As a female from a minority ethnic group and a researcher with an interest in the impact of policy on practice, my approach is influenced by questions about how gender, ethnicity and the situational context affect the implementation and effectiveness of policies and initiatives that seek to promote equality. I empathise with the less powerful and wanted to find out if the growing emphasis on widening participation was just policy rhetoric or was actually reaching disadvantaged and excluded learners and giving them new opportunities to succeed. It was this interest that initially led me to MUP. Subsequently, the empirical data from the early stages of the fieldwork and the nature

of my changing engagement with members of the partnership shifted my focus on to the basis of sustainability in a partnership.

The transition from observer to participant observer

During the fieldwork, which spanned nearly three years and so gave a more longitudinal perspective of the life of MUP, the nature of my relationship with members of the partnership changed and developed. In some respects it became more like a partnership between researcher and researched as I gained access to existing social networks, developed weak ties (Granovetter 1973) with members of MUP and tried to reciprocate in a small way the time they gave me to help in my data collection. I would not go as far as to say that I developed friendships, which some feminist researchers have done through their research (Oakley 1999) but I did develop my personal networks through the fieldwork and gain access to data by building trust through my interactions with members of MUP. In this sense the process of researching MUP enabled me to build my social capital, which Field and Spence define 'as the networks, norms and shared sense of trust that are available to any group of actors' (Field and Spence 2000, p.34). During the fieldwork I became more like a member of the partnership than an observer of a series of meetings of partnership working, though for me MUP was a site for research. I discuss below the process and interactions involved in this transition and its significance for the research.

I started fieldwork in September 1999 as a non-participant observer of MUP meetings but gradually moved closer to a participant observer and on occasions took on dual roles in meetings and in planning days convened to develop the partnership's

strategy. During meetings held in May, June and July 2001 I was asked by the Chair to take the minutes as no administrator was able to attend the partnership's meetings. The partnership was going through a trough in its activities and there was no dedicated administrator for MUP. The issue of adopting the dual roles of observer and minute-taker meant that I had to move between 'multiple selves' (Coffey 1999) and write two versions of the interaction, a set of notes for the partnership and my observations as a researcher. This was challenging, though in practice not difficult as some members of the Board talked at length about issues that did not need recording in the minutes, hence giving me space to write observations as researcher. Furthermore, it had the advantage of allowing me to make copious notes without arousing any suspicion as two of these meeting were of relatively small groups (4-6 people) in which taking notes became much more noticeable than in earlier meetings which had been attended by 17-30 people. As I was always given copies of all papers discussed at the meetings, and hence treated as a member of MUP, I could cross reference to the papers and hence take notes rather than attempt verbatim records of the interaction.

By this stage in the fieldwork most members of MUP had forgotten that I was a researcher who was observing and recording their behaviour and interaction and regarded me instead as a fellow member of the partnership. I was often consulted about the progress of the partnership's activities and projects as members felt I had a more accurate picture of what was going on, as illustrated in the exchange below from a MUP Board meeting held in 2001:

Stephen:... so what's Right Track? *[turning to me, JD]*...You probably know more about it than we do...*[other Board members nodding in agreement]*

JD: Right Track is a project funded by HEFCE to widen participation in higher education and specifically targets learners in community settings rather than college environments...there's been some slippage with timescales but they are beginning to recruit learners now...

Stephen: I find it hard to keep track of all these projects we're involved in...

Helen: *[nodding]* Me too...they're so many going on...

[others indicating agreement through non-verbal communication including nods, glances and 'um']

(Observation 5, 17/5/01)

I was included in the group and in the shared sense of trust amongst a group that Field and Spence (2000) refer to in their definition of social capital. In June 2001, I was asked to lead a workshop group at a MUP action-planning day and to provide a written report of the priorities identified for action for the academic year 2001-2002. On other occasions I was asked for my view on widening participation projects and activities in other parts of the country to inform the work of MUP and almost used as consultant or fellow professional who shared the partnership's commitment to widening participation. Managing the multiple roles of researcher, minute taker and educator were challenging but as I became more of an insider I was able to access data that enabled me to probe more deeply into the basis of partnership working than would have been possible through non-participant observation. As a result of the social networks and the level of trust I developed through my contact with members of the partnership I was able to negotiate access to all the records of the partnership's work, which are discussed in Section 4.4.

Coffey (1999) argues that 'research methods texts remain relatively silent on the ways in which fieldwork affects us, and we affect the field' (Coffey 1999, p.1). During the fieldwork for this study I moved between multiple selves to gather and analyse data and in constructing my interpretation recognise that my own self has shaped the approach and the analysis. I have addressed the issue of subjectivity and potential bias through reflexivity and critical thinking about the data and used methods and procedures that are well established for researching social phenomena. By using multi-methods to carry out the research (Arsenault and Anderson 1998), systematically recording data and using techniques, such as triangulation (Mathison 1998, Cohen *et al* 2000, Stake 2000) for corroboration across data sources I have sought to strengthen the validity of the findings.

4.2   Designing the study

My approach to designing the study began by identifying the purposes of the enquiry through the formulation of research questions. Some researchers may interpret this as a hangover from positivism but I find research questions a useful tool in shaping and focusing the planning and implementation of a study. The questions, given in the introduction to the thesis and in Table 4 on the next page, do not reveal the messiness of the process of refining, clarifying and questioning which led to their formulation but give the reader an indication of the focus of the research. Mason's 'five important questions' (Mason 2002, p.13) were used as a tool to work out the essence of the enquiry and to develop a research framework which is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Research framework

Research questions	Methods of investigation	Justification
1. Why is partnership working promoted in post-16 learning?	▪ Review of policy and literature in the field of post-16 learning	Explore policy and initiatives to increase and widen participation in post-16 learning, focusing on the need for greater participation in learning and calls for partnership working as a strategy for widening participation
2. How is partnership conceptualised and understood in policy, theory and in practice?	▪ Review of literature on partnership ▪ Observations of MUP meetings ▪ Documentary evidence of MUP activities ▪ Interviews with MUP Board ▪ Research diary	Examine the concept of partnership and the basis of relationships in partnerships as a basis for conceptualising and understanding partnership in the context of post-16 learning
3. How is the process of partnership working implemented and experienced and what sustains a partnership?	▪ Observations of MUP meetings ▪ Interviews with MUP Board ▪ Research diary	Interrogate the practice of partnership working to identify the basis of success in collaborative activities and of sustainability in a partnership

(Table adapted from Mason 2002, p.28)

Though the framework is presented as a linear table, from the various models developed to represent the research process (Hopkins 2002, Edwards and Talbot 1999) the one that most closely represents my engagement is the one developed by Blaxter *et al* which sees 'the research process as a spiral' (Blaxter *et al* 2001, p.10). I found that:

> ... the research process is not a clear-cut sequence of procedures following a neat pattern but a messy interaction between the conceptual and empirical world, deduction and induction occurring at the same time. (Bechhofer 1974, cited in Gill and Johnson 1991, p.3)

The research questions given in Table 4 are addressed through a case study of MUP.

Case study of MUP

Yin (1994) defines case study as 'an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin 1994, p.13)

This study investigates the phenomenon of partnership working; a strong thrust in policy and practice in education and other fields, as discussed in Chapter 2. The context is widening participation in post-16 learning. The phenomenon and the context are not clearly bounded but converge and mesh in the shifting landscape of post-16 learning as it copes with implementing New Labour's policies for participation in formal learning and experiences the policy thrust towards partnership working emanating from Third Way thinking, considered in Chapter 1.

Yin compares case study to other research strategies in the social sciences and argues that case study as a specific research strategy has a distinct advantage when 'a "how" or "why" question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control' (Yin 1994, p.9).

In this study how and why questions about partnership are central. The aim is to investigate the impact of contemporary policies and strategies to address educational and social disadvantage in a region that consistently performs poorly in national measures of educational achievement. My interest is in examining how policy as espoused is reflected in policy as implemented and policy as experienced (Evans and Heinz 1994). More specifically, it is to find out if partnership is a strategy that works in widening participation in post-16 learning and in research terms to make a

contribution to understanding the basis of sustainability in partnerships. Though partnerships are proliferating in the post-16 landscape, the concept of partnership and the process of partnership working remain under-researched (Stuart 2002). My goal is to obtain a deep and rich understanding of the concept and practice of partnership through an in-depth study of partnership working in one partnership to gain the type of qualitative insight that would not be possible through other strategies such as a survey of partnerships or a comparative study of two or more partnerships.

Yin distinguishes between different kinds of case studies along two dimensions, in terms of the number of cases; single or multiple, and in terms of the purpose of the study; exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. This research focuses on a single case and is both exploratory and explanatory as it seeks to uncover the basis of sustained partnership through an analysis of partnership working. It explores the implementation of partnership working through observations of interactions in partnership meetings and investigates the basis of partnership through in-depth interviews with the actors involved in MUP. I have not found the distinctions in Yin's typology straight forward, as the boundaries between exploration and explanation are not neat. However, the typology is useful in helping to maintain focus on the research questions as there is the danger that because the method seeks a holistic understanding the researcher loses sight of the purpose of the study as it is 'difficult to know where 'context' begins and ends' (Blaxter *et al* 2001, p.73).

Crafting the methodology

Mason (2002) points out that qualitative research 'is not a unified set of techniques or philosophies' (p.2) but that it has grown out of a range of disciplines and traditions.

My approach draws on a number of traditions including ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Coffey 1999, Denzin and Lincoln 2000) for observation of partnership working, grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Hutchinson 1988) for inductive theorisation of partnership and discourse analysis for interpreting the communicative meaning of verbal interaction in meetings (Samra-Fredericks 2000), interviews and conversations. This made the process of research interesting but also messy and unpredictable.

The main methods used for the fieldwork were observations and interviews, with documentary evidence used to support the analysis and interpretation of partnership working. These methods are discussed in more detail in Section 4.4. I also kept a research diary (Silverman 2000) which facilitated interpretation of the data and the development of a conceptual framework that was grounded in the empirical data in the sense that it was 'based on and connected to the context-dependent observations and perceptions of the social scene' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, quoted in Crabtree and Miller 1992, p.27). My inductive approach to theory building was assisted by reflective diary entries which helped me to analyse, question and relate data to other studies and the wider literature. I used the diary to record my reflections, interpretations and decisions about the meaning of data and to log informal conversations with project co-ordinators, tutors and learning advisors which provided further insights into the context of the collaborative activities of MUP and the functioning of the partnership. This also included field notes of informal conversations with members of the partnership board, e.g. before and after the formal meetings, and during action planning days when I was more of a participant observer than an observer of partnership working.

My approach generated rich data for analysing the basis of partnership and has uncovered complexities and an insight into levels of partnership which surveys, such as evaluations of lifelong learning partnerships (Rodger *et al* 2001, Ramsden *et al* 2004) cannot reach. This is not to claim that one type of approach is superior to the other but to indicate the different perspectives revealed from using alternative methodologies and to recognise the polyvocality of research (Coffey 2001).

Reliability, validity and triangulation

This study provides an interpretation of partnership which is grounded in three years of fieldwork and is illuminated by the perspectives of senior managers and practitioners who have worked in partnership for over five years and continue to see a need for partnership working to widen participation in post-16 learning. Stake (2000) points out that in the study of a single case 'the search for particularity competes with the search for generalizibilty' but argues that 'generalization should not be emphasised in all research' (Stake 2000, p.439). This study does not seek to provide generalisations about partnership but an insight into a particular form of partnership working to contribute to understandings and theorisations of the concept in the context of post-16 learning. As an interpretation of a particularity (Stake 1995) it offers an insight into how external factors, such as government policy and initiatives, impact in the field of educational practice and how social networks underpinned by dimensions of social capital underpin and sustain partnership.

The study of a singularity also raises issues about the reliability and validity of the research findings. 'Reliability is essentially a synonym for consistency and replicability over time' (Cohen *et al* 2000, p.117). I have not sought replicability,

which is more likely in experimental research designs located in the positivist paradigm, but have aimed for consistency in research practice by observing meetings of the partnership over a three year period, using an interview schedule (Appendix 2), fully transcribing all the data and seeking validation of the interview transcripts from the interviewees. I agree with Silverman's (2001) position that 'reliability can be addressed by using standardized methods to write fieldnotes and prepare transcripts' (Siverman 2001, p.231) and have aimed for credible qualitative research.

In credible research the issue of validity is equally important. Mathison (1998) argues that 'good research practice obligates the researcher to triangulate, that is, to use multiple methods, data sources, and researchers to enhance the validity of research findings' (Mathison 1998, p.13). I have used observations, interviews and a research diary as methods of data collection and based my interpretation of partnership on data from documents and the views of senior managers, administrators and other actors in MUP. The study thus employs two out of the four basic types of triangulation identified by Denzin (1989), namely methodological triangulation and data triangulation. By using multiple methods, piloting data collection instruments and corroborating across data sources I have sought to present a valid and relatable (Bassey 1999) account of partnership working which focuses on 'learning about and from the particular case' (Stake 2000, p.444).

4.3 Access, ethics and reciprocity

The university where I work is a member of the partnership but I had no involvement or formal contact with the partnership before the start of the research. I work at a

campus located ten miles away from the base of staff who were, and are, active members of MUP. Access to the partnership for research was negotiated through a letter to the Chair of the partnership Board and agreed at the Board meeting in September 1999. In line with ethical protocols (BERA 1992) the letter assured complete confidentiality and anonymity and this was reiterated at all stages of data collection and in the reporting of findings.

The informed consent (Hughes 1999, Cohen *et al* 2000) of all senior managers interviewed as part of the study was obtained through a personal letter to each member of the partnership Board. All members who were active in the partnership during the fieldwork agreed to be interviewed. This may seem surprising but by the time access for interviews was negotiated, towards the final stages of the fieldwork, I had built up a level of trust with members of MUP Board through my observations of partnership meetings over two years. Furthermore, in many cases, either during or after the interview, I was given the names of other people in the organisation who were involved in other partnerships and widening participation projects that I could contact to assist in my research.

The interviews took place at their place of work and confidentiality and anonymity were verbally re-iterated before each audio recording started. The full transcript of the interview was sent to each person to enable her or him to comment on or clarify any aspect of the conversation. This method of respondent validation (Siverman 2001) was used to strengthen the validity of the data and to enable the voices of the interviewees to be represented as they wished. A number of senior managers, mainly female, returned their transcript marked with comments and clarifications, two of

them within a few days of receiving it. In reporting the findings I have used a number of strategies to protect the anonymity of participants in the study. All names have been changed and any reference to particular organisations removed; organisations are only identified by category and interviewees by role or by pseudonym. In the presentation of data, in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I have not linked names to interviews, referring instead to the number and date of the interview in order to protect the identify of individuals and to convey the significance of the contemporary policy context.

During the research I tried to develop and maintain an open relationship with the people who participated in the research by listening carefully to what was being said, giving them opportunities to ask questions about the research and following ethical protocols to ensure privacy and confidentiality. I endeavoured to recognise and reciprocate what Coffey refers to as 'the commitment to others' (Coffey 1999, p.160) and followed the practical advice given in research methods literature on using observations and interviews as methods of data collection (Anderson with Arsenault 1998, Mason 2002, Silverman 2000, Cohen *et al* 2000). My debt to the people who participated in the study can never be fully repaid but I tried to reciprocate in a small way by providing a summary of the findings of focus group discussions with learners to members of MUP. The members are keen to inform their strategy for widening participation in the Black Country through research-based practice and one of the organisations have since used the methods I developed for focus group interviews with learners in other locations.

4.4 Fieldwork

The fieldwork spanned the period from September 1999 to March 2002. Observations of MUP meetings and analysis of documentary evidence of the partnership's activities were spread over the whole of this period but by March 2002, I had reached what Hutchinson (1988) refers to as 'saturation' as data were confirming the interpretation I had reached but not uncovering any new insights. The interview schedule (Appendix 2) for semi-structured interviews with MUP Board was piloted in July 2000 with a member of MUP who was moving to another higher education instituion in England. No changes to the schedule were identified through the pilot. The instrument was intended to give some structure to the interaction between researcher and researched but not to inhibit discussion of any issues which may emerge during the conversations. The interviews took place between May and November 2001 across various locations in the Black Country. I discuss below the methodological issues which arose during data gathering.

Observations of partnership working

Observations of MUP meetings sought to explore and explain partnership working and so to note the maximum information the observation sheets were kept unstructured (Bell 1999). A structured observation schedule as commonly used for classroom observations (Hopkins 2002) was felt to be too limiting for observation of partnership meetings and so a thick description (Geertz 1993) was the approach adopted. Burton and Bartlett (2005) point out that 'teachers are very skilled at making observations...observation is built into their training and they have developed the appropriate skills in order to aid their teaching...'(Burton and Bartlett 2005, p.130). As a teacher and a teacher trainer I am experienced at using both structured

and unstructured observation schedules for recording observations and felt that an open approach was more appropriate for gathering data of partnership working.

Permission to observe meetings was agreed in September 1999 and I attended both full partnership meetings, (MUP Board), and MUP Executive Group meetings over nearly three years. It was normal practice to hold three meetings of each group per academic year and meetings were held at different locations across the Black Country as each organisation represented on MUP Board hosted a meeting in rotation. I attended a total of nine meetings, six MUP Board meetings and three executive meetings, as some meetings in 2001 were cancelled and I was not able to attend two meetings due to other professional commitments.

I started observation of meetings as a non-participant observer and drew on ethnographic approaches (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Samra-Fredericks 2000) and discourse analysis (Coulthard 1992, Marshall 1998) to record my observations. As a person with a grounding in discourse, text and conversational analysis, I am acutely aware of the role of non-verbal communication and context in conveying communicative meaning (Brown and Yule 1983, Halliday and Hasan 1976). Pauses, silences, nods, smiles, avoiding eye contact, looking at the floor and discourse fillers, such as um, erm, aha, can convey as much meaning as articulate speech, particularly in meetings. Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000) point out that:

> Even studies based on direct interviews employ observational techniques to note body language and other gestural cues that lend meaning to the words of the persons being interviewed. (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000, p.673)

For these reasons, I decided to note features of non-verbal communication in observations of MUP meetings, as well as in the interviews with members of the partnership, and to take them into account in interpreting the meaning of interaction.

I began each observation by drawing a seating plan that noted the gender and seating position of each person around the table (see Appendix 1, p.1). The original plan was to also record the ethnic background of Board members but I soon discovered that all were White and that one female member had a physical disability. During the meetings I made detailed notes of the verbal interaction between Board members and on the seating plan noted late arrivals and early leavers. The notes included timings, a verbatim record of what was said, as far as was possible given that I was making hand-written notes, and my observations of the non-verbal communication. After each observation I produced a word-processed thick description (Geertz 1993) using my hand-written notes and documents and papers, such as minutes of the previous meeting, agenda, discussion papers, project bids, letters, which were circulated at the meeting. I roughly followed the procedure set out by Spradley 1979 (quoted in Silverman 2001) of making short notes during the observation, expanded notes as soon as possible after each observation and keeping a provisional running record of analysis and interpretation. Appendix 1 provides an example of my thick description of one MUP meeting showing the content of the meeting and my interpretations and notes of non-verbal communication shown in italics.

As I developed and adapted my approach to gathering data I found that 'negotiating access, data collection and analysis are not...distinct phases of the research process. They overlap significantly' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p.55). During this

process I was starting to adopt 'multiple selves' (Coffey 1999) as my observations and interpretations in the field were noting aspects of the context and the interaction which other researchers may not have picked up as being significant. As a female, an Asian, a teacher, and a researcher investigating the work of a partnership of education and training providers which serves a multicultural sub-region, I was asking questions about the gender and ethnic composition of MUP and how the voice of the community it serves was represented. This was one of the questions I put to Board members in the semi-structured interviews. As a researcher I was systematically recording data but by bracketing (Crotty 1998) and moving between multiple selves I was able to analyse data to inform further fieldwork and through questioning the data begin the process of theory building.

Documentary evidence of partnership working

Observations of MUP meetings and my changing relationship with the people in the partnership enabled me to negotiate access to documents and records of partnership working. Hodder (2000) argues that documents and records 'are of importance for qualitative research because...the information provided may not be available in spoken form, and because texts endure and thus give historical insight' (Hodder 2000, p.704). By examining documents and records including minutes of meetings, newsletters, discussion papers, action plans, bids for projects and texts of speeches given at the launch of the partnership, I was able to able to track the history and development of MUP. I use citations from these documents in Chapters 5-7 as part of the research data and reference them as MUP documents e.g. MUP document 1999a. They are included in the list references used in the thesis.

This documentary evidence was most significant in enabling me to trace the early stages in the life of the partnership, as shown in Figure 3, Chapter 5, as my fieldwork started in 1999 but MUP formed in 1997. I was also able to triangulate the information from texts with data in spoken form, particularly from interviews with senior managers and the three people who took on the role of partnership administrator.

Documentary evidence of partnership working assisted my analysis and interpretation of partnership during all stages of the lifecourse of MUP and led to the idea of a lifecycle as a means of theorising partnership. Seddon *et al* (2004) also come to similar conclusions in discussing a framework for theorising partnerships. They draw on a series of empirical studies of social partnerships in Australia and argue that:

> These examples provide some evidence for the idea of a partnership lifecycle. They suggest that partnerships are actively born through the initiative of external agencies or through the coalescing of friendship or collegial community networks in response to a particular need. They also 'die' by dissipating or going out of existence.' (Seddon *et al* 2004, p.134)

These aspects of partnership were found in MUP and are discussed in Chapter 5. The idea of a partnership lifecycle might suggest that partnerships go through a number of stages and that the process is cyclical and to some extent this was found in MUP. MUP went through four stages of development as a partnership but also experienced high and low points in its power and influence in the sub-region and this is best captured through the concept of the lifecourse. The peaks and troughs in the lifecourse of MUP are considered in Chapter 6.

Interviews with MUP Board members

Observations and documentary evidence of partnership working influenced the final questions for interviews with MUP Board members. Interviews are 'the most commonly used method in qualitative research' (Mason 2002, p.62) and semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provided sufficient focus for exploring the research questions but provided enough flexibility for in-depth discussions with individuals (Cohen *et al* 2000). These 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1984, p.102) were held with eighteen managers working at executive level in organisations providing post-16 education and training. Interviews were planned to last about forty-five minutes but the actual time ranged from forty to seventy-five minutes. The sample included all the founding members of the partnership and those invited to represent other constituencies of provider as the partnership grew and aspired to represent all providers of post-16 learning in the Black Country.

The interviews enabled me to experience the ethos of the institution and meet senior managers on their home territory as most were held in the interviewee's office. This was quite revealing and where possible I made a point of walking around the colleges and private training providers I visited and informally spoke to staff and students. I felt that by 'walking the ground' (Blaxter 1999) I was better able to experience the organisational culture and interpret the rhetoric and reality of policies and initiatives that managers had talked about in the interviews.

Visiting the organisations that were members MUP not only added to the richness of my data but also proved to be significant in data analysis as I found that my interpretation of some individuals changed as a result of meeting them in their office

and made me question the interpretation I had formed from my observations of them in Board meetings. One particular example highlights the dilemma this raised, which is similar to those discussed by Acker *et al* (1991) in their study of women based on interviews. The example relates to a female college principal.

During Observation 4, (29/9/00), I noted that Gillian appeared to be very tough based on interpretations of her contributions to the discussion, body language, dress, manner and reactions to others. She was dressed in a dark business suit, came over as very business-like and seemed to lack toleration of others wittering on as she even closed her eyes for a few minutes. However, when I went to interview her at her college my perception of her as a person changed quite markedly. After the interview, (Interview 5, 11/5/01), I interpreted her as a friendly, committed and likeable person. Her dress, a printed blouse over a polo neck with dark trousers, was much more causal and she was genuinely interested in the issues we talked about, though concerned about ethics as a previous researcher had failed to maintain the anonymity of the college in reporting research findings. This example highlights the dilemma for the researcher in judging which interpretation of Gillian is valid. My view, like that of Acker *et al* (1991), is that both interpretations are valid as each was made on the basis of the information available to the researcher at that time. The example illustrates the need to corroborate across data sources and to seek confirmation from the data but also reveals the different multiple selves which Gillian may adopt as an executive and as a person.

4.5 Data analysis and interpretation

In analysing and interpreting the data I have drawn on grounded theory both during the fieldwork, as indicated in the previous discussion, and in the more concentrated stage of data analysis following the completion of the interviews. Though I have not followed exactly the stages of iterative theory building and testing as developed by Glaser and Strauss (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Hutchinson 1988) my interpretation is 'derived from data' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p.12) and I have used the analytic procedures associated with a grounded approach to code and categorise the data.

The interview transcripts were analysed using open and axial coding to identify and confirm the themes and concepts that emerged to explain the basis of partnership. This included identifying the characteristics of different levels of partnership along a continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership and emerged from comparing the concepts in the literature on partnership with the evidence from empirical data of partnership working as found in MUP.

An audio typist had transcribed the tapes but I checked the accuracy and the authenticity of each transcription by listening to each recording several times and adding the discourse features that the typist had missed out. This included pauses, hesitations, fillers used as thinking devices by the speaker and aspects of stress and intonation that gave emphasis to aspects of speech which all contributed to the meaning of the discourse but which had not been captured by the typist. This was a very time consuming process as it involved listening repeatedly to each segment of the discourse to ensure an accurate record of the interaction but it enabled me to become very familiar with the transcripts and to revisit the interviews which had

been conducted 4-6 months earlier. The final versions of the transcripts were then sent to MUP Board members for checking and confirmation of the content.

I considered the potential of a computer assisted analysis of the data through a software package such as Ethnograph, NUD*IST or ATLAS. ti. I attended workshops on the use of these packages and researched their potential for enhancing my analysis through a survey of literature and the developers' websites, and discussions with experienced researchers who had used NUD*IST. However, I came to the conclusion that a computer assisted analysis would not add significantly to a manual analysis as when using NUD*IST for example, the categories to search for are still determined by the researcher and all that the package seemed to offer was a speedier way to cut and paste the data (Bathmaker 2002). The perception that a computer assisted analysis may be more 'objective' or more rigorous than a manual one did not hold and as by this stage I had 18 interview transcripts to code and categorise rather than 50-100, I decided to carry out a manual analysis.

During the fieldwork I had used the constant comparative method and questioning to identify themes that emerged from observations to explain partnership working and in the analysis of interviews I was seeking confirmation and elaboration of the themes and their connections to a conceptual framework. In this process I found that:

> Field-workers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves and then to their significant others, and then to the public. (Denzin 1998, p.317)

By sharing the themes emerging from fieldwork with researchers and practitioners at research seminars and conferences (Dhillon 2001a; 2001b; 2002) I was able to identify theoretical constructs which informed my analysis and interpretation of the story in MUP. I was engaged in untangling what Geertz (1993) refers to as 'the webs of significance' (Geertz 1993, p.5) in my search for meaning.

My analysis of the interview transcripts used a systematic procedure of cross-checking to corroborate interpretations from observations and documentary evidence with data from interviews. The layout of the transcripts was adjusted to facilitate open coding by numbering the lines and increasing the margins. A line-by-line analysis of each transcript generated *in vivo* codes (Hutchinson 1988), e.g. individuals frequently use 'collaboration', 'co-operation', 'joined-up thinking', 'sharing ideas', ' sharing good practice', 'working together', 'doing things together', 'added value' to talk about the benefits of being a member of MUP. These terms correlated to observational data where people had used similar words to discuss the role and function of the partnership at a Board meeting (Observation 3, 7/7/00). The same vocabulary is found in a discussion paper produced by the Chair of the partnership in July 2000 (MUP 2000a). Through this process of coding I was able to identify and annotate the themes in the transcripts and compare and confirm with themes from observational and documentary data.

After an initial coding of the transcripts I carried out an audio analysis as a written text fails to capture the richness of the interaction. For this process I was able to also use notes taken during interviews where I had jotted pertinent aspects of the interviewee's body language and my rough interpretations of categories and concepts.

Listening to the tapes, scrutinising the transcripts and referring to notes taken during the interviews enabled me to construct a richer and more careful interpretation than working from written transcripts alone.

By making the process and the methods used to study partnership working open to scrutiny, I provide a basis for others to judge the validity and relatibility (Bassey 1999) of the case study which lies at the heart of this study. The following chapters present the fieldwork data which forms the empirical evidence on which my interpretation and theorisation of partnership is based. They draw together data from observations of MUP meetings, documentary evidence of partnership working, interviews with MUP Board members and other actors in the partnership and my research diary from 1999-2002.

Chapter 5 presents the longitudinal perspective of the study in terms of the history and development of MUP and the stages in its development as a partnership in the sub-region. Chapter 6 explores partnership working during two very different stages in the lifecourse of MUP. The chapter compares a peak (a period of expansion) with a trough (a period of ambivalence) and considers power differentials and the roles and relative contributions of the participating organisations and individuals. Chapter 7 presents senior managers' perspectives of partnership.

Chapter 5

The lifecourse of Midlands Urban Partnership

This chapter presents the story of the lifecourse of MUP using the four stages in its development as a partnership that were identified through the fieldwork. These stages were shaped by both external factors, such as policy imperatives and initiatives to widen participation in post-16 learning and by internal factors, such as the values of the actors and their commitment to MUP. As mentioned in the previous chapter, partnerships tend to have a marked beginning and may 'die' after a certain period of time, representing evidence of a partnership lifecycle (Seddon *et al* 2004). MUP experienced four stages of development in its life as a partnership which resembled a partnership lifecycle but also represented a lifecourse in that there were high and low points, or peaks and troughs, in its power and influence in the sub-region. This chapter focuses on the history and development of the partnership over five years and the next compares partnership working during two stages in its lifecourse, a peak and a trough.

5.1 The Black Country

The Black Country sub-region, which is made up of four boroughs, provides the local landscape for the work of the partnership. The sub-region has been scarred by the consequences of industrial decline and contains pockets of severe economic and social deprivation, shown by national statistical comparisons:

> Sandwell is one of the 10 most deprived boroughs in England, while Wolverhampton hits 11 of the 12 indicators for deprivation and Walsall 10 of the 12. Dudley ranks 110th but contains within it pockets of great disadvantage. (Office for National Statistics 1999, p. 69)

It is located in a region where levels of educational achievement are lower than national averages:

> The workforce in the West Midlands is less qualified than the workforce nationally. On almost all standard indicators of education and vocational attainment the West Midlands is the poorest performer among the English regions. It is 4% below the national average for adults who have NVQ 4 or higher qualifications. (Advantage West Midlands 1999, p. 28)

In national comparisons of educational achievement the four boroughs regularly occupy the lower positions in league tables and in measures of skills and competencies a higher proportion of adults have poorer skills than the national average (Office for National Statistics 2001). The NETTS figures are correspondingly low, e.g. 20% of 15-year-old males in Sandwell and Wolverhampton gained 5 GCSE passes, while Sandwell and Walsall were included as two of 'the worst performing regions' in respect of Lifetime Target 1. Basic Skills Agency Benchmark Statistics show that Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton all have numeracy and literacy levels significantly below the national average (Basic Skills Agency 2001).

The statistics paint a bleak picture and show the necessity for action in addressing the levels of disadvantage. Statistical comparisons such as these need to be interpreted with caution however, as they can lead to stereotypical assumptions about people living in such apparently 'underachieving and disadvantaged' areas despite the sometimes exceptional achievements of individuals which match those of individuals living in more affluent regions. The attitudes associated with this type of structural stereotyping can pose additional barriers to the opportunities available to individuals through self-fulfilling prophecies and low teacher expectations and so further

perpetuate the cycle of underachievement. Thus the statistics need to be interpreted with care but they do indicate the proportion of people who need support from government and non-government agencies in addressing disadvantage.

Policymakers and practitioners view participation in formal learning as key to addressing disadvantage although, as discussed in Chapter 1, the perspectives of national governments, international organisations and agencies, academics and adult educators emphasise different benefits of post-16 learning. In New Labour's policy, which is the backdrop to this study, a key responsibility of government is 'to promote the active development of human capital through its core role in the education system' (Giddens 1998, p.47). Chapter 1 has shown how New Labour places particular emphasis on widening participation in learning and partnership working as strategies for addressing economic and social disadvantage. The assumption that such strategies can tackle disadvantage is contested, as critics argue that the levels of poverty, deprivation and disadvantage found in some regions, such as parts of the Black Country, is due to structural inequalities which require more concerted political action. However, for the actors in MUP the emphasis in New Labour's policy resonates with their values as individuals as well as representing the policy context in which they have to work.

The members of MUP are all involved in developing human capital through their role in the provision of education, training and information and guidance services for post-16 learners. In a paper produced to discuss their role in the Black Country, they state that they are a grouping of providers and associated agencies that 'work together to raise the educational profile of the region, widen participation and

enhance access and progression' (MUP document 2000a, p.2). Through collaborative working they aim to create 'co-ordinated, accessible educational provision...which will in time enhance the economic profile and the social aspirations of the communities within the four Boroughs' (University of Wolverhampton 1999, Appendix A). They call themselves a 'partnership' though the term is not defined and engage in the process of partnership working for a relatively sustained period of time, an indicator of their commitment to MUP.

5.2   Members of MUP

MUP is a partnership of institutions, organisations and individuals. The membership includes six further education colleges, one sixth form college, a regional university, four Training and Enterprise Councils, (TECs), and representatives of Employment Services, Private Training Providers, Adult Education Services, Prospects Careers Service, the Open College Network of the West Midlands and the Workers Educational Association. Changes to the membership and differences in levels of commitment amongst the actors occurred during the five years that I tracked the lifecourse of the partnership but despite tensions arising from power differentials and conflicting demands on participating organisations and individuals the partnership managed to sustain itself. The tensions and conflicts that affected partnership working are explored in Section 5.3 of this chapter, which presents the four stages in the development of the partnership, and also in Chapter 6 which focuses on comparing a peak with a trough in the lifecourse of MUP.

Though MUP is a partnership of institutions and organisations, it is also a partnership of individuals as in practice partnership working is implemented by representatives

of member organisations and shaped by the relative contributions of the people involved. The research data, presented in this chapter and in the next, reveals the key role of some individuals in forming, expanding and sustaining MUP. The commitment and contributions of six key people, discussed in Chapter 6, led to 30 organisations and 134 individuals across the Black County (MUP document 1999a) being involved in collaborative activities associated with the partnership. The most significant personal contribution came from Margaret who was asked by the founding members to take on the role of partnership broker and chaired MUP Board for three years, from 1997-2000, leading the partnership during its formation and expansion. The contributions of key people, including Margaret, are discussed in the next chapter.

The commitment and contribution of members to MUP, both as organisations and as individuals, is a strong theme in the research data. Commitment is not easy to demonstrate but during the fieldwork I kept a record of attendance at partnership meetings both by organisations and by individuals, which provides an indication of commitment. For each meeting that I observed I recorded the names of the individuals attending and the organisation that they represented on a seating plan (see Appendix 1), later cross-checking my notes with official records of the meetings as given in minutes of meetings (MUP document 1999h; 2001b). This information was used to produce a log of attendance at MUP meetings by organisations from 1999-2002, presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Log of attendance at MUP meetings by organisations from 1999-2002

Category of partner	1/10/99	12/5/00	7/7/00	29/9/00	17/5/01	8/6/01	29/6/01	12/7/01	1/3/02
College 1	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
College 2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
College 3	✓	✓	✓	✓					
College 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
College 5	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓
College 6	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓
College 7	✓	✓				✓			✓
University	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
TEC 1	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
TEC 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
TEC 3	✓	✓	✓	✓					
TEC 4	✓	✓				✓			
Prospects	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
PTP		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
WEA		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
OCN	✓	✓		✓					
Adult Ed	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Other	✓	✓		✓			✓		

Key

TEC: Training and Enterprise Council

Prospects: careers and guidance service

PTP: Private training providers

WEA: Worker's Educational Association

OCN: Open College Network

Other: invited guests/speakers

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As Table 5 shows, representatives from three colleges (College 1, College 2, College 4), the university, TEC 2 and Prospects regularly attended all MUP meetings from October 1999-March 2002, only missing one meeting of the partnership during the two and a half year period. During the expansion of MUP, members missed no more than one meeting with the exception of College 7 and TEC 4. The pattern of attendance for College 5, College 6 and College 7 is interesting as it shows that they kept an interest in the work of MUP but were not as strongly committed to the network as some of the other members. Two organisations: College 3 and TEC 3, drifted away from the partnership after the first year, attending all meetings until September 2000 but none after that time. This was due to changes in organisational focus and the personal circumstances of the individual actors involved in the partnership. In the case of College 3, the organisation became much more involved in borough-based partnerships and so drifted away from the sub-regional partnership whilst in the case of TEC 3 the person representing the organisation retired during the restructuring of the TECs into the local LSC.

The log of attendance at partnership meetings is a crude indicator as it does not reveal the full complexity of trying to establish commitment amongst actors, a qualitative rather than a quantitative entity. The log is used to infer organisational commitment to MUP amongst the participating institutions and organisations. The commitment of individuals was less easy to track in this way as some institutions had to send different people to represent them at MUP meetings due to competing demands from other organisational commitments. I noticed this early in my observations of MUP meetings as it is recorded in my observation notes of the second meeting I observed:

9.25   Some members were standing and chatting informally over coffee while others were sitting round the table and looking through the papers for the meeting. Some individuals were attending a MUP meeting for the first time (representing their organisation on behalf of a member of MUP Board who was unable to attend this meeting due to other commitments). They were welcomed and introduced to members of MUP Board informally by the Chair before the formal start of the meeting.

9.30   The Chair formally opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and reminding them that I was attending as an observer as I was researching widening participation in lifelong learning...

(Observation 2, 12/5/00)

Individuals who were 'standing in' for MUP Board members at meetings had a different level of commitment to the partnership and sometimes less power, as the assistant principal of a college often attended in place of the principal and took more of a reporting back role than a full participatory role in the decision making process at the Board meeting. This influenced the nature and effectiveness of partnership working, as shown in the comparison of a peak and a trough in the lifecourse of MUP in Chapter 6.

5.3   The four stages in the lifecourse of MUP

In presenting the stages in the lifecourse of the partnership I draw on the concept of visual mapping (Paulston 1997) as it offers an 'open space for all perspectives' (Paulston 1997, p.117) and a visual image can transcend the constraints of verbal discourse. By trying to paint pictures that illuminate the development of MUP, I endeavour to provide a visual insight into the context of its work and the structures and networks which underpinned its ability to sustain itself 'through thick and thin'.

These are discussed using the framework of the lifecourse of MUP, represented in Figure 3 below. During this five-year period the partnership grew from an embryonic grouping that formed in 1997, to a complex network of organisations and individuals during 1998-2000, with a subsequent period of ambivalence in 2001, followed by re-invigoration in 2002.

Figure 3: The four stages in the lifecourse of MUP

Voluntary projects and activities

Debate about identity and future role of MUP

MUP action planning

2000

2001

Stage 3: Ambivalence

Managing externally funded projects

Stage 2: Expansion

MUP
Aug 1997 -
Aug 2002

Links to LSC

Stage 4: Re-invigoration

Network of 30 organisations representing providers of post 16 learning in the Black Country

1999

2002

Stage 1: Formation

1997

Summer 1997 embryonic grouping

March 1998 formal launch by Helena Kennedy

Fieldwork (observation of meetings, analysis of documentary evidence, interviews with MUP Board members

LSC = Local Learning and Skills Council

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Stage 1: formation and early development

MUP grew out of a network of individuals prompted by a series of events during the summer of 1997. The major catalyst for bringing the key actors together was a request to colleges from the Further Education Funding Council, (FEFC), set out in FEFC Circular 97/23, to form a partnership to develop collaborative widening participation strategies (MUP document 1997a). This was in response to the Kennedy agenda as one of the recommendations of the committee on widening participation in further education was the promotion of partnership approaches to stimulate demand for learning locally (Kennedy 1997). One of the key individuals that initiated the formation of MUP described the report as 'an absolutely seminal work' in the development of the further education sector (Interview 5, 11/5/01). The individuals who instigated the formation of the partnership already had existing links with each other's organisations but the opportunity to bid for funding focused their attention and prompted them into action. Principals from two FE colleges contacted a senior manager at a university seeking assistance with the establishment of a partnership:

> It [MUP] started when Stephen phoned Margaret as he had been sent a circular by FEFC. Margaret is also a governor at X and was contacted by Gillian who said we can't start it ...we need some form of mediation ...an independent without a vested interest and so approached Margaret.
> (Interview 1, 31/5/00)

A Chair who was trusted and perceived by the various actors as a neutral broker was to be crucial in the formation and successful operation of MUP. The individual needed to facilitate the shift from competition to co-operation in the local education and training environment where the legacy of competition was still evident. As Wylie (1999) observed 'having undergone a period of intense competition after

incorporation the FE colleges did not trust each other sufficiently to let any one take the lead' (Wylie 1999, p.2).

Although the government was promoting partnership in post-16 learning, as in other public sector services (Balloch and Taylor 2001, Glendinning *et al* 2002), on the ground 'the battles of the colleges' (Interview 12, 14/8/01) and the 'far too many personal vested interests' (Interview 10, 27/6/01) remained significant barriers to any collaborative activity. The incorporation of colleges in 1992 and the new funding methodology (Ainley and Bailey 1997) had led to bitter competition between colleges necessitated by the marketisation of the FE sector under the Conservative government. The climate of mistrust remained even though the change of government to Labour in 1997 had brought a policy shift from competition to collaboration, as discussed in Chapter 1. The challenges of moving towards collaboration did not deter the key actors in MUP, however, as 'for the first time it [MUP] had Black Country providers working together instead of at each other's throats' (Interview 10, 27/6/01).

The embryonic grouping of three key individuals drew in representatives of other education and training organisations in the Black Country to form the core of MUP (MUP document 1997b). The frantic pace of activity which led to the formation of the partnership and an indication of the challenges to partnership working are revealed by Kelly, the administrator who was heavily involved in the first year of the partnership's development:

> It was a hellish meeting to organise... I was sitting here in July ringing up all these college principals during the summer when no one is around

...academics are on holiday and we had to get the bid in ...we had to achieve a quick turn around and overcome two major barriers ...one the barrier of talking to each other [colleges] and the other that nobody trusted their neighbour... (Interview 1, 31/5/00)

The first meeting, an exploratory meeting hosted by the university, was mainly attended by college principals and held on 14 July 1997 (MUP document 1997b). Within two weeks, other organisations and agencies were invited to the second meeting and by 19 August, only a month since the initial call for action, a full consortium with representation from all the appropriate agencies was formed (MUP document 1997c). Kelly reflected how they 'moved quickly... within a month launching a recognised partnership in order to get funding' (Interview 1, 31/5/00).

The developing grouping gave itself a name, [not MUP at this stage], and the pace and shape of activity was driven by the FEFC's requirements for funding widening participation projects. The catalyst for all this activity was the need to write a bid (MUP document 1997a, Interview 1) and at this point in its development the actors came together specifically for bidding purposes but this was not the sole reason for the formation or subsequent expansion of MUP.

The application for funding submitted to FEFC in September 1997 stated:

> The purpose of the Consortium is to establish and facilitate collaboration between its members and other agencies in order to widen participation in education and training within the Black Country Boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. (BCC 1997, p.2)

The focus of the bid was three action research projects to be located in different Black Country boroughs and the development of a strategic plan aimed at increasing participation in post-16 education and training by under-represented groups (BCC

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1997). The Black Country is culturally and ethnically diverse with minority groups

constituting between 5% (Dudley) and 25% (Sandwell) of the population (Black

Country Consortium 2000, Annex 1) and the projects aimed to work with African-

Caribbean males, Bangladeshi women and White adults from social classes IV and

V. They were identified as the most disadvantaged and socially excluded groups in

the four boroughs with individuals from these backgrounds most likely to be non-

participants in education and training (BCC 1997, CIHE 1997, Woodrow *et al* 1998).

The process of writing the bid had brought the group of senior managers together in a

very productive collaborative relationship, in the words of one of the participants:

> This was the honeymoon period. There was a genuinely positive
> commitment to working together and early in the process it was agreed that
> the partnership would stay together whatever the outcome of the bid because
> there was such a need to address the common problems of the sub-region
> with common solutions. (Wylie 1999, p.2)

The bid from MUP to FEFC for funding as a partnership was unsuccessful but for

various reasons the actors decided to stay together:

> The partnership came together specifically for funding but that bid failed.
> Stephen said now we have started talking why don't we keep talking...so we
> started to draw up a network, allocated an administrator and started data
> gathering. (Interview 1, 31/5/00)

The group of managers gave themselves a new name, MUP, having discovered that

the name they had used to describe themselves in the FEFC bid was also being used

by a different partnership in the region (MUP document 1997d, Wylie 1999). The

other partnership was funded through the single regeneration budget (SRB) and

although it had an interest in education and training was not solely focused on post-

16 learning.

The synergy which marked the first few months of the life of MUP was driven by government policy (MUP document 1997a) but other reasons for collaboration were evident even at the early stages and became much more explicit as MUP expanded into a strong and active sub-regional voice.

Stage 2: expansion

In 1998, the partners, (the word they chose to describe themselves) organised a high profile launch using their social connections to attract a national figure, Helena Kennedy, author of the report into widening participation in FE (Kennedy 1997) to formally launch MUP (MUP document 1998a). Kelly recalls the level of activity vividly:

> It was frantic at times...government changes to national policy meant we had to move quickly...Helena Kennedy, an old mate of Paul Smith[1], came to launch the partnership in 1998... it was a huge bash at the Science Park ... a conference was held...we used the word 'partners' rather than members and they all signed a memorandum of co-operation. (Interview 1, 31/5/00)

At the formal launch on 23 March 1998, Helen, the FE college principal who delivered the welcome speech proclaimed:

> We are very proud to have Baroness Kennedy here with us today to witness our signatures of this partnership agreement... 'Learning Works' has now been underlined by the Government's Green Paper 'The Learning Age'. So today, we are also pledging ourselves to work to bring about the 'Renaissance in Learning' which is the Government's vision for a new Britain. This partnership is not a 'virtual one' it is very real. It is also an over arching one. (MUP document 1998b, p.1).

She concluded that by working together the partners could translate the vision of a self-perpetuating learning society into reality (MUP document 1998b). At national

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[1] Paul Smith is a fictitious name

and international levels this was a period of intense policy interest in notions of lifelong learning and the learning society, discussed in Chapter 1. The British government's vision had been articulated in the publication of *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998) and it had started a research programme, the ESRC funded *Learning Society Programme*, to investigate lifelong learning in the UK (Coffield 1997; 1999; 2000). The launch of MUP indicated how the vision espoused in national policy fired the imagination of individuals in the local landscape of the Black Country and brought them together to take action to widen participation in post-16 learning. The formal launch of MUP was attended by forty-one senior managers representing educational institutions, training organisations and other stakeholders in post-16 learning in the Black Country together with nine students representing different member institutions (MUP document 1998c).

The actors set about working towards this vision with energy and enthusiasm. Key people saw partnership working as an opportunity to work in new ways with other organisations and individuals and there was an element of hope in this aspiration, as indicated in the comments of Gillian, another FE college principal:

> ...many of us who'd worked in further education for many years prior to incorporation in 1992 remembered, with a mix of positives and negatives, other ways of going about things and ways of regarding other educational institutions, not merely as hostile competitors...and it was very much like a breath of fresh air after the early atmosphere of the '90s...we wanted to try a different way of doing things...and the other thing about the Helena Kennedy thinking...was reminding us that at the heart of the FE mission was something very specific about tackling disadvantage and promoting social inclusion and those aspirations were not part of the government prior to '97, they were not part of the previous government's priorities.
> (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

This optimism was surprising given the tensions arising from the marketisation of education, mentioned earlier, and the challenges of partnership working which Mark, a member of MUP Board articulated as:

> I think there's a rhetoric about partnership you know talking about partnership is easy, making it happen is much much harder...and I think MUP has struggled to get beyond the rhetoric but I think all partnerships do. (Interview 2, 4/7/00).

Despite the challenges and tensions the energy and activity that marked this stage of the partnership's development is captured in the comments of Kelly:

> By August 1999 the partnership had expanded beyond belief...HEFCE and FEFC had approved MUP and given money for projects...I was impressed with the commitment shown ...MUP is a provider voice, a forum...a lobbying forum to LSC and has a future tied to funding requirements...the three year HEFCE project...Ufi for two years...Ufi is a big driver for colleges. (Interview 1, 31/5/00)

My observation notes of the MUP Board meeting held in October 1999 corroborate Kelly's account as I had noted 'the air of optimism and excitement about the pace of developments at this meeting' (Observation 1, I/10/999). This optimism and excitement drove the development of links with other networks, organisations and individuals in the Black Country so that by October 1999, two years since it had formed, all constituencies with an interest or a role in post-16 provision across the sub-region were involved in MUP's collaborative activities (MUP document 1999a).

During this period of rapid expansion the members of MUP created organisational structures to manage the work of the partnership. They formed a partnership Board, MUP Board, which included representatives from all stakeholders, and a smaller

MUP Executive Group consisting of seven people drawn from representatives of the full partnership board (MUP document 2000a). The executive group was formed to act on the decisions made by the partnership, as MUP Board had become a large and unwieldy group, with 17-30 representatives attending meetings (MUP document 1999a). Other sub-groups were formed to manage projects and other collaborative activities as shown in Figure 6.
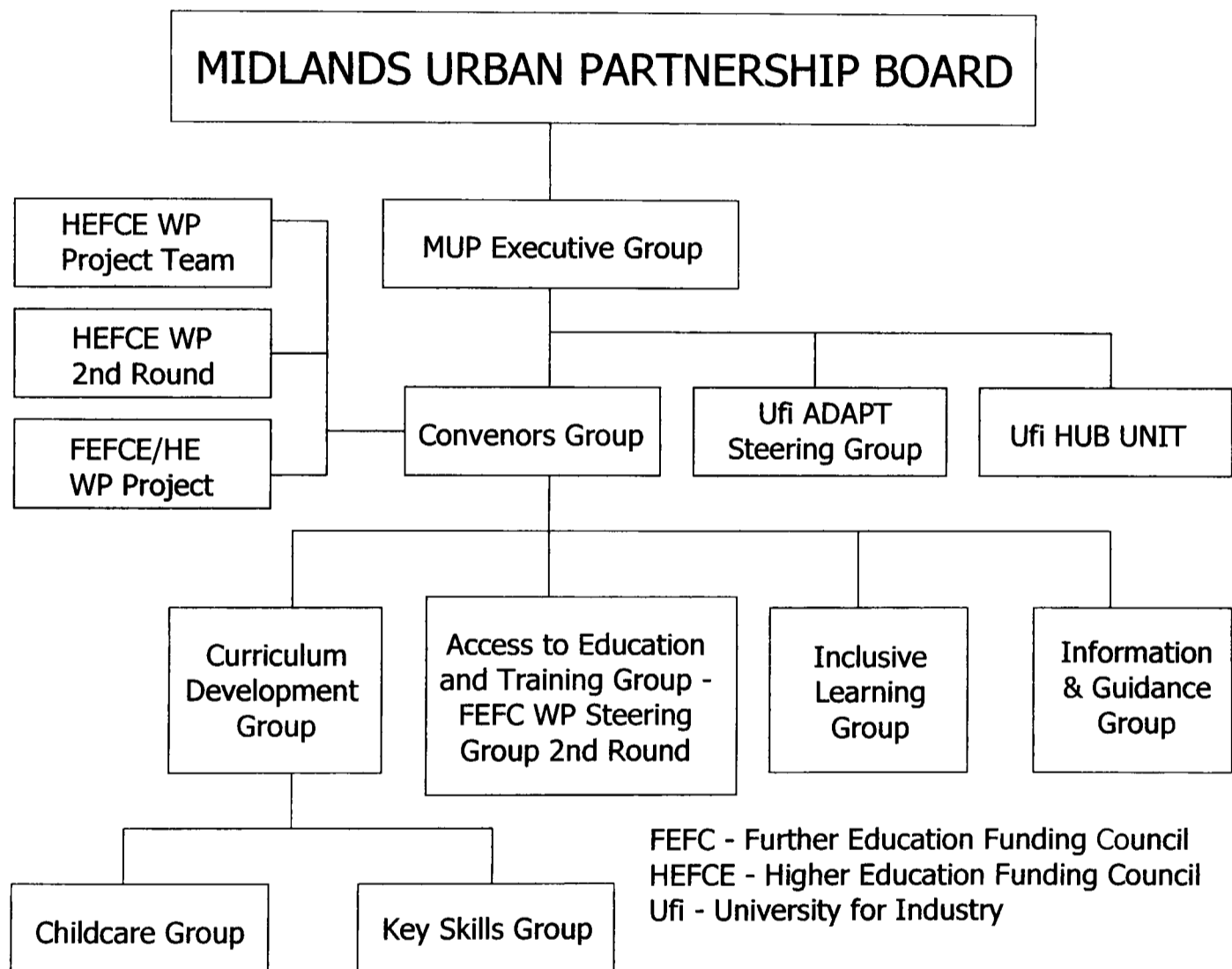
Figure 6: Organisational structures in MUP (MUP document 2000b, p.1)

Figure 6 shows the range of organisational structures developed by the partnership to manage its activities during this stage in its lifecourse. The individuals and organisations that were key to MUP's growth were involved in a variety of groups and sub-groups including MUP Board, MUP Executive group, convenors group and

steering groups for externally funded projects e.g. FEFC, HEFCE, Ufi. The convenor's group organised and participated in practitioner groups for curriculum development, access to education, inclusive learning and information and guidance.

MUP was by now a complex network of individuals and organisations that had firmly established itself in the post-16 education and training landscape in the Black Country. It managed a number of externally funded projects for widening participation in further and higher education (MUP document 1999e; 1999f; 2000d) and successfully bid to become a Learndirect hub as part of the University for Industry's (Ufi) strategy for widening participation in post-16 learning (Ufi 1999; 2004). The role of funded projects in the extension and expansion of partnership activity is examined in Chapter 6.

In addition to initiating and managing externally funded collaborative projects the members of MUP organised a range of inter-organisational projects and activities that were not funded by any agency. I refer to these as voluntary projects and activities to distinguish them from projects funded by FEFC, HEFCE and Ufi and examine their contribution to partnership working in Chapter 6. They include the practitioner groups, shown in Figure 6, set up to bring individuals from different member organisations together to work on collaborative projects. These activities extended partnership working *within* as well as *between* the multiple organisations and agencies that now constituted MUP as the individuals involved came from different levels of their respective organisations including people working at lecturer and middle manager level whilst MUP Board was composed of executives and senior managers.

The links and structures that developed as a consequence of expansion in MUP's activities led to some confusion as revealed in the text of a newsletter produced by the then administrator of the partnership:

> Within hours of taking over from Jenny I realised that the Partnership [MUP] had grown in size and complexity, groups and sub-groups, projects and bids etc. etc. etc...I decided that my first task should be to find my way around the new structure.... As well as my own self-confessed confusion, I have had some requests for clarification of the interest groups that exist and the work that is going on behalf of MUP. I hope that the outline structure below is of some use! (MUP document 2000b, p.1)

For the people that were drawn into MUP keeping track of activities was not easy due to the growth in collaborative activities and the demands on key individuals from their own institutions and organisations. As Helen, put it; 'you'll appreciate that we've all got day jobs to do and it isn't exactly easy to manage big organisations' (Interview 6, 6/6/01). Helen was involved in managing a substantial European Social Fund (ESF) project in her college as well as being involved in other partnerships in the borough where her college was situated. She was also a member of a national body for widening access to education and very active in MUP, particularly during its formation and expansion. All the members of MUP Board were senior managers with challenging roles working as college principals, directors of training, community and voluntary organisations or members of university executive. Thus MUP was a partnership of powerful people who were prepared to devote time and energy to developing this particular partnership although they were also members of many other groups, networks and partnerships in the Black Country. Gillian, a college principal who chaired MUP Executive Group for three years reflected:

I think you have to have enough momentum and pace for people to see what the added value is in this particular piece of partnership working, otherwise people lose interest and commitment ...and that's quite difficult as we were saying earlier. (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

The role of key actors, like Gillian, in managing the expansion of MUP and sustaining it despite tensions and challenges from other roles and responsibilities indicated that the reasons which kept this partnership together extended beyond pragmatic and strategic objectives. Margaret, a key actor who led the expansion of MUP commented, 'there was something which drew people together to keep coming...although partnerships were proliferating all over the place...MUP maintained itself' (Interview 9, 20/6/01). It was this 'something' that indicated the role of social capital in sustaining MUP.

The synergy, organisational structures and networks which characterised MUP's expansion were not sustained and for about a year the partnership experienced a rapid decline in its activities as it went through a period of ambivalence.

Stage 3: ambivalence

The period from September 2000-July 2001 marked a deep trough in MUP's lifecourse as a partnership. During this stage of ambivalence, tensions, ambiguity and challenges to collaboration disrupted the process of partnership working and dissipated the partnership.

In terms of process, two meetings, a MUP Board meeting to be held in January 2001 and a MUP Executive Group meeting to be held in March 2001, were cancelled. Furthermore, the meetings held in May and July 2001 were only attended by a

handful of people. Six people attended the meeting held on 17 May 2001 (Observation 5) and four people attended the one held on 12 July 2001 (Observation 8). The only organisation represented at both these meetings was College 1 (see log of attendance p..). This was partly due to a breakdown in communication, as some representatives had not received sufficient notice of the dates of the meetings whilst a few had to prioritise other commitments over attending a MUP meeting. Both these aspects are well illustrated by Andrew, a founder member, who identified some of the problems that MUP was currently experiencing and the issues that he as a college principal had to take into consideration when resolving clashes of meetings. He said:

Andrew: Erm there's a problem and of course I don't know if you're going to the meeting on Friday...

JD: Mmmm

Andrew: But a number of people including me didn't know about it now that will be the fault of some of the individuals concerned...I think whoever is now secretary to the partnership [MUP] should be more pushful in checking that people have got dates in diaries I think that is an issue erm...the clash that we have is that the Black Country Learning and Skills Council wants to have a meeting of principals...

JD: Yes

Andrew: And erm any principal that does not respond to that wants his head looking at!

JD: Yes, right

Andrew: Erm and I understand that they're trying to ensure that the LSC meeting finishes at around 10.30 so that people can go to the MUP meeting but you see there is yet another clash that one or two of us are going to a consult...a DfEE consultation event at Bristol after that so...and so one of the things I have to do this morning is making sure that this college is represented...

(Interview 10, 27/6/01)

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Andrew decided to send his assistant principal to the next MUP meeting held on 29 June 2001 (MUP document 2001b) rather than attending personally. In his interview, he commented that though MUP was still engaging in important work, for him and his organisation other priorities had emerged which needed more urgent attention. This included the formation of the LSC and the growing importance of borough-based partnerships, which are discussed in Chapter 6. Other members of the partnership corroborated Andrew's account of the stages in the development of MUP and the problems that the partnership experienced during the academic year 2000-2001 in their interviews. A few founder members confirmed that during this period though they ensured that they were represented at MUP meetings they 'delegated tasks to other people to keep the relationship going more or less' (Interview 6, 6/6/01).

There was a severe lack of focus in the partnership and meetings felt qualitatively different from earlier meetings, as indicated in the observational data below:

9.30   People tending to arrive late and not lingering over the coffee table exchanging news as they usually did. It was much quieter as there wasn't much talking going on, unlike the hub-bub of earlier meetings. There were few papers for the meeting today so members were just sitting around the table waiting for the Chair to begin the formal meeting.

10.05   Mike, project co-ordinator for the Ufi Learndirect hub, left after presenting his report as he had to be at another meeting in a different part of the Black Country at 11am.

11.25   At the end of the meeting, people did not hang around talking in little groups in the car park as they usually did but seemed in a hurry to get away. The meeting only lasted about an hour and a half instead of the usual three hours or more.

(Observation 5, 17/5/01)

Other data confirms the 'marked lack of impetus in MUP during this period and the lack of clarity about its goals' (Research diary entry July 2001). This was also observed by Helen, an FE college principal who noted on the transcript of her interview, 'at first MUP was task orientated...later it became a talking shop' (notes on transcript 6, returned 10/4/02).

During ambivalence MUP was not involved in any new initiatives, projects or major developments whilst three of the four existing externally funded projects came to an end (MUP document 2001b). The voluntary collaborative activities lost momentum and petered out. There was a breakdown in communication and information flows, as the partnership administrator, Jenny, left in June 2000 when the funding for her post came to an end. The role of Jenny in establishing and maintaining functioning networks to support partnership working is examined in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, the members engaged in an introspective debate about the future, identity and role of MUP. This debate had started early in the life of the partnership (Wylie 1999) but it re-emerged with the imminent formation of the LSC. In May 2000, a sub-group produced a discussion paper entitled *MUP: The Next Generation* (MUP 2000a). This paper began by stating:

> MUP has for the last year been concerned about its future role. However, the uncertainty around the role of Lifelong learning Partnerships and the local Learning and Skills Councils has made it difficult to address the MUP issue until now. This paper, which draws on a useful consultation with the four Learning Partnerships, lays out the framework for a change of role in the context of the emerging subregional relationships around the provision of education and training. (MUP document 2000a, p.1)

It then outlined the current commitments of the partnership (in terms of its role in managing funded projects and voluntary collaborative activities), the changes to the sub-regional context and then posed the question: *Whither the MUP?* (MUP document 2000a, p.2). This question was debated at three MUP Board meeting held during 2000-2001 (Observations 2-4) and it was finally agreed that MUP should promote itself as a 'subregional provider forum' (MUP document 2001a). The rationale for this was that as learners travelled across the boundaries of the four boroughs for post-16 education and training the members of MUP could address issues around learner needs and quality of training across the Black Country through the forum of MUP Board. This debate though challenging did actively engage all members of MUP Board but it also exposed another source of tension in the partnership. This was in relation to resourcing the costs of partnership working which is discussed in Chapter 6.

Ambiguity about its role exposed differing perceptions for engaging in MUP. Some members revealed very pragmatic reasons:

> Joint fear of the unknown is keeping the partnership together ...colleges are getting big brother...the LSC, and they want to be united...they see themselves as training providers...they need to get a voice to feed into the LSC...they're getting the LEA back in another guise...principals don't benefit...students see a benefit indirectly. (Interview 8, 12/6/01)

Others saw MUP as an alternative voice to other partnerships that they were involved with, particularly Lifelong Learning Partnerships (Partnerships Directory 2001) and borough-based initiatives which neglected the sub-regional focus. A number of individuals admitted, in informal conversations with me before and after MUP Board meetings, that they were not sure why they were still being invited but as the meetings

provided an opportunity for networking and finding out what was going on in the sub-region, they carried on coming.

This lack of clarity about the purpose and goals of the partnership was a sharp contrast to the clear articulation of the reasons for collaboration and the declarations of working to realise the vision of a Learning Society (MUP document 1998b; 2000a), evident in Stages 1 and 2 of the lifecourse of MUP. As an observer of partnership working I was increasingly coming to the conclusion that MUP would fizzle out and die during this stage of ambivalence. However, it turned out to be a much more resilient partnership than my observations suggested.

In June 2001 key individuals who were founder members of MUP held an action-planning day which served to re-invigorate the partnership and pull it out of the deep trough it had reached (MUP document 2001a). The event was instigated by one founder member and hosted by another and the aim was to produce a two-year plan of MUP activities to articulate with LSC objectives to encourage participation in learning and raise skill levels amongst post-16 learners (Observation 6, 8/6/01). The twenty-one participants, representing sixteen organisations, were enthused by the agenda and by the end of the day had generated concrete actions to form the basis of a draft action plan.

MUP seemed to have found its focus again and sought to re-invent itself as a provider forum that would establish relationships with the local LSC, which now had responsibility for funding post-16 learning. Despite this it took another six months

of behind the scenes work by key individuals for the partnership to join-up, re-invigorate itself and re-emerge as a sub-regional voice with some presence.

Stage 4: re-invigoration

After the hive of activity in June and July 2001, MUP quietened down again as key individuals were pulled back to responsibilities within their own organisations. Each organisation had to manage the implementation of the new funding framework brought in by the LSC (DfES 2001) which was placing additional demands on staff time. In interviews many principals complained about LSC staff coming into their college 'to find out what they did' (Interview 6, 6/6/01). They were exasperated by having to talk to so many LSC staff but realised that they had to co-operate with the representatives of the new funding body for post-16 learning.

Meanwhile the Black County LSC became frustrated by the incapacity of MUP to put forward the actions identified in the June 2001 planning day as a 'business plan' which the LSC could fund. Key people in the Black Country LSC, who were also members of MUP and still had an interest in its work, supported the partnership but were disheartened by the lack of practical action by the Chairs of MUP Board and Executive Group:

> ...twelve months ago I sat down with Christine and Richard [chairs of MUP]
> erm...explaining from the LSC's point of view what we were about, planning
> and funding post-16 learning...from our point of view we want them to focus
> on the four areas of learner feedback, learning needs...
> in a practical sense I don't think there's any er real executive effort to make
> things happen...(Interview 17, 6/11/01)

During his interview, Ian discussed how he remained deeply committed to MUP's vision and respected specific individuals but had reservations about the ability of the partnership to deliver:

> ...in a sense I think the problem is that it's an idea, it's a vision but turning it into reality requires, you know, people to be given a job to do in terms of making it happen...(Interview 17, 6/11/01)

As MUP was a voluntary partnership with no external funding to support the costs of partnership working, unlike statutory partnerships, there was no one whose job it was to 'make things happen'. In interviews many MUP Board members identified efficient administrative support and a Chair who could broker relationships between the different partners as vital to effective partnership working. Roger advocated the need for a secretariat:

> I think you really need a secretariat and by that I don't mean just an administrator to take the minutes and so on and circulate papers to members but a proper secretariat to ensure everyone knows what is going on, what funding opportunities are available and so no...(Interview 12, 14/8/01)

Ian argued that there was a need for a 'proper partnership co-ordinator' as running the partnership was not:

> ...a part-time, dare I say, hobby for everybody...it's a full-time job to sort out MUP, whether it's got a life and a role and to do it properly it's a full-time job...it's not you know something to do when you've a couple of hours free as a principal...it doesn't work, life doesn't work that way...
> (Interview 17, 6/11/01)

However, although the need for an efficient and effective administrator figured strongly in explaining the expansion, success and drift of collaborative activity in

MUP its resilience was rooted in something more fundamental. As one of the key actors put it:

> ...it [MUP] should have a future...it's up to the partners really...if they see value in it they will keep coming because it's a voluntary body it can voluntarily exist and succeed or voluntarily not exist... (Interview 7, 11/6/01)

The partners did see value in the partnership as they freed up time from their own organisations to work together to rejuvenate MUP. The actions planned in June 2001 did finally emerge in the form of a business plan in February 2002 (MUP document 2002a) and an administrator for MUP was appointed at the end of that month. The September 2001 meeting had been cancelled but behind the scenes key individuals had been working together to produce a draft plan which was finally sent to the Black Country LSC in February and the ideas used as the basis of a workshop sponsored by the local LSC, held on 27 March 2002, to feed into MUP's progression projects for 2001-03 (MUP document 2002b). The members also agreed a subscription of between £500- £800 per member (depending on size of organisation, MUP document 2002c).

By March 2002 MUP had established firm links with the Black Country LSC and become a subscription-based partnership with a dedicated administrator (MUP document 2002b) posed to bid for new projects including partnerships for progression, a jointly funded initiative by the LSC and HEFCE (HEFCE 2001) to widen participation and meet the target of 50% participation of 18-30 year olds in HE by 2010. The synergy evident during its expansion in 1998-2000 was again re-emerging and MUP Executive Group proposed using some funding to re-invigorate MUP by holding a policy forum involving all Board members, learning providers

and LSC representatives in October 2002 (MUP 2002c). The marked improvement in attendance at the MUP Board meeting held in July provided visible evidence of the much more active role that members were now taking in partnership activities. The key actors had successfully re-kindled interest in the partnership and it was re-emerging as a significant voice in the sub-region. One of the actors pinpointed two vital aspects of MUP's work as a partnership:

> Well, it is the only pan Black Country organisation in town...erm in the sub-region...there ain't nothing like it...so I think it's value is that it does provide that forum as a regular set of meetings and now with the attempt to work with the LSC...its other value has been that it has involved a much wider range of organisations than anything else that I've known...I think that sort of heterogeneity of membership is really important. (Interview 12,14/8/01)

Another member of MUP Board said:

> Over the past number of years I think there's been a clear benefit in terms of having a sub-regional focus rather than a parochial focus when I was involved just in X [name of borough] so I think that was helpful and also it gave the opportunity to meet people from outside X in the wider education lifelong learning field and share good practice...(Interview 17, 6/11/01)

The sub-regional focus of the partnership, its attempt to be inclusive in terms of membership and its aspiration to spread good practice in the field of lifelong learning, which at this time was widely interpreted as post-16 learning, held the actors together despite high and low points in its lifecourse. Partnership working in MUP was supported by layers of collaboration amongst the groups and sub-groups that were drawn into the partnership and social networks amongst the individuals involved. These are discussed in the next section.

5.4 Layers of collaboration and networks in MUP

The layers of collaboration and the social networks found in MUP, shown in Figures 4 and 5, draw on the use of social capital as a framework for theorising partnership, as discussed in Chapter 3. I draw on the 'collective benefit' definition of social capital which emphasises that norms and networks are capable of being used for mutual benefit (Kilpatrick *et al* 2001). I also use Field and Schuller's (2000) notion of a loose network and Trevillion's (1999) concept of network density to show in diagrammatic form the relationships amongst the organisations, agencies and individuals who participated in MUP.

Figure 4 represents the layers of collaboration and co-operation that developed through collaborative activities and social relationships amongst actors.
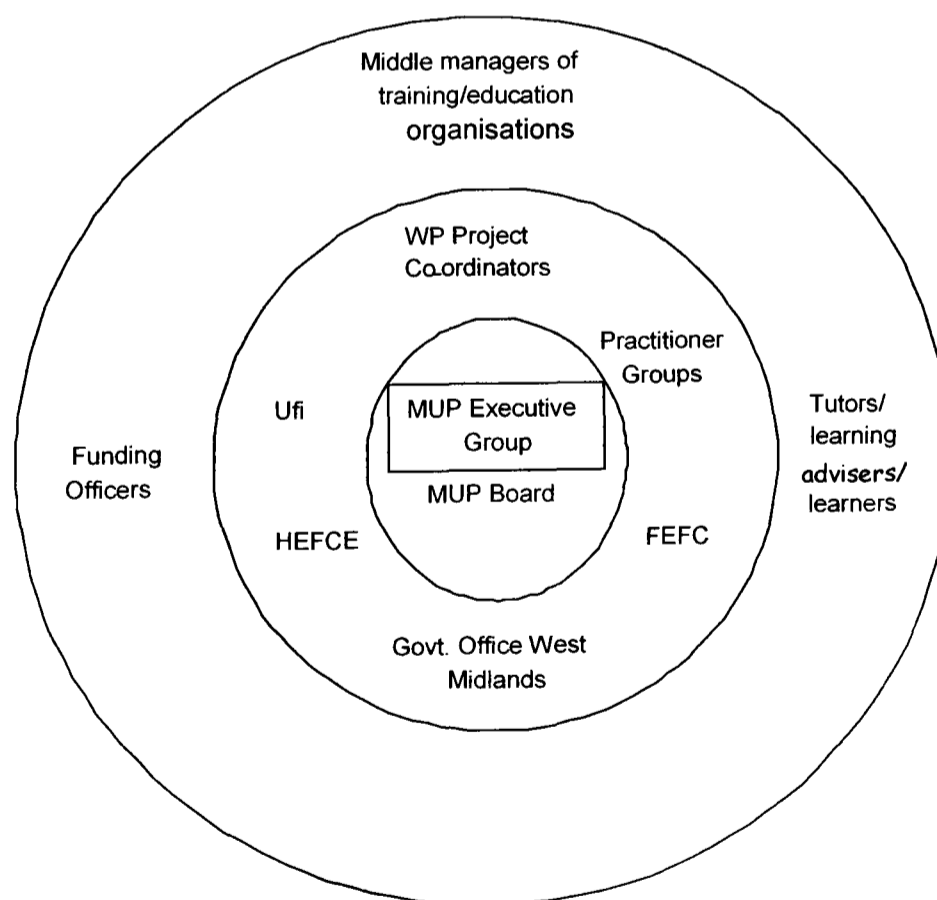
Figure 4: Layers of collaboration in MUP

The core layer represented by the inner circle in Figure 4 reflects relationships amongst the senior managers that constituted MUP Board and the smaller MUP Executive Group who were appointed to progress the decisions of the Board as the partnership expanded. The middle circle in Figure 4 represents the links the actors developed with funding agencies, in particular to access funding streams for widening participation in post-16 learning, and the relationships they developed with practitioners. The outer circle represents the weaker links the actors developed with other local and regional projects, such as SRB projects, borough-based partnerships and networked learning projects. The outer circle also includes the weaker connections that MUP Board had to middle managers who were involved in implementing projects and voluntary collaborative activities initiated by the partnership and the tutors, learning advisors and learners who were affected by the work managed by MUP.

Figure 5, on the next page, represents a simplified visualisation of the networks that underpinned these layers of collaboration.
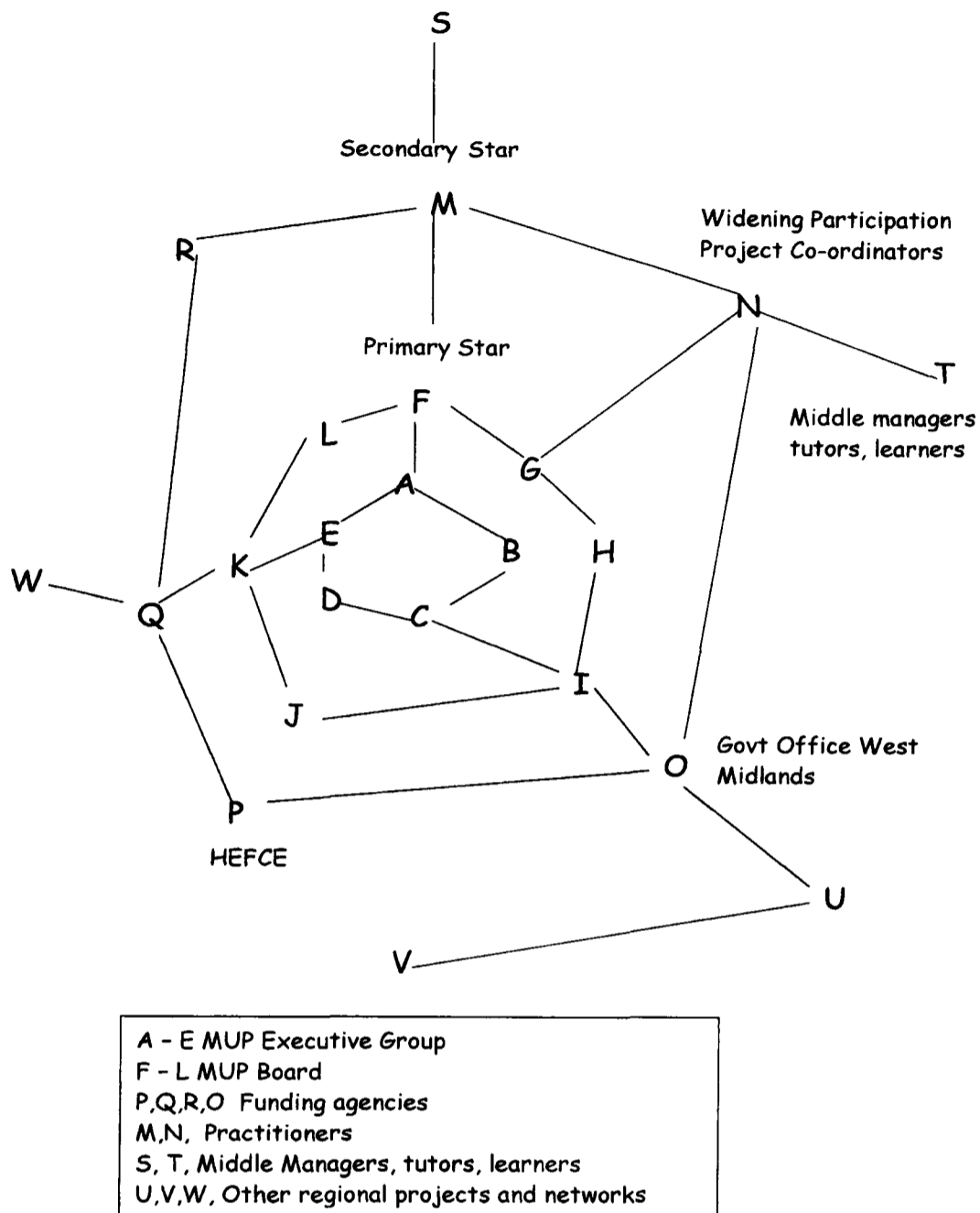
Figure 5: Networks in MUP showing primary and secondary clusters and links

This figure draws on the diagram used by Trevillion (1999, p.23) to represent relationships in a network and one used by Field and Schuller (2000, p.108) to visualise relationships in a loose network. It tries to show overlapping ties and different levels of collaboration with strong ties amongst MUP Executive Group (A, B, C, D, E) and MUP Board (F, G, H, I, J, K, L) and weak ties to funding agencies (Q, O) developed by key actors (K, I) and still weaker links to other networks and

projects (U, V, W). The web-like ties with primary and secondary stars reveal some of the complexity and strength of the relationships between key actors and the role of dimensions of social capital in partnership working. The functioning of networks in the primary star, amongst MUP Board and MUP Executive Group, is explored in Chapter 6.

The presentation of the stages in the lifecourse of MUP has revealed high and low points in its progress as a partnership and indicated how policy imperatives, which constituted the context for partnership, and individual and organisational priorities impacted on partnership working and were reflected in the benefits of collaborative activities for the actors involved. It has also revealed that MUP was not just driven by external policy initiatives but also by the norms, values and beliefs of individuals and the layers of collaboration and social networks that developed amongst them. The next chapter examines the influence of the external policy context and the roles of individuals and organisations in partnership working by comparing two stages in the lifecourse of the partnership.

Chapter 6

Peaks and troughs of collaborative activity: an analysis of partnership working

The previous chapter presented the stages in the development of MUP during which the partnership experienced peaks and troughs in its collaborative activities and variations in its power and influence in the sub-region. This chapter compares partnership working during two contrasting stages in the lifecourse of the partnership, the first a period of expansion, a peak in power and influence, and the second a period of ambivalence, a trough when MUP almost died as a partnership. By focusing on a period of growth and a period of decline in partnership activity the analysis seeks to learn about the basis of partnership working and the role of organisations and individuals in sustaining a partnership.

The chapter begins by outlining aspects of the peak and the trough that are the focus of the comparative analysis of partnership working in MUP. It then takes the two stages in MUP's development as cases to explore partnership working by considering the policy context, the power and relative contributions of the participating organisations and individuals, and the roles adopted by key individuals in the partnership.

The research data reveal how national policies promoting collaborative working and the positive resonance associated with the notion of partnership, discussed in Chapter 2, provide the initial synergy for partnership working in MUP. More critically, the data show how power differentials amongst the participating organisations and individuals together with changes in post-16 policy and competing demands from

other roles and responsibilities impact on the practicalities of partnership working. These power differentials and pressures from various sources affect the nature and extent of collaborative activities and the experience of partnership at the micro-level for the individuals who implement partnership working. Tensions, conflicts and the power of personalities lie beneath the rhetoric of partnership and occasionally surface in the arena of MUP Board meetings and more covertly in the informal networking amongst sub-groups which take places outside the formal scheduled meetings of the partnership.

The data presented in this chapter emanate from my observations of MUP Board meetings during both stages in the lifecourse of the partnership and from interviews with members of MUP Board, most of which were carried out during the trough in MUP's development. I also use notes and reflections recorded in my research diary together with documentary evidence of MUP's activities to analyse and present partnership working as implemented and experienced by the organisations and individuals who participated in the collaborative activities instigated and managed by the members of MUP.

6.1   A peak and a trough in the lifecourse of MUP

Chapter 5 has shown that during its lifecourse MUP went through high and low points in the level and nature of collaborative activity amongst members and variations in its power and influence as a partnership in the Black Country. I have characterised these high and low points in its development as peaks and troughs and represented aspects of MUP's activities that contributed to the major peak and trough in its lifecourse in Figure 7 on the next page.

Figure 7: Peaks and troughs in the lifecourse of MUP

Enthusiastic Chair
of MUP Board,
dedicated
administrator

Funded
projects

HEFCE WP
FEFC
WP
Ufi hub

PEAK ACTIVITY

Change of Chairs of
MUP Board and
Executive Group

Voluntary activities

Conferences

Workshops

Practitioner groups

No administrator,
meetings
cancelled,
drift to inactivity

Launch by
Helena Kennedy

Links to LSC
established

Pulled back from
brink by key actors

Embryonic
grouping

1997

199
8

199
9

200
0

200
1

2002

178

As Figure 7 shows the major peak in MUP's activities occurred during 1999 and 2000, the expansion stage in its lifecourse, and the main trough during 2001, the ambivalence stage when MUP drifted towards inactivity and uncertainty about its role and future as a partnership. The figure also points up key aspects of partnership working which differed during these two stages in the partnership's progress including the range of funded projects and voluntary activities managed by MUP and the contribution of key individuals. Figure 7 shows that the expansion of MUP was led and managed by an enthusiastic Chair and a dedicated administrator whilst a change of Chair and the lack of an administrator marked the decline of the partnership before it was 'pulled back from the brink' (Interview 11, 5/7/01) by the same key actors who had driven the formation of the partnership in 1997 and its formal launch in 1998.

During these stages in its development the participating organisations and individuals engaged in varying degrees of involvement ranging from very active participation to passive association with the partnership. This is shown by the log of attendance at MUP meetings presented in Table 5, p.148 and discussed in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I discuss these differential aspects of participation in Sections 6.2 and 6.3 as they contributed to expansion and ambivalence in MUP.

The peak and trough in MUP's development resulted from both external and internal factors. The external factors relate to the policy context in which the partnership had to operate and include the implementation of New Labour's policies for post-16 learning, in particular strategies to widen participation in learning through partnership working. The internal factors include the motivations and commitment

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of key individuals and their roles and responsibilities both to MUP and to their respective institutions and organisations.

The rest of this chapter is divided into two sections. In Section 6.2, I discuss partnership working during expansion in MUP's lifecourse. I consider the external policy context that shaped partnership working during this peak of collaborative activity and internal aspects of partnership working, including the role of member organisations and individuals in driving the expansion of the partnership. In Section 6.3, I discuss partnership working during ambivalence in MUP's lifecourse using the same headings of policy context, power differentials and relative contributions of organisations and individuals.

6.2 Expansion: a peak in the lifecourse of MUP

During expansion, MUP became an influential voice in the Black Country and aspired to a strategic sub-regional role. This is indicated in exchanges between members of MUP Board in 2000, at the peak of expansion. One example came at the end of a lengthy discussion about the purpose of the partnership:

> Margaret: We need to be clear about what we're about...
>
> Stephen: We [MUP] want to be a strong sub-regional political force...
>
> (Observation 3, 7/7/00)

Another happened during a debate about the role of MUP given the pace of change brought about by government initiatives and the proliferation of other partnerships in the sub-region:

Margaret: ...there's certainly a need for joined-up thinking in the sub-region and **we** [MUP] can take on that strategic role...

Ken: There are lots of groups around in the Black Country...positioning itself [the partnership] as a strategy and lobbying group is going to be best...MUP has many roles...a lobbying group with a strategic role and links to LSC [local Learning and Skills Council]...at practitioner level...a curriculum development function and a role in improving the quality of training...the pursuit of professionalism in the delivery of teaching and learning...e-commerce, ICT delivery...they'll be economies of scale...

Gillian: There are strategies coming out every hour...the problem with policies on paper is it bears no resemblance to lived experience...especially under this government...as we find out every day...

This led to general discussion about other groups and partnerships emerging in the Black Country and the resulting confusion about representation and links with each other. Members of MUP talked about their own membership of other partnerships that were forming in the sub-region and the work they were doing. It was only after exchanging this information that they returned to the agenda of the meeting which was to agree the types of organisations that should be represented on MUP Board.

(Observation 4, 29/9/00)

Though some individuals, such as Stephen, entertained a political role for MUP, most members emphasised its function 'to raise the educational and skills profile of the region' (MUP document 2000a, p.2) by working in partnership with providers of education and training and other stakeholders in post-16 learning in the Black Country.

MUP expanded by developing and extending its activities and links to organisations, agencies, networks and other partnerships in the Black Country. The extent of MUP's collaborative activities and links is shown in Figure 8.

1 = Private Training Providers
2 = Govt Office, West Midlands
3 = Local Councils
4 = SRB Projects
5 = Funding Agencies
6 = Borough -based networks

MUP
Lifecourse

Stage 2:
Expansion

March 1998:
Formal launch
by Helena
Kennedy

2000

1998

1999

Practitioner
Groups

Workshops

Conferences

Organising
voluntary projects
and activities

Managing
externally funded
projects

Ufi
ADAPT

Ufi Learndirect
BC hub

HEFCE WP
Project Right
Track

FEFC WP
Project mapping
provision   in BC

Network of 30
member organisations

A

B

C

D

Developing links to
other BC networks

1

2

3

4

Figure 8: Collaborative activities and links in MUP

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Figure 8 shows MUP's involvement in externally funded projects and voluntary collaborative activities, as it was by now a partnership of 30 organisations and 134 individuals. The figure also shows the links with private training providers, Government Office West Midlands, the four local councils in the Black Country, SRB projects in the sub-region, funding bodies, such as FEFC, HEFCE and Ufi and other borough-based partnerships and networks which developed in response to national, regional and local policies for post-16 learning.

The policy context and its contribution to expansion in MUP

Policies for post-16 learning represent the structure within which MUP had to function and during this period the policy context was very supportive of a partnership that aimed to widen participation in learning. The enthusiasm and synergy that had accompanied the publication of *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998) and the expectations associated with the changes to post-16 learning set out in *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999a) had fired the imagination of members of MUP. This was emphatically expressed by Gillian, one of the founder members of the partnership who said:

> Initially it [MUP] was a stance of colleges and others across the Black Country region **standing together** and saying...we have common interests, we have common learners, and our learners have common needs **there is much we can gain from each other**. (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

The use of bold[1] in the transcription above attempts to capture the passion and strength of feeling in her views conveyed in the research data through the stress and intonation in the tape recording of her voice and her non-verbal communication in

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[1] The use of bold in the data indicates original emphasis and this convention is used throughout the thesis.

the interview. At this point in the interview she clenched her fist and banged it on the table to emphasise the words in bold. This example also indicates that for members of MUP it was not just the policy context that supported their collaborative activities but also their views and common interests, in particular their commitment to widening participation.

The summary of MUP's constitution and commitments drawn up in July 2000 states:

> MUP has a remit for widening participation and its activities have reflected this focus. Broadly it has two key areas of work. The first is the practitioner group activity in curriculum development, inclusive learning, information and guidance, and access, which has enabled staff to come together in conferences and workshops to undertake various development projects. The second is the area of funded projects, where the Partnership has been singularly successful and has continuing responsibilities.
> (MUP document 2000a, p.1)

MUP's success in bidding for and securing externally funded projects was an important factor in its expansion as a partnership.

Success in externally funded widening participation projects

During expansion, MUP managed four major projects: a FEFC funded project which focussed on mapping FE provision in the Black Country; a HEFCE funded project (Right Track) which aimed to widen participation in HE for non-traditional learners; the Ufi Learndirect hub in the Black Country; and a Ufi funded ADAPT project to produce learning resources (see Figures 8, 7 and 6). These projects were all funded through special funding streams for widening participation (FEFC 1997, HEFCE 1999; 2000, Ufi 1999, MUP document 1999d; 1999e; 1999f; 2000d) and reflected implementation of New Labour's policies, through incentives for partnership

working and funding for projects that claimed to widen participation in post-16 learning.

The role of externally funded projects in the extension and expansion of MUP activity is highlighted by a Chair of MUP Board:

> ...it [MUP] was driven by projects...and so it became a partnership erm which owned a number of projects. It then went on to own the Ufi bid so it had very important work which it looked after on behalf of the Black Country... (Interview 9, 20/6/01)

Not only were projects important but they also signified another aspect of partnership working in MUP in that the members followed principles of reciprocity and equality in the way that they managed this activity. A different member organisation took the lead role in each project and others provided a supportive framework for initiating bids and monitoring projects. Progress reports on funded projects were a regular feature of MUP Board meetings and project co-ordinators were invited as guests to present reports to the Board. For example, the agenda at the MUP Board meeting held on 1 October 1999 included 'FEFC widening participation project; Ufi learning centre hub developments; HEFCE widening participation continuation funding' (MUP document 1999g) whilst at the meeting held on 7 July 2000 the first item on the agenda was an update on Black Country Learndirect (MUP document 2000d).

This activity provided synergy and a common purpose:

> ... because we were successful in bidding it developed a kind of momentum around that and erm a set of responsibilities which meant we had to keep going and people found some benefit in keeping going, if only on the basis of information exchange and being involved in something which as it were was leading edge...(Interview 9, 20/6/01)

The final comment in the above extract indicates a further characteristic of partnership working in MUP. Key actors did not regard MUP as a conduit for bidding for external project funding but gave other reasons for meeting regularly and working collaboratively. Members were well aware of MUP's pragmatic benefits, as indicated by Diane, principal of one of the smaller FE colleges in the partnership:

> Well in terms of bidding it's important that all sorts of organisations come together if you're going to be successful in bids these days, you can't go it alone, you do have to show how you **are** working with others...
> (Interview 16, 19/9/01)

However, in interviews, MUP Board meetings and in documents, members emphasise the 'added value' of working collaboratively. In one of their regular newsletters they articulate this as 'common ground in the wish to provide added value through partnership working' (MUP document 1999b, p.1).

Adding value through partnership working: learning and taking power and control

The notion of the 'value-added' is a strong feature of the discourse of partnership working in MUP (MUP document 1999b; 1999c; 2000a; 2001, Observation 2, interview 9). It reflects a deeper commitment to collaborative working than the instrumentalist function of MUP as a basis for bidding for external project funding. In some manifestations the 'value- added' represents an opportunity to take power and control, e.g. Gillian's comments about MUP being a stance of colleges standing together (see p.183) and in others it represents opportunities for individual and organisational learning e.g. through participation in voluntary collaborative activities.

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The members of MUP Board gave considerable time and thought to ideas and practices for working collaboratively and to debate what they were about as a 'partnership' (Observations 2-4). It was in this context that they articulated the goal of adding value through partnership working. This was agreed early in the life of the partnership (MUP document 1999b) and re-iterated in subsequent stages of its lifecourse, e.g. in action plans for collaboration (MUP document 2000c) and in a business plan for the LSC which affirmed that they would 'work together in productive partnerships which add value' (MUP document 2001b).

The notion of the 'value-added' amongst MUP members was based on the belief that partnership working would lead to benefits that could not otherwise be achieved. There was a strong feeling that they could:

- raise the educational profile of the region;
- exchange best practice in the interests of the quality of provision;
- develop staff competence to enable them to explore new styles of delivery and areas of the curriculum. (MUP document 2000a, p.2)

The founder members in particular emphasised the benefits of collaboration. Gillian said:

> I think that everybody discovered that there was a great deal of benefit in working together and they were able to forge relationships across the Black Country which they had not been able to forge while they remained within their borough boundaries and that was quite liberating. (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

Andrew, another founder member, stressed the benefits of talking and networking through the forum of MUP and commented on the environment that preceded the formation of the partnership:

JD: What do you think are the benefits of being part of MUP?

Andrew: Erm, talking to other people, networking er relating to people who for far too long have been involved in what I can only describe as unwelcome and unnecessary competition, competition in a number of areas is healthy er but I believe that the competition that has been engendered by the colleges funding methodology has been wasteful and I say that both as a principal of fifteen years standing and as a taxpayer...I think that's wrong
(Interview 10, 27/6/01)

The above data indicates that in addition to recognising the wastefulness of ruthless competition members of MUP believed in the benefits, or added value, of collaborative working. This suggests that it was not just policy imperatives but also individual agency that drove the expansion of the partnership. Individual agency featured heavily in the voluntary collaborative activities that mushroomed during this period.

Expansion in voluntary collaborative projects and activities

During expansion, success in externally funded projects was matched by success in collaborative projects and activities initiated, organised, managed and resourced by members of MUP. These activities provided further synergy for partnership working and focused on areas deemed to be important by the members of MUP rather than by external funding agencies or government departments. The members organised conferences, workshops and set up practitioner groups to bring individuals from different organisations together to learn with and from each other. In this process MUP took on the role of facilitator of learning, a role which was summarised as: 'we have a role in developing and disseminating good practice across the sub-region...there are too many people out there re-inventing the wheel' (Observation 3, 7/7/00).

The momentum that was generated through this work is captured by Mark, a university representative, in his recollection of a conference held to develop action plans for collaboration (MUP 1999c):

> ... you couldn't get a seat in the room it was packed down at the Science Park, every seat was taken, people were literally standing they'd come from colleges, TECs, adult education providers, careers service, the works...they wanted to respond to the Kennedy initiative in a consortium...a partnership
> (Interview 2, 4/7/00)

Roger, another university representative, described this as a 'more public show piece' of MUP activities and went on to say:

> ...out of that conference, workshops were organised...there was a lot of fluffing around...I suggested that we needed to get practitioners on board...to get nearer the overhead projector face and we hosted a planning workshop to take forward this idea of getting people involved on the ground...
> (Interview 12, 14/8/01)

The conference and workshops generated areas to focus collaborative effort and individuals from member organisations volunteered to participate in practitioner groups. Although individuals were allocated time from their organisations to participate in these activities they did not receive any financial reward and most contributed a great deal more time than they were actually given by their employers (Interview 12). The interest, enthusiasm and effort of the volunteers enabled partner organisations to share inter-organisational expertise and supported intra-organisational human resource development for relatively minimal cost. The role of this voluntary activity was emphasised by Margaret, Chair of MUP Board, in her reflections on the work of the partnership:

> One of the areas that MUP was involved with which I think is very important to highlight and I think this is probably where one of the enduring strengths of MUP lies is in the work of the working groups that it's set up. It's set up a

number of working groups around information guidance and curriculum development and social inclusion...for practitioners within colleges I think those groups will be very beneficial and MUP has got to continue those groups... (Interview 9, 20/6/01)

The practitioner groups enabled lecturers and tutors from different post-16 education and training organisations across the sub-region to meet on a regular basis to develop and share good practice and to collaboratively produce learning resources for different areas of the curriculum. The areas were generated by the groups and not 'plucked from on high' (Interview 12, 14/8/01), so represented perceived needs and gaps in existing provision. In summarising the contribution of the practitioner groups, Roger who chaired the convenors group, admitted that some were more successful than others in the outcomes of their work (Interview 12). However, this voluntary work shows that ability to attract external funding was not the only reason for the success and sustainability of MUP.

MUP's success in extending its power and influence in the Black Country through externally funded projects and voluntary collaborative activities depended upon the contributions of the participating organisations and individuals, some of whom were more powerful than others. The organisations varied in size from large urban FE colleges to small private training providers and the individuals' roles ranged from college principals to part-time adult education tutors. Consequently, they had access to differing resources (physical, financial and human) and were able to provide varying levels of support for partnership working. Some of the tensions that arose as a result of these power differentials are discussed below.

Power differentials between institutions and individuals

The tensions that surfaced most sharply during MUP's expansion related to resourcing the costs of partnership working and representing less powerful voices in the forum of MUP Board. The first issue involved the relationship between the university and other member organisations, representing power differentials between institutions, whilst the second related to the dynamics of participation amongst representatives of member organisations, representing power differentials between individuals.

The university was the largest member organisation and provided a significant level of support for MUP, particularly during expansion. Representatives from the university played a major role in managing the partnership and leading externally funded projects and voluntary collaborative activities. Margaret, a senior manager at the university, chaired MUP Board for three years and Roger, another university representative on MUP Board, drove the growth in voluntary collaborative activities. The university also hosted a key conference (MUP document 1999c) and a number of partnership meetings as well as providing a working base for the administrator of the partnership from 1997-2000 (MUP document 1999b; 2000b).

The tension that surfaced most sharply in observations of MUP meetings during this period related to the level of support provided by the university:

> *After three years the university was hoping to move to a different role reflecting the 'equal' status of the actors in MUP and looking for a shared commitment to resourcing the partnership*
>
> Chair: on the item of resources...the university has resourced the partnership and for the future MUP has to determine what resources it's going to put in to support the partnership

Silence. People avoiding eye contact, staring at the floor, shuffling uncomfortably as the Chair continued

Chair: the practitioner groups need to be re-invigorated...we need some admin support...the university is happy to contribute but the partners need to recognise their responsibilities...resourcing needs to be a **shared** responsibility...

(Observation 3, 7/7/00)

The expectation was that now, after three years of support from the university, the costs of partnership should be equally shared amongst the member organisations. However, this request met a stony silence, as shown by the non-verbal communication noted in italics in the observational data. This example exposes a source of friction and a potential cause of decline in partnership working. The issue of resourcing the partnership became much more significant during ambivalence in MUP's lifecourse.

Despite this source of tension, the university and other organisations demonstrated a high level of commitment to MUP during its expansion. This is evidenced in organisational and individual attendance at MUP Board meetings. In the four Board meetings held during 1999-2000, six out of the seven member colleges attended 3 or 4 meetings, the university, three of the TECs and Prospects attended all 4 whilst other organisations attended 2 or 3 (see Table 5, Chapter 5). Each of these organisations had a different number of representatives on MUP Board and at the four Board meetings mentioned above the attendance was between 17-30 people (MUP document 1999h; 2000e). Furthermore, the level of representation was also significant as individuals who attended MUP meetings during this period were either college principals, members of executive at the university or the most senior manager

in their organisation (MUP document 1999h; 2000e). Later in MUP's lifecourse, during ambivalence, people who held less powerful positions in their organisation attended meetings in place of these senior managers.

Although individuals who led the expansion of MUP were themselves very powerful people some key individuals were concerned to give equal voice to the representatives of smaller organisations in the partnership. For example, during a MUP meeting held in May 2000 Margaret, the Chair, encouraged representatives of adult education and voluntary groups to contribute to the discussion:

Chair: so what does adult education think of...

Sally (AE representative): ...we think it's important to be represented on the partnership... for all the sectors in the area to know what each is doing

Chair: ..and what about the WEA...do you have a view on this Alan?

Alan (voluntary groups representative): ...well the WEA has always been active in bringing education and training to people...we're happy to work with colleges, the university...link with the other organisations represented here...

Paul (FE college principal): ...a feeling of inclusion is important in partnership...all colleges will want to be represented...

Chair: Yes, I agree... but we need workable structures and I'd like to see sensitivity about smaller organisations...the Executive Group, the Board, the Ufi group all need support and direction and we need to consider the costs of running the partnership...

Some members avoiding eye contact with the Chair, shuffling papers, doodling on papers as she moved on to discuss the issue of resourcing the partnership, in particular the administrative costs.

(Observation 2, 12/5/00)

The non-verbal communication of other Board members, noted in italics, suggested that they were not all quite so sensitive or patient. This was also reflected in their

differing reactions to presentations from male and female members in a MUP Board

held in October 1999. Part of this meeting was devoted to presentations from the

four TEC representatives, three male and one female. My notes of the non-verbal

communication of Board members during these presentations indicate the gendered

dynamics of the situation:

10.15 Luke, the first male presenter gave a verbal report which focused on the government steer towards partnership working, funding opportunities for partnerships and the possibility of a learning hub ...

Board members were listening intently with interest. The non-verbal communication (NVC) of the group was positive (good eye contact, nods of agreement, open body language)

11.05 Joy, the fourth presenter, used Powerpoint for her presentation but had problems with the technology...

She started her presentation with hesitations and less confident NVC (um...er...fumbling with jacket...crossed legs whilst facing the audience...). The group's NVC indicated lack of attention...many Board members were sitting back with folded arms and making unkind comments about the technology...This was the first female speaker other than the Chair.

At the end of the presentation, the Chair thanked Joy and said it was worth the struggle with the technology to put her plan over effectively.

11.30 Coffee and comfort break

(Observation 1, 1/10/99)

This example reveals how gender and power differentials amongst individuals

affected the process and experience of partnership working. The observational data

show that despite the efforts of some individuals, like Margaret, to promote equal

participation in MUP the power of personalities and the size and type of organisation

they represented led to tensions and friction in the process of partnership working.

The realties of power differentials were never far from the surface rhetoric of

collaboration and partnership, also revealed by the throw away comment of a college principal who said 'I'm not the principal of a tiddly little college' (Research diary entry, 31/5/00). This individual, like Margaret, was one of the founder members of MUP but his contribution to the partnership was very different. The next section considers the relative contributions of representatives of different organisations to the expansion of MUP.

Relative contributions of representatives of different types of organisations

The data presented in the preceding section has revealed the substantial contribution of university representatives to the growth in MUP's activities. It has also indicated the importance of individuals in driving partnership working. Stephen, highlighted the key role of a small number of people:

> JD: What would you say gives the partnership synergy? What keeps it going?
>
> Stephen: Well, I'm quite clear about that. I mean it is the energy of a very few people and it's those who will take on the offices at any particular time and I would certainly pay tribute to Margaret in this respect because she's been the kingpin of chairing it for a long time....
> (Interview 8, 12/6/01)

The role of Margaret, the Chair, has already been highlighted but there were five other people who took a leading role in driving the expansion of the partnership and providing support for its activities from their respective organisation's resources. These six individuals operated an informal network within the formal structures of MUP Board and MUP Executive Group (shown in Figure 9, on the next page) and their collective drive, commitment and passion provided the synergy for the expansion of MUP as a network of interconnected nodes (Castells 2000, Ebers 1997a) across the Black Country sub-region.
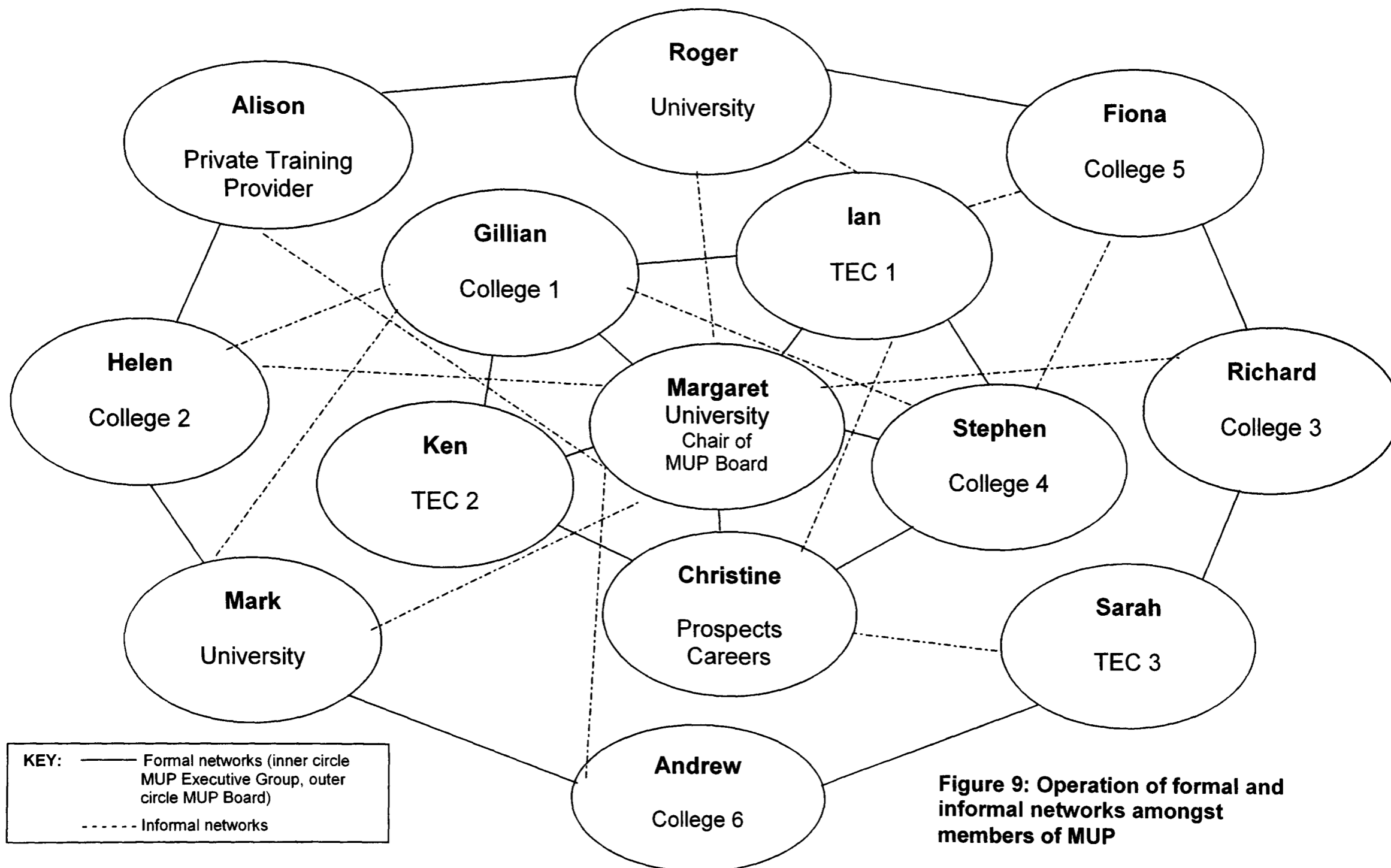
Figure 9: Operation of formal and informal networks amongst members of MUP

KEY: ———— Formal networks (inner circle MUP Executive Group, outer circle MUP Board)

- - - - - Informal networks

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Figure 9 represents my interpretation of the web of cross-cutting and overlapping ties amongst the nodes (individuals and organisations) in MUP during the peak in its lifecourse. It shows the formal and informal networks that underpinned partnership working during this period and the strength and extent of the multiple layers of links, which Trevillion (1999) refers to as network density, amongst key individuals. The figure shows that Margaret had access to the greatest number of formal and informal networks and Gillian, Ken, Ian, Stephen and Christine represented the next layer (the inner circle), followed by more diffuse links amongst other members of MUP Board (the outer circle). During 1999 and 2000 the individuals shown in the inner circle expanded the partnership by forging links to new nodes so that individuals and organisations representing adult education, voluntary groups, private training providers and the Open College Network were added to the existing network of representatives from colleges, the university, TECs and Prospects Careers Service. Some of these nodes (both individuals and organisations) became dormant at other stages in the lifecourse of the partnership, (as happened during ambivalence and shown in Figure 10) but had the potential to be re-activated, as happened when MUP re-invigorated itself following a period of ambivalence.

Figure 9 shows key individuals (and the organisations they represented) in two of the formal structures developed by the partnership to manage its work: MUP Board and MUP Executive Group. The figure also depicts the reality of partnership working by showing individuals' access to the formal and informal networks that functioned beneath these two formal structures. Membership of these groups gave individuals access to formal networks, such as MUP board (shown in Figure 9 with solid lines), and opportunities to forge links and ties to other individuals through the process of

partnership working. These more informal links (indicated by broken lines) were sometimes more significant in the operation of partnership working than the formal structures as individuals drew on their informal ties to progress the work of the partnership in collaborative activities, such as writing bids for external funding (MUP document 1999f), position papers (MUP document 2000a), and plans for conferences (MUP document 2000c) before taking them for formal approval to MUP Board. The relative contributions of Margaret and the five individuals shown in the inner circle in Figure 9 were central to the success of these activities and to the resulting expansion in the power and influence of the partnership in the Black Country.

Margaret: Chair of MUP Board and partnership broker

Margaret was described by other members of MUP Board as the kingpin of the partnership (Interview 8), an honest broker (Interview 10), an intelligent woman (Interview 15), an intellectual with the germ of the idea of getting providers to 'pull in the same direction' (Interview 17) and someone who could let 'things run for a while at meetings and then pull in the reins' (Interview 1). These characteristics are associated with the co-ordinator and shaper in Belbin's categorisation of team roles. Belbin identifies the co-ordinator as someone who is 'mature, confident, a good chairperson' and a shaper as someone who is 'dynamic and has the drive and courage to overcome obstacles' (Belbin 2005). In driving the expansion of the partnership Margaret displayed all these characteristics, in particular through the ways in which she obtained resources for the partnership and the skill with which she chaired MUP Board meetings.

Figure 9 shows Margaret's pivotal role in the operation of the partnership with access to multiple formal and informal networks to individuals and organisations. As a senior manager at a university she also had access to other networks, outside MUP, and was able to forge links to people in positions of power and influence and make what Lin (cited in Paldam 2000) terms 'good connections' to lever resources for the partnership. In 1999 she invited a representative from Government Office West Midlands to present his plans for regional development to MUP Board (Observation 1, 1/10/99) and organised a day for the Head of Ufi West Midlands and her team to review 'a range of potential Ufi Learning Centres and meet a number of Hub Partners' (MUP document 1999e, p.1). The potential partners were all members of MUP and this visit led to the partnership becoming the managing agent for the Ufi hub in the Black Country.

Margaret was thus able to broker relationships with external funding bodies and support the growth of MUP with resources from her own institution, including her own time and university spaces for partnership events. Her key role as partnership broker however, was not just linked to the size and resources of the institution she represented but also depended upon her skills, qualities and personality as an individual. Tennyson and Wilde (2000) stress 'the vital and pivotal role of a partnership broker' (p.33) in ensuring success in partnership working. They suggest that the role may be formally allocated or informally taken on but requires 'individuals of stature for whom skills of dialogue, reconciliation and negotiation are paramount, and who are willing to compromise for the greater good' (Tennyson and Wilde 2000, p.33).). In MUP it was Margaret who took this role and demonstrated the skills and attributes of a partnership broker.

Margaret was asked to take on the role as she was perceived by founder members of MUP to be an honest broker and her skills and qualities led a funding officer to conclude 'I have a lot of time for Margaret, academically, directionally she's worth three of them [other members of MUP Board]'(Interview 17, 6/11/01). Margaret's interpersonal and communication skills enabled her to present issues for discussion clearly, both verbally and as written discussion papers (e.g. MUP document 2000a), and keep MUP Board members focused on the agenda in meetings. For example, at a meeting where members were debating the future role and identify of the partnership Margaret intervened in a discussion that had been meandering for an hour and ten minutes with the following:

> Margaret:...while we're working out **who we are**...can we get back to the terms of reference...(*looking at the terms of reference as stated in the document circulated at the meeting*)
>
> ...skills needs to be there...research...who's going to pay for all this...the biggest waste of money is ...nationally we're re-inventing the wheel...a good idea is not necessarily good practice...
>
> (Observation 2, 12/5/00)

Similarly at another Board meeting she steered the discussion back to the agenda with the following intervention:

> Margaret: That gets us off the minutes. Can we move to the substantive item on the agenda, MUP: The Next Generation...
>
> *Pause while members look at the discussion paper MUP: The Next Generation (2000), written by the Chair and circulated to everyone prior to the meeting with other papers for this meeting.*
> *Chair scanning the room to pick up non-verbal clues and an indication from those present that they had read the paper and were ready to move forward with the discussion.*
>
> Margaret: Are you happy with the terms of reference?
> (Observation 4, 29/9/00)

In all the meetings I observed it was evident that Margaret was a skilled Chair and that her communication and interpersonal skills enabled her to build strong working relationships with all the members of MUP Board. Mark, a university representative on MUP Board summed up her skills as follows:

> She's very good at keeping people on board, keeping the debate going, putting the arm round people and so on and this arena needs that, when you start to force issues that's not Margaret's natural game and also it's not necessarily a strategy that would maintain the partnership.
> (Interview 2, 4/7/00)

Margaret's individual effort and personal contribution to expanding the range and extent of collaborative activities associated with MUP and the power and influence of the partnership in the sub-region was complemented by the contributions of the five other people that constituted the inner circle (shown in Figure 9) and the roles that they adopted in the process of partnership working. Their roles and contributions are discussed below.

Stephen: Philosopher King and creative resource provider

Stephen was the principal of a large urban FE college and one of the two individuals who asked Margaret to broker the embryonic group in 1997 that eventually developed into MUP. He personally attended eight of the nine MUP meetings I observed (see log of attendance for College 4, p.148) and offered his college premises and facilities free of charge to MUP for meetings, workshops and action planning days, particularly after July 2000 when the university started to question the level of support it was providing to MUP. He took on the role of plant and resource investigator for MUP in Belbin's categorisation of team roles as he found creative ways of finding resources for partnership working and solved difficult problems

(Belbin 2005) by approaching Margaret to take on the role of partnership broker. Margaret was seen as a neutral broker because she represented a university rather than a college, as well as being highly regarded for her skills and qualities as an individual.

Stephen was enviously described by Ken as someone who could take on 'the role of philosopher king' (Interview 15), a role that could not be taken by those who did not have access to the level of resource available to College 4. Stephen demonstrated his commitment to MUP both through his personal attendance at partnership meetings and through the use of his college's resources to support partnership working. The latter was quite critical to the survival of MUP as it was not funded by any external source and so when the university started to step away from providing the resources for partnership working, Stephen offered the physical resources of his college. Stephen hosted three out of the four MUP events held in 2001 (Observation 3, 5, 6), including an action-planning day held in the college conference centre. This planning day was devoted to developing a business plan to re-invigorate the partnership (MUP document 2001a) and Stephen's college provided the facilities and hospitality for this event free of charge.

Stephen's generosity in supporting partnership working in this way illustrates the willingness of larger organisations with more resources to support smaller organisations in MUP. This was also evident in the level of support provided by the university for partnership working, discussed earlier. However, in Stephen's case there was an almost altruistic aspect to the support he provided not only to members of MUP but also to other organisations and groups. In his interview, he gave

examples of making his college facilities available to voluntary and community groups that were not members of any partnership arrangement. He said:

> I give house room to lots of community groups, the Black Country and industrial mission has been here for donkeys years and the borough festival of drama, music and dance we've housed here over three weekends in the Spring for forty years, free of charge, because the buildings are already paid for and broadly heated and lit so the cost is really, you know, marginal...a bit of extra caretaking cost to unlock the building and keep it safe I suppose but it's really very very marginal...(Interview 8, 12/6/01)

This aspect of Stephen's behaviour was not something which could be explained by his role as a college principal who worked in partnership with other senior managers to reap the benefits of collaborative working, such as involvement in funded projects though as the following extract shows this certainly was one function of MUP:

> It [MUP] provided a ready basis for bidding...but it depended on individual commitments from people in the organisations...MUP could be wheeled out at Government Office West Midlands and bidding was, you know, relatively easy for things erm...(Interview 12, 14/8/01)

Stephen's personal commitment to MUP and his contribution to supporting partnership working by taking on the role of creative resource provider stemmed from his passion for widening participation and his values. He summarised the reasons which sustained the partnership as follows:

> It's moral commitment that keeps it [MUP] going...because it's something none of us have to do...there are those who are there because they have a passion and want to change the world and that's why they make the time and trouble to be there... (Interview 8, 12/6/01)

As he sat in his oak panelled office behind an enormous heavy wooden desk (Field notes, 12/6/01), Stephen spoke avidly, without much prompting from me, about his

passion for learning and for engaging others in learning. He spoke about the role of education in his own life history, his working class family background and upbringing in a small rural community and his position as principal of a college 'in exercising social responsibility' (Interview 8) as well as contributing to the economy of the local community. He identified his own value system as key to guiding his work as a principal and his actions as an individual:

> At the end of the day you see you're a committed professional trying to shift the world, if you really believe it you'd do it irrespective of the personal or institutional cost...(Interview 8, 12/6/01)

The costs of partnership working and the role of values in sustaining the partnership are considered in Chapter 7. Stephen's relative contribution to MUP was more evenly distributed over the different stages in its lifecourse and though he paid tribute to Margaret and others for taking on the offices of MUP (see p.195) he himself did not take on the role of Chair or convenor for any groups or sub-groups in the partnership. In addition to Margaret, it was Gillian who took on the role of chairing a key sub-group.

Gillian: Chair of MUP Executive Group

Gillian, like Stephen, was the principal of a large urban FE college and the person who along with Stephen asked Margaret to broker the partnership. Gillian chaired MUP Executive Group during the same period that Margaret was Chair of MUP Board (MUP document 1999h, Observation 2, Observation 4). She only personally attended two of the meetings I observed though her college (College 1) was represented at eight of the nine meetings (see log of attendance for College 1, p.148). The deputy principal represented the college when Gillian was not able to attend

(Observation 1, Observation 3, MUP document 1999h; 2000; 2001). College 1 was also involved in the four externally funded projects and the voluntary collaborative activities organised by MUP. Thus, organisational commitment to MUP was evident though Gillian's personal attendance at meetings might suggest that she was not quite as committed to MUP as other key actors. However, interview data shows that she was personally very committed to MUP but had to ask her deputy to attend on her behalf due to more pressing concerns at College 1.

During the period of the fieldwork for this study College 1 had to take over the management of a failing neighbouring FE college and Gillian as principal of College 1 had to manage the merger and integration of the two colleges, including redundancies for some of the staff in the failing college. This also meant that College 1, which was already a multi-campus college, acquired more campuses to manage as well as more staff and curriculum areas. The launch of the 'new' college is noted in first observation of MUP Board:

> One of the colleges in the partnership was being re-launched today, following the re-organisation of FE in X [name of borough], with a new name and some of the discussion over coffee before the formal start of the meeting centred on this development. (Observation 1, 1/10/99)

Margaret also mentioned this at the formal start of the meeting when taking apologies for absence. She explained that this was the reason that Gillian was not able to attend personally and that for today the deputy principal was representing College 1 (Observation 1). At the MUP meeting held in July 2000, I noted:

> Gillian was not able to attend today due to more pressing commitments at her college. In her absence Margaret chaired the meeting. (Observation 3, 7/7/00)

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Gillian was again tied up at College 1 and unable to attend MUP Executive Group. Gillian did attend the next MUP meeting, held in September 2000, and it was at this meeting that the question of who should take over the Chair of both MUP Board and MUP Executive group was discussed. During a lengthy discussion about MUP becoming a subscription-based organisation Gillian revealed her skill at 'searching out errors and omissions' (Belbin 2005, p.3) characteristics associated with a completer finisher (Belbin 2005), shown in the extract below:

Margaret: In order for structures to work...we have to have administrative support

Gillian: Are we moving to a subscription-based organisation?

Janet: The same debate is going on everywhere...it's a test of commitment... the question is whether we should all be tested **equally**

Margaret: The challenge is to find £1500 from impoverished organisations... lifelong learning partnerships can draw on government funding to support their activity...

Janet: I say if you don't want to subscribe, walk

Margaret: I'd like to see some sensitivity about smaller organisations ...perhaps we can look at a flat model and a differential model of contributions...say £600 per member for large organisations and less for smaller ...can we ask a sub-group to look at this and report back to the next meeting?

(a number of members volunteered to look at this and report back to the next meeting)

Gillian: There's also the ticklish matter of the Chair

Margaret: I'd like some advice about the process for choosing Chairs...

(Observation 4, 29/9/00)

As Chair of MUP Executive Group, Gillian had to ensure that reports on projects were delivered to external funding bodies on time and that tasks were completed

according to agreed dates and so she had a monitoring role for MUP as well as a completer finisher one. She carried out these roles despite her commitments at College 1 as she was the first chair of MUP Executive Group and carried out this role until October 2000. Her personal commitment to MUP is revealed in interview data (see p.187) where Gillian talks about the liberation of working collaboratively across borough boundaries and MUP being a stance of the colleges standing together (see p.183) and rearticulating the FE mission (see p.157). This was founded on the belief that by working in this partnership she and her organisation could make a contribution to the wider aspirations of 'tackling disadvantage and promoting social inclusion' (Interview 5). Thus, despite the challenges of managing a merger in her own college and the many other partnerships her organisation was involved in, she ensured that the college was represented at MUP meetings and involved in all its collaborative activities. In her interview she spoke about the number of partnerships she and the college were involved in and the place of MUP:

> Gillian: The college is involved in hundreds of partnerships and I probably wouldn't be able to count them for you...now predominantly these partnerships are borough based but not exclusively and if I had to sort of rate on a scale of importance the MUP in relation to a whole set of other partnerships for this college it's probably the borough based that are the most important at the moment ...but the sub-regional dimension is evolving very quickly ...(Interview 5, 11/5/01)

The relative contributions of Gillian, Stephen and Margaret and their organisations were central to the expansion of MUP. As managers of three large educational institutions they were able to draw on the resources of their own institutions to support MUP as well as use their personal skills and connections to lead the growth of the partnership. It was also noticeable that the two women took on the key roles of chairing the formal structures of the partnership. The other three members of the

inner circle, Ian, Ken and Christine (shown in Figure 9) supported the structures of partnership working and participated in collaborative activities managed by MUP though their relative contributions were less significant.

Ian, Ken and Christine: committed and trusted participants

Ian, Ken and Christine were representatives of smaller organisations. Ian and Ken represented two of the four TECs and Christine represented careers and guidance services (see Figure 9). All three were heads of their respective organisations and personally attended MUP meetings. Ken (TEC 2) and Christine (Prospects Careers Service) attended eight of the nine meetings I observed and Ian (TEC 1) attended six of the nine (see log of attendance, p.148). They adopted the role of trusted and committed participants in partnership working, displaying some of the characteristics of teamworker as they were co-operative and diplomatic (Belbin 2005) even though their organisations did not directly benefit from the externally funded projects managed by MUP. In her interview, Christine, who agreed to Chair MUP Board when Margaret stepped down, highlighted the advantages of involvement in MUP:

> ...it's a networking thing for me...I mean there are other networking things but it's a networking opportunity and a forum I mean there are other things but that's what it [MUP] is really...it's quite useful for both me and the organisation, our involvement is a bit more um...peripheral's not quite the word for it but it's just different to um a provider...
> (Interview 17, 11/6/01)

Christine's organisation was not a provider of education or training and so MUP was an opportunity to network and learn about provision and developments in the sub-region. Similarly, the representatives of the two TECs were committed to the values and ideals of MUP and provided organisational and personal support for partnership

activities. In addition to attending meetings and events organised by the partnership Ken hosted a MUP Board meeting at his TEC offices (Observation 4) before his organisation was merged with other TECs to form the local LSC. Ian's attendance at MUP meetings was lower than Ken's but his commitment to MUP was evident in his interview as he reflected on the development of the partnership and the importance of its sub-regional focus. He commented:

> We've [TEC 1] been a member since it [MUP] started and the synchronisation of objectives of MUP is a simple way of explaining things...the fact that MUP is on a Black Country level of lifelong learning and moves towards involving that was how it came about really...and there's a clear benefit in having a sub-regional focus rather than a parochial local focus. (Interview 17, 6/11/01)

Ian's major contribution was to provide business-planning expertise to the partnership but, like Gillian, he was pulled away from MUP by organisational changes. In Ian's case, it was the merger of the four Black Country TECs into the local LSC as he became the director of funding for the new organisation and this work had to take priority over attendance at MUP meetings. He could however, still be called upon to give support to MUP and was a key actor in the formulation of the business plan to re-invigorate the partnership after the trough in its lifecourse (Interview 17, Interview 9).

Apart from Margaret and the five members of the inner circle discussed above there was one other person who played a key role in the expansion of MUP. This was Jenny, the partnership administrator, who was a conduit for information flows during expansion in MUP's lifecourse.

Jenny: dedicated partnership administrator and conduit for information flows

Jenny made a major contribution to expanding MUP as a sub-regional network. She was the partnership administrator for eighteen months from January 1999-June 2000 and became an effective and efficient conduit for information flows (Ebers 1997a) amongst the members. Roger singled out her contribution during a discussion about what makes a partnership work effectively:

> Roger: I think it's important to have a structure, an infrastructure and a secretariat, I really do, and I think for me the most efficacious time was when Jenny was here
>
> JD: That was certainly a time when there was a lot of activity and people knew exactly what was happening…
>
> Roger: Absolutely…I mean apart from Jenny's own qualities and we were incredibly fortunate to get her because she was on the market…we fitted her needs erm…she had a tremendous number of skills, a certain diplomacy er…**and** I think this is the critical point, this was her job, she had the one job erm I think it's no criticism at all of Kelly trying to do MUP and something else…
>
> (Interview 12, 14/8/01)

In addition to her skills and qualities, Jenny was also the only person who was appointed to the specific post of partnership administrator for MUP. Other individuals who undertook administration for MUP did so in addition to their normal role of PA to one of the members of MUP Board yet several members commented on the importance of efficient administration in partnership working, including Margaret who said 'you need that administrative support to chivvy and move things forward' (Interview 9, 20/6/01).

Jenny did more than chivvy things along. She forged formal and informal channels of communication between members of the partnership by visiting each partner

organisation and establishing personal networks with people who came to MUP meetings (Interview 3). She set up a regular newsletter (MUP 1999b; 2000b), ensured that receipt of papers for Board meetings were timely, and engaged in networking before and after formal partnership meetings (Observation 2, 3, 4). The networks that Jenny established became essential channels for information flows and a significant factor in the success and expansion of the partnership from 1999-2000.

Jenny also established and maintained an accurate database of individuals and organisations involved in collaborative activities linked to MUP (1999a). She used this information source to channel knowledge and information to members, which facilitated the formation of inter-organisational links and professional connections amongst individuals in partner organisations. The bridges (Granovetter 1973) that Jenny actively developed added to the 'clubby' nature of the partnership:

> It's all embracing so you don't want to be outside the circle…it [MUP] does some good things in terms of bringing folk together who might otherwise not have been brought together…so it's a ready made conduit for development (Interview 12, 14/8/01)

Jenny was a key personality in expanding the networks that underpinned partnership working and like Margaret played a pivotal role in adding new nodes to the network structure that supported the growth of MUP. When Jenny left and Margaret and Gillian stepped down as Chairs of MUP Board and MUP Executive Group, the partnership started to decline and move into a trough in its lifecourse.

In the next section I discuss partnership working during the trough in MUP's lifecourse. I begin by presenting prominent characteristics of this period and then

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consider the contribution of external policy to ambivalence. This is followed by an analysis of internal aspects of partnership working including power differentials and the relative contributions of member organisations and individuals.

6.3   Ambivalence: a trough in the lifecourse of MUP

The depth of the decline in partnership activity during this stage in MUP's lifecourse is graphically shown in Figure 7 (see p.178). I have labelled this period ambivalence, as the partnership experienced uncertainty about its future and members were ambivalent about its role in the sub-region. As Figure 7 shows, participation in colloborative activities plummeted from 25-30 organisations being actively involved to 5-8 organisations being active whilst others took on a passive coasting role or became dormant nodes in the network structure that underpinned MUP. Some members started to question the value of belonging to MUP and this was reflected in the level of representation at meetings. Andrew, a founder member, commented:

> I'm bound to say in all honesty that some of the members er like the local authority representative, workers education and er careers service, TECs, were asking themselves what was the point of continuing to go to meetings er ...I think there was a period where meetings were not well attended by people of senior executive level and no doubt if you study the notes and minutes of the meetings you'll find that. (Interview 10, 27/6/01)

The prominent characteristics of partnership working during this period, noted in Figure 7, include the absence of a partnership administrator, cancelled and poorly attended meetings, and a drift to inactivity before key actors pulled MUP 'back from the brink' of extinction. The severity of the situation for the partnership was reflected in requests for my assistance in the work of MUP. During this period I took

the minutes of several meetings and circulated them to members, partly taking on the role of partnership administrator, and chaired a workshop at the action-planning day held in June 2001 (Observation 6). These changes to partnership working contrasted sharply with the enthusiasm, energy and range of collaborative activities that were evident during MUP's expansion, discussed in Section 6.2.

Organisational and individual participation in partnership activity during this deep trough in MUP's lifecourse was affected by external policy developments. These included the formation of the LSC and the growth of borough-based partnerships, which focused on developments within each borough rather than across the four boroughs of the Black Country. Internal aspects of partnership working in MUP, such as the lack of an administrator and the change in Chairs of MUP Board and MUP Executive Group also contributed to uncertainty and a loss of momentum. During this period, other partnerships became more significant for key actors and less powerful personalities took on pivotal roles in the organisational structures of MUP. Furthermore, members of MUP Board began to question the aims, role and identity of the partnership, as part of a process which incorporated re-negotiating its identity as a provider forum (Observations 3, 4, MUP document 2000a; 2001), as discussed in Chapter 5.

The policy context and its contribution to ambivalence in MUP

Ambivalence in MUP coincided with the implementation of New Labour's major re-structuring (Blunkett 2000) of the planning, provision and funding of post-16 learning, in particular the formation of the Learning and Skills Council and its local arms, discussed in Chapter 1. One of these local arms was set up in the Black

Country and involved members of MUP. The Learning and Skills Act of July 2000 (HMSO 2000) established the LSC which took over responsibility for funding all post-16 learning in April 2001 from the FEFC (LSC 2005). So the period from September 2000-July 2001, the trough in MUP's lifecourse was a period of uncertainty and change for providers of post-16 learning, such as the members of MUP.

The impact of transition from TECs to LSC

The representatives of the TECs who were involved in the transition from four borough-based TECs to one local LSC, the Black Country LSC, most acutely experienced the impact of the changes. This was reflected in their attendance at MUP meetings, involvement in collaborative activities and willingness to take on roles and responsibilities in the partnership. Joy, (TEC 3) attended all MUP meetings until September 2000 (see log of attendance p.148) but during the transition from TECs to the LSC she took early retirement. Alan (TEC 4) only attended three out of the nine meetings I observed, two out of the four held in 1999-2000 and one out of the four held in 2001. Even Ian (TEC 1) who was a committed and trusted participant was pulled away by other commitments and missed three of the four meetings held in 2001. Ken (TEC 2) was the only TEC representative who managed to attend most MUP meetings; the only one he missed was held in 2001. None of the TEC representatives took on any leadership or management roles in MUP.

The establishment of the Black Country LSC not only impacted on member organisations and individuals but also contributed to ambiguity about the role of MUP in the sub-region. During its expansion, MUP had articulated a sub-regional

role for itself and one which included improving the quality of post-16 provision in the Black Country through 'joined-up thinking' and collaborative working. However, now that the LSC had a sub-regional remit and was responsible for planning and ensuring the quality of post-16 learning there was a question mark over the role that MUP could play in the sub-region. Helen, an FE college principal, reflected on this change in her interview:

> I think [MUP], you know, if I'm honest about it I think it's struggling...it's lost its focus...in a sense the rugs been pulled to another Black Country Agency....I think the leadership's quite clearly gone to the Learning and Skills Council, I don't think anybody would argue with that.
> (Interview 6, 6/6/01)

In addition to the formation of the LSC, Helen identified another factor which she felt contributed to the loss of focus in MUP:

> Where [MUP] started to struggle was when the local authorities started to be aware that they needed to work in partnership locally in order to access funding and, as I said, X [name of borough in which her college was located] started early with mega consultation events to do with strategic planning for the borough...there's partnership meetings for everything and if you're a local partner like us that's quite a heavy workload...
> (Interview 6, 6/6/01)

The growing importance of borough-based initiatives in two of the Black Country boroughs pulled key individuals away from MUP due to these competing demands on their time, leading to a lack of synergy and drift in MUP.

The competing demands of borough-based partnerships

Helen and Andrew, both FE college principals and founder members of MUP, stressed the conflicting demands of borough-based initiatives and their consequent inability to attend MUP meetings personally due to the increased workload of

partnership meetings in their boroughs, which were attracting funding from various government sources such as SRB and regional development agencies. Helen, principal of College 3, mentioned the 'mega consultations' in her borough and:

> SRB meetings with casts of thousands because the meetings in X [name of borough] are so complex …they have pre-meetings with members of the community so they could understand the agenda for the meeting and then the thing [the meeting] starts at sort of eleven and runs 'til four…there's a lot of pressure on time …and when I come back I still have loads of work to do, you know, that's just flogging a dead horse yourself really…
> (Interview 6, 6/6/01)

Helen's comments show how much time has to be invested in partnership working. She attended all MUP meetings during expansion but her college was not represented at any meetings during ambivalence (see log of attendance, p.148). However, she responded quickly to my request to interview her for this study and sent me comments on the transcript of her interview. During her interview Helen reflected on MUP's development and remarked that the partnership had become 'a talking shop' and that she and her staff could not afford the time to continue attending partnership meetings because 'we're getting very adept at deciding if we're getting value for our time, I decide now if the meeting isn't going anywhere after an hour that I'll go' (Interview 6, 6/6/01). Helen's assessment of MUP indicated that it was going nowhere and so she could not afford to invest time in it.

Andrew, principal of a college in a different borough (College 6), discussed the growing significance of other partnerships in the borough especially Greenshires Partnership, a borough-based regeneration initiative involving College 6. He said:

Green is a significant part of X [name of borough] which has huge social and economic erm problems and...the Greenshires project one of the first in the community is a £58 million long-term project so we're very much involved with that er I would say the other key ones [partnerships] for us are...(Interview 10, 27/6/01)

Andrew admitted that he had not been able to attend any MUP meetings personally in 2001 because 'there are other places I have had to be' (Interview 10) although his college was represented at MUP meetings by his assistant principal. He also commented on the 'vagueness' and 'lack of focus' in MUP during 2001 and linked this to poor attendance at meetings particularly by people at executive level in their organisations.

Borough-based initiatives did not only affect participation in MUP by Helen and Andrew but were also reflected in the work of other members of MUP. This included Gillian, who spoke about the importance of borough-based partnerships (see p.207) and the key role of her college in these developments and Carol, who was appointed to chair Learning Plus, a borough-based initiative with a budget of £22 million spread over seven years. Carol, director of a private training provider, said that Learning Plus was just one of the partnerships she was involved with and that:

It's all IT and again networking again within IT I don't begin to pretend to understand the mechanics of this it's beyond me again it's linked with lifelong learning and different ways of getting people engaged in learning...the Learning and Skills Council is very much involved in all of that um I feel that sometimes there are so many bodies involved that the plot gets lost somewhere along the line... (Interview 14, 29/8/01)

Other members of MUP echoed Carol's comment about so many bodies being involved in initiatives (Interview 5, 9 and 12). For example, Gillian, commented on 'the plethora of initiatives and tiny funding streams' which her college had to work

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with and described the government's approach to 'support a lifelong learning strategy through little pockets of hypothecated initiative funding' as a 'madness...a madness' (Interview 5, 11/5/01). These initiatives, part of the external policy context for partnership working, contributed to ambivalence in MUP as they pulled key people such as Helen, Andrew and Gillian away from the partnership so that they became dormant nodes in the network structure of MUP. Other key actors including Ian and Margaret were also pulled away from MUP by a change in job role for Ian, and demands on Margaret's time from her institution leading her to step down as Chair of MUP. These developments led to changes in the power and influence of the partnership in the Black Country due to shifts in power relationships between the participating organisations and individuals which are discussed below.

Power differentials between institutions and individuals

During ambivalence representatives of smaller organisations who were less experienced managers carried out key roles in the partnership. Christine, representing the careers service, a relatively small organisation became Chair of MUP Board. She replaced Margaret, a senior manager at the university (Observation 4) who as partnership broker had driven the expansion of MUP and effectively managed the process of partnership working by adopting the roles of co-ordinator and shaper (Belbin 2005). Richard, who was principal of a small FE college became Chair of MUP Executive Group. He replaced Gillian, principal of a large FE college that was becoming even larger as a result of a merger (Observation 5). Gillian had adopted the role of completer finisher (Belbin 2005) in MUP during its expansion phase. The loss of Margaret and Gillian led to a significant change in the internal working of MUP, partly due to the power differentials between their personalities

and profile compared to those of Christine and Richard and partly due the resources they could draw on to manage and support partnership working. One member of MUP Board singled out the profile of the Chair as a significant factor in how MUP was perceived during the trough in its development. He commented:

> I was a bit surprised that Christine was the Chair...that was a bit odd really I mean I like Christine but she's operational, gets on with the thing but well I thought it's not the right image if you want people to stand up and look at what you do...what you do is get a high profile Chair...I mean would a business man know who Christine is ...She's Chair of MUP...well I think there's something about profile. (Interview 13, 15/8/01)

Christine did not have the charisma or sub-regional profile that Margaret had developed and though she was competent in chairing meetings was not able to provide the vision or connections to other organisations and individuals that were possible through Margaret's formal and informal networks. Furthermore, unlike Margaret she was not able to draw on the resources of her own organisation to provide administrative support for partnership working. In fact as the manager of a small organisation, she was quite protective of her staff and their time as she said, 'well I don't involve any other staff in it [MUP]... cos they've got too much else to do so I try and restrict it to myself' (Interview 7, 11/6/01).

These internal changes in MUP further aggravated the uncertainties resulting from the shifting external policy environment and led to a loss of momentum in partnership working.

Uncertainty and loss of momentum in MUP's activities

Ian, a founder member, reflected this change in his account of the partnership's development:

Over the past number of years there's been a clear benefit of having a sub-regional focus [through MUP]...it gave the opportunity to meet people in the wider education field and share good practice...**now** I have to be honest and say I'm struggling to see the real benefits er tangible benefits at the moment but I think that's to do where MUP is ...and its organisational development (Interview 17, 6/11/01)

Ian was a committed participant in MUP but was now struggling to see the benefits of the partnership. Andrew, another founder member identified some of changes in the partnership's development:

...I think there was a period where meetings were not well attended in general and certainly not well attended by people of senior executive level...there's been a change over the three years...people at executive level are not attending as regularly as they used to, there is what I call diary slippage...I think whoever is now secretary to the partnership should be more pushful in checking that people have got dates in diaries...I mean if you don't get into people's diaries pppttt... (Interview 10, 27/6/01)

'Diary slippage' was very much a characteristics of partnership working during ambivalence. Attendance at meetings dropped markedly and some meetings were cancelled altogether. For example, the attendance at three meetings held during ambivalence was between 4-6 members in comparison to 16-18 members during expansion (see log of attendance, p.148). Two meetings were cancelled (MUP document 2001b) and some organisations drifted away altogether (College 3, TEC 3, TEC 4, WEA, OCN) whilst representatives of others attended irregularly (College 5, 6, 7, Adult Ed).

The level of representation at meetings also changed. Principals, started to send assistant or deputy principals to represent their organisations at MUP meetings rather than attending personally (MUP document 2001b, Observations 5-7). Andrew spoke

about the considerations that affected his decision to send an assistant principal to MUP meetings rather than attending personally. He said:

> One of the things that I will have to do this morning is making sure that this college is represented...now in general organisational terms that speaks volumes because if MUP was so dynamic so important around here then people would organise their diaries around it erm other things that have arrived on the scene that are for the immediate moment more important...not that MUP isn't important and others [members of MUP] are trying very hard to make an important voice ... (Interview 10, 27/6/01)

Assistant principals, deputy principals and middle managers represented second tier people who were less powerful and sometimes less committed to MUP than founder members and executive level managers and they adopted more of a reporting passive role rather than a shaper, driver, or champion of the partnership. In one of the workshops held during an action-planning day, Luke, the assistant principal representing College 6 said, 'I'm just here to take notes and report back to my manager about what's happening in the partnership' (Observation 6, 8/6/01). Representatives from the university who had made a substantial contribution to driving MUP's expansion continued to participate in the partnership but took more of a back seat as the university executive started to question the amount of time they were devoting to MUP, as indicated below:

> The vice chancellor said well I want pay-off for this you're investing all the time, [names of three representatives of the institution on MUP] what are we getting from it really and so I suspect the vice-chancellor might wonder is it worth the cost because the cost to him is my time, Margaret's time and Roger's time...(Interview 2, 4/7/00)

As university representatives such as Margaret and Roger were pulled away from MUP the voluntary collaborative activities managed by the partnership, particularly

the work of the practitioner groups, which had been driven by Roger, fizzled out. Furthermore, when Jenny's eighteen-month contract as partnership administrator came to an end, there was a further loss of impetus as communication and information flows in MUP disintegrated.

Relative contributions of representatives of different types of organisations

The previous section has shown how managers from smaller organisations took on key roles in MUP during ambivalence, replacing managers from larger organisations who had driven the expansion of the partnership. During this trough, MUP Board lost the skills, qualities and profile of Margaret, the partnership broker, Gillian, the completer finisher, and Ian, a trusted and committed participant. These three members of the inner circle (shown in Figure 10, on the next page) became dormant nodes in the network structure that underpinned partnership working, as they were pulled away from MUP by other roles and responsibilities in their respective institutions. The other members of the inner circle managed 'to keep the relationship going more or less' (Interview 6, 6/6/01). Stephen continued in his role of philosopher king and resource provider by hosting MUP meetings at his college and Ken remained a trusted participant who attended most meetings whilst Christine became Chair of MUP Board.
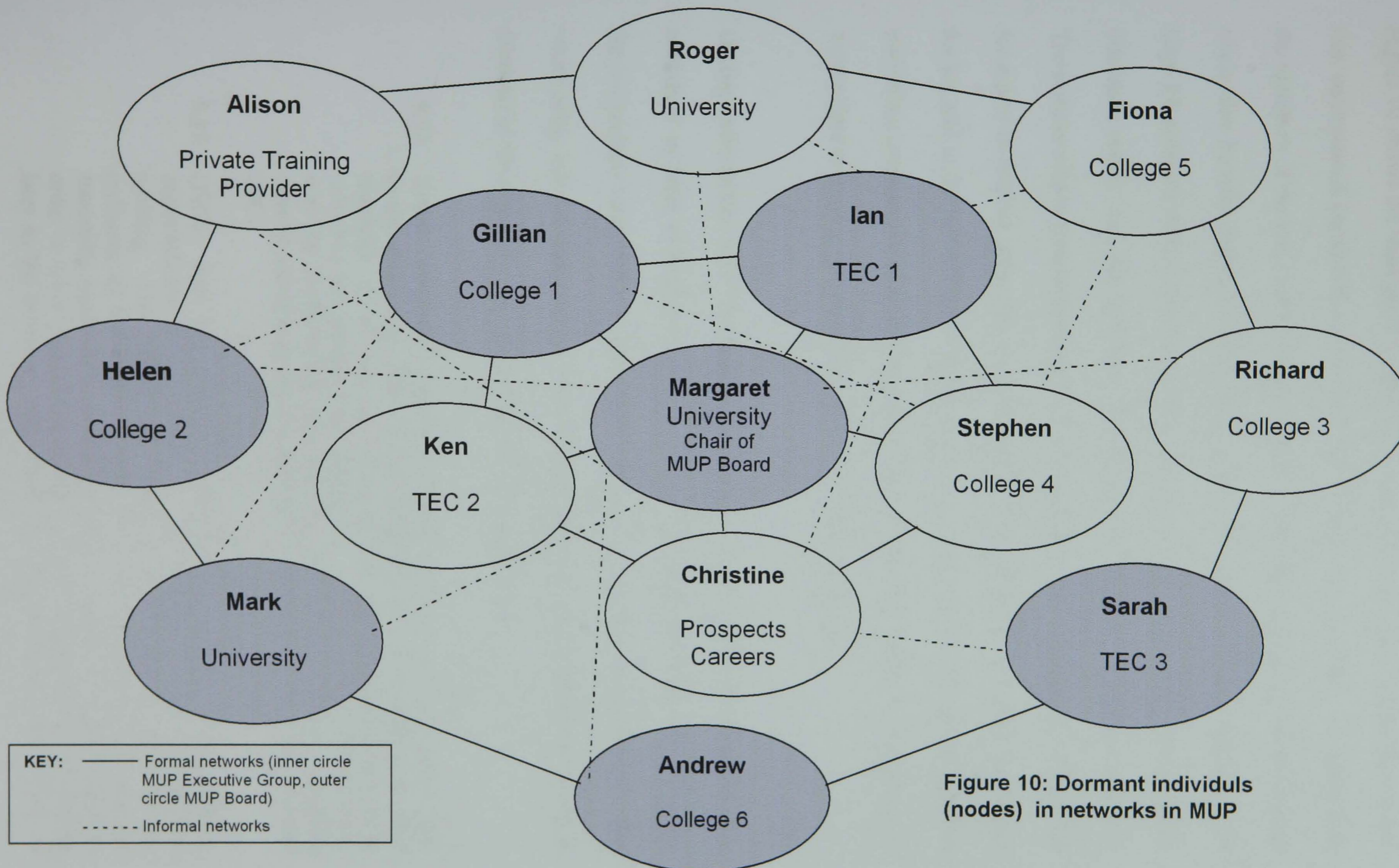
Figure 10: Dormant individuls (nodes) in networks in MUP

KEY:
——— Formal networks (inner circle MUP Executive Group, outer circle MUP Board)
- - - - - Informal networks

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Figure 10 shows the individuals who became dormant nodes in the network structure that underpinned partnership working in MUP during ambivalence. In addition to the members of the inner circle discussed above, other key individuals from the outer circle also became dormant during this period. Andrew and Helen, principals of large FE colleges drifted away and sent lower level managers to MUP meetings, as discussed earlier, and Joy took early retirement from TEC 3 and was not replaced. The number of university representatives on MUP Board also contracted as Mark left for a post in another university in the north of England and no substitute was found for his role in the partnership. Roger, another university representative, managed to maintain a presence in MUP but was not able to attend all meetings or to continue to devote time to leading collaborative activities for the partnership.

During ambivalence MUP became a small group of committed professionals who continued to meet at irregular intervals to discharge responsibilities for on-going funded projects rather than a partnership with a strong sub-regional presence. The uncertainty, lack of direction and poor communications that marked this period is revealed in the observational data, shown in the extract below:

9.25   Board members arriving, helping themselves to coffee and exchanging news. Some were taking the opportunity to arrange other meetings or to feedback progress on developments from other networks and partnerships in the area. Today's major item of news was the forthcoming appointments to the LSC. Some members offered views and opinions about possible appointees to the regional LSC.

9.35   Gillian was not able to attend today due to more pressing commitments at her college. In her absence Margaret chaired the meeting. The agenda was slightly altered to enable Mike, the co-ordinator of the Black Country Ufi hub for which MUP was the managing agent, to begin with his report. Mike had to leave early in order to travel across the Black Country to attend another meeting later in the morning. The other meeting was about connectivity of

new centres of learning to the hub as part of Black Country Learndirect (BC Learndirect).

9.40 Mike began by circulating a copy of his update on the activity of BC Learndirect and commented at the lack of notice he had received about today's meeting. In future he asked if he could be notified earlier. He said he had only found out about this meeting 'by accident'.

Mike's comment is indicative of the difficulties caused by the lack of a permanent dedicated administrator for MUP business.

Mike presented his report which gave a breakdown of units of learning delivered by centres in the hub and payments from FEFC. The report also provided details of the number of learners registered by gender and age and noted that 96% were White. There was some discussion and questions from other members of the Board before Mike left to travel to the other meeting.

10.45 Margaret :...item 5 on the agenda, MUP The Next Generation, 2nd draft, you all received this in the papers for the meeting ...I'm hoping to get some detail confirmed today...

Shuffling of papers as members find the relevant paper and focus their attention on the next agenda item

(Observation 3, 7/700)

The data presented above also shows the difficulties being experienced by the partnership due to the lack of a partnership administrator. Mike, the co-ordinator of a major project managed by MUP, had only found out about the MUP meeting 'by accident' through his informal networks as formal communication and information flows in the partnership had broken down.

Breakdown in communication and information flows

The lack of dedicated administrative support meant that the agenda and papers for meetings were sometimes only sent out a few days before the meeting. For example, I received hard copies of the agenda and papers for the first three meetings I observed at least a week before the meeting whilst for the next three they were

emailed to everyone the day before the meeting (Observations 1-6). Some people, like Mike who were not formally members of MUP Board but were invited quests and required to report to MUP Board on funded projects, did not receive notification of meetings. Newsletters and visits to partner organisations that Jenny used to undertake as partnership administrator to maintain information and communication flows ceased and actions from meetings were not always followed up. A university representative commented on the consequences of this for partnership working:

> There is nothing more dispiriting than turning from one meeting to another and discovering that nothing has happened in the interim and that nobody has done any work and we're still where we were three months ago...the days when we all sat around a table and discovered how wonderful it was to talk to each other because we'd never talked to each other before are gone...everybody's quite jaded about partnership working that doesn't go anywhere so you need actions coming out of discussions and you need things moving on...(Interview 16, 19/9/01)

The consequence for MUP was a meandering existence during which Christine, Chair of MUP Board, and Richard, Chair of MUP Executive Group, tried to inform members of meetings and provide minutes/notes of those meetings but were unable to keep the partnership action orientated. Discussions in meetings focused on the internal mechanisms for partnership working, such as funding a MUP administrator (Observations 5-8), rather than on how the partnership could make a major contribution to widening participation in post-16 learning in the Black Country sub-region (Observations 1-4). As the more formal channels of communication and the networks, which Jenny had forged, began to disintegrate individuals in the partnership started to rely more heavily on their informal networks. There was also some evidence of a dilution in levels of trust amongst members as in an informal

conversation with me after a formally scheduled partnership meeting (Observation 7) one member said:

> When a meeting's over we [three individuals] get on the phone to each other to talk about what's **really** gone on in the MUP Board meeting.
> (Journal entry, 29/6/01)

Christine and Richard had to cope with a disintegrating network structure, poor communication and information flows and fewer active participants in the process of partnership working. Furthermore, these participants became entangled in negotiating the costs of resourcing partnership working.

Resourcing the costs of partnership working

The major issue that preoccupied members of MUP during the period that Christine and Richard chaired the two key sub-groups in the partnership was finding a way of funding the post of partnership administrator. This was a major agenda item at the meetings held in May, June and July 2001 (MUP document 2001b; 2001c). The issue led to a wider debate about the costs of resourcing the partnership and the need to become subscription-based in order to fund the costs of partnership working, largely administrative support (Observation 5). This was necessary since MUP did not receive any funding from an external agency to function as a partnership. A sub-group had been set up in September 2000 to recommend a rate of subscription per organisation (Observation 4) but MUP Board did not agree to a subscription until July 2001 (Observation 7). The debate around these financial aspects of partnership working exposed some underlying tensions around motivations for participating in MUP and revealed the role of trust and values in sustaining a partnership, which are discussed in Chapter 7.

The debate about funding a partnership administrator was intriguing. I was surprised that a group of executive managers, some with budgets of millions, seemed unable to find a way of funding a 0.5 administrator for MUP (Observations 5-8). It took the group from July 2000 until February 2002, over 18 months to arrange for the same person to provide administrative support to MUP, (MUP document 2002), whilst during this period ad hoc arrangements were used to inform partners of meetings and to keep records. The spiralling loss of impetus and lack of clarity about the partnership's role and identity is reflected in the minutes of the MUP meeting held in July 2001:

> It was confirmed that £10,000 has been earmarked by MUP Board for administrative support. Christine and Richard were asked to work out the roles of the administrator and give direction and support. There was some concern that projects were slipping and awareness that MUP needed to network with Lifelong Learning Partnerships and the LSC. This needed swift action to identify a person who could take on the roles and tasks needed. (MUP document 2001c)

The administrator was not actually able to undertake her role until March 2002 (MUP document 2002) as the appointment was further complicated by the fact MUP was not a legal entity and thus could not employ anyone. Jenny, the previous administrator had been employed by one of the partner organisations and so was covered by employment law and any liabilities would have fallen to the university as the employing organisation rather than to MUP. Thus, during ambivalence MUP was left with impromptu arrangements for administrative support which included calling on me to take the minutes of three meetings in 2001.

This chapter has compared partnership working in MUP during a peak, when the partnership was expanding, and a trough, when it was in decline. At the level of

structure, it has shown how the external policy environment shaped and influenced the activities of the partnership. At the level of individual agency, it has shown how power differentials amongst the participating organisations and individuals and their relative contributions through the roles they adopted in the partnership led to a peak and trough in MUP's collaborative activities. During the trough in MUP's lifecourse there appeared to be no obvious reason why it should survive as a partnership but it did. In fact as its lifecourse, discussed in Chapter 5 has shown, it later emerged as a re-invigorated partnership. In research terms this left me with the puzzling question of what sustained the partnership. The next chapter presents participants' perspectives of what sustains partnership.

Chapter 7

Participants' perspectives of partnership

This chapter examines the nature and basis of partnership from the individual perspectives of the senior managers who were participants in the process of partnership working. It presents the research data, largely from one-to-one interviews with members of MUP Board, in which individuals reflect on the experience of partnership working and identify factors that contribute to sustaining a partnership. In their conversations participants discuss the costs and benefits of partnership working both in MUP and in other partnerships and illuminate the role of social capital in underpinning partnership.

In their analysis of partnership working senior managers of post-16 education and training organisations identified 'joining-up', trust and shared goals as the key characteristics of effective partnerships. The presentation of data in this chapter is structured around these three themes. The chapter begins by considering the notion of 'joining-up' which is perceived by members of MUP as a benefit of partnership working and linked to networking and the relationships that underpin social networks. The second part of the chapter examines the role of trust in a partnership and the final part discusses the place of shared goals. The data show that networks, trust and shared goals, which in MUP were based on the collective and individual values and beliefs of the participants, are dimensions of social capital that are perceived to support and sustain a partnership.

7.1 'Joining-up' to work in partnership

Terms associated with 'joining-up' such as 'joined-up thinking' and 'joined-up government' (Field 2000c, Balloch and Taylor 2001) are key ideas in New Labour's policies and associated with new forms of governance, as shown in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 has also shown that such policies are derided by some academics working in post-16 education (Coffield 1999; 2000b, Thompson 2000) and regarded with cynicism by others (Ecclestone 1999, Tight 1998) on the grounds that they are a way of shifting responsibility away from the state to other agencies and individuals for addressing structural inequalities. Critics argue that 'joined-up working' or partnership as promoted by New Labour cannot address the causes of educational, social and economic disadvantage. There is thus some negativity associated with the idea of 'joined-up working' and the notion of partnership.

For the participants in MUP, however, 'joining up' was not a negative idea or practice. Margaret, a university representative, reflected:

> Well, the major benefit of MUP was that it gave people a chance to talk to others across the patch [the Black Country]...the interesting thing and I think that the really pertinent point to make about it was that there was no Black Country organisation in respect of education or at least in respect to post-16 education at that time. All the activity was contained within the four boroughs and there was no pan sub-regional umbrella organisation so this was a new kind of conversation that we were having and there was a great deal of good will attached to it... we wanted to do some joined-up thinking...people were able to forge relationships across the Black Country which they hadn't been able to forge while they remained within their borough boundaries and that was liberating. (Interview 9, 20/6/01)

Margaret had taken the role of partnership broker, chaired MUP during its expansion and been a crucial player in its re-invigoration following the trough in its lifecourse. As the above comments indicate she saw MUP as a forum for 'joined-up thinking'

and described the process of partnership working in MUP as 'liberating'. Gillian, an FE college principal, who was involved in many partnerships besides MUP, saw partnership working in MUP as a way of empowering the participants. She described MUP as a 'stance of colleges and others across the Black Country region standing together and saying: there is much we can gain from each other' (Interview 5, 11/5/01). Stephen likened MUP to a 'sub-regional political force' which could bring about change in post-16 learning and other members of the partnership emphasised its role in promoting and spreading good practice (interviews 6,11,12) through 'joined-up thinking' and 'joined-up working'.

The disparaging connotations of terms associated with 'joining-up' found in some of the post-16 literature were not reflected in the views of participants in MUP. For the members of MUP the notion of 'joining-up' was a positive image which captured the essence and reality of partnership working as they 'joined-up' to draw individuals, organisations and agencies into the partnership to reap the benefits of collaborative activities. Chapters 5 and 6 have shown how key individuals used formal and informal networks to give MUP synergy and achieve shared goals that they could not have achieved individually. Networks and networking to forge new relationships was a key part of the process of partnership working.

Networking

For some individuals participation in MUP was predominantly perceived in terms of networking advantages. Christine, who represented the careers service on MUP Board, said:

...it's actually an incredibly useful communication link because all the providers are there ...so that's a useful benefit and if you're looking to raise information, advice and guidance issues about provision ...because everybody's there it can become a useful forum...so it's a networking thing. (Interview 7, 11/6/01)

For other participants, such as Stephen, Andrew, Helen and Gillian, all FE college principals, it was a combination of networking opportunities and a vehicle to collectively debate and question government policy, such as the funding methodology for FE and strategies to widen participation in post-16 learning. In his interview, Andrew, a forceful personality who was personally intensely committed to widening participation commented scornfully on a recent funded initiative in his borough:

How do you widen participation? Oh God you don't just put leaflets through the door of one of the three sink estates in this borough and say come to college we are friendly we are sexy we love you we will educate you will learn it's a turn off... (Interview 10, 27/6/01)

Andrew had been very active in MUP during its formation but was pulled away by borough-based partnerships in the later stages of its lifecourse. However, he kept 'a watching brief on MUP' by sending his assistant principal to meetings and following the re-invigoration of the partnership in 2002 provided a space at his college for the administrator for MUP. He was thus able to re-activate his personal involvement in the partnership and this was based on his values and commitment rather than pragmatic and strategic reasons for partnership working. The role of values in MUP is discussed Section 7.3.

My observations of partnership working also noted the significance of networking, illustrated below by extracts from observations of two MUP Board meetings:

A good rapport was evident both from the non-verbal communication and the level of interaction. Everyone was relaxed and at ease. The individuals representing their organisations at this meeting seemed to have established good relations with each other [noted at beginning of meeting]

Members lingered to chat informally after the meeting and the administrator did a lot of networking and checked that all members had received all the papers [noted at end of meeting]
(Observation 1, 1/10/99)

Various members chatting informally at the end of the meeting. Some members chatting outside in the car park - some still chatting 10-15 minutes after the formal end of the meeting. There was strong evidence of networking.

(Observation 2, 12/5/00)

In addition to noting the level of networking my notes suggest warm relationships amongst members of MUP, an indicator of the social function of the partnership. They also show that much of the networking was actually taking place outside the formal scheduled part of a meeting. As fieldwork progressed and I developed closer trust-based relationships with the members of the partnership I discovered that before, after and between formally scheduled MUP Board meetings individuals joined-up to network, exchange information, clarify misinformation and generally find out what was going on in 'the patch' [the term affectionately used by key individuals to refer to the Black Country].

The need for this type of informal networking and opportunities to develop relationships in a partnership are highlighted by Sally, an adult education representative, who commented:

I think the networking is a necessary precondition to enable proper co-operation and collaboration to take place and I think that the thing we're all surprised about is...it takes a lot of time and effort to get to the degree of

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confidence and mutual confidence to be really co-operative and collaborative than one might think for a simple rational discussion about the issues because there's so many complex issues involved broadly around people's aspirations for themselves, for their institutions...then there's the complexities of human relationships...(Interview 3, 21/7/01)

The time and effort needed to sustain 'joining-up'

The time taken to develop such relationships and manage 'joining-up' was identified as the major cost of partnership working by all members of MUP. The issue of time also revealed tensions amongst participants, as illustrated by the following extract from an interview:

JD: What would you say are the costs of being a member of MUP?

Andrew: Time

JD: Right, yes

Andrew: Time er it's a very interesting question not all members are at their best at the same times of day

JD: uhum

Andrew: There are one or two members who are unfamiliar with times of the day before nine thirty in the morning

JD: Yes

Andrew: There are others of us who would very much prefer to have meetings early in the mornings because the roads are quieter

(Interview 10, 27/6/01)

Andrew, a very busy college principal, was frustrated by the timing of MUP meetings as they always started at 10am and finished between 1-2pm followed by lunch and were usually held on a Friday. This practice facilitated a great deal of informal networking through 'hob-nobbing' before and after meetings, as shown by the observational data cited earlier, but it was also a source of tension. For Andrew who

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was at his desk before 8 am (Interview 10), it interfered with his working day. It was further aggravated by the practice of rotating the meetings around the partner organisations which members of MUP Board had agreed to implement in order to give equal status to all member organisations as key individuals had argued that 'if it's a **partnership** that's got to be right' (Observation 3, 7//700). This meant that MUP meetings were hosted by different partner organisations across the Black Country and as members drove to these meetings they lost most of the working day to one meeting. This practice based on a proactive and positive principle, that of reciprocity and equality in a partnership, caused some tensions. However, despite the tensions signalled by Andrew, attendance at meetings and commitment to MUP remained relatively high except during ambivalence in MUP's lifecourse.

In addition to finding the time to participate effectively in a partnership, senior managers commented on the more complex task of managing relationships in a partnership. Many individuals likened partnership to a marriage and Andrew graphically illustrated the fundamental basis of a partnership using the image of a palm tree. He said:

> ...a palm tree in the wind, there's the palm tree very strong, very strong bears fruit the wind blows this way and the palm tree flexes the wind blows the other way the palm tree flexes, but the tree is not blown down and the tree continues to bear fruit...now that's part of a partnership - tolerance, understanding...the ability to say it all at the partnership meeting not to say white at the meeting and then when its finished you go round saying black , that does happen erm telephones start ringing...(Interview 10, 27/6/01)

The image of the palm tree conveys both the strength and the fundamental roots of partnership which serve to hold it together despite tensions and conflicts that may

arise in relationships amongst the actors. Andrew commented on the importance of tolerance, understanding and honesty amongst individuals in a partnership and alluded to the damage caused by lack of trust. His comment 'telephones start ringing' corroborates observational data in which some individuals in MUP admitted to me that they rang each other up after meetings to find out what had really happened at the meeting (see p.227). Andrew went on to say that a partnership is like a marriage but much more complex because:

> ...everybody knows that a marriage between two people is difficult and you have to work at it but we're talking about marriages between twelve, fifteen, twenty different people all of whom come from different backgrounds, all of whom in terms of their organisations have different wealth, all of whom have different ambitions and are different ages, er so it is very very difficult...
> (Interview 10, 27/6/01)

The difficulties of managing differences in the ambitions, motivations and personalities of individuals and the size, resources and power of the organisations they represent all contribute to tensions and conflicts which have to be reconciled through the process of partnership working or 'joining-up'. Trust plays a fundamental role in managing such tensions and conflicts and provides the basis for effective partnership working. The role of trust is considered below.

7.2   The role of trust in sustaining partnership

The dominant theme in the research data in relation to what sustains a partnership is trust. In the interview data the majority response to the open question of what makes a partnership work effectively is trust, mentioned by over 70% of the senior managers interviewed for this study. There were differences in individual perceptions of the meaning of trust and variations in emphasis in relation to the level and type of trust

that is needed but its centrality to partnership was clearly signalled. Roger, a university representative, commented:

> Trust between members...openness and I think that in the case of MUP there is an openness and I think that's because currently there's not a vast amount at stake...I mean if there's been money through projects it's been evenly shared and it's small Toto's really...the partnership's not a bidding factory but a sharing of information. (Interview 12, 14/8/01)

Gillian, an FE college principal, reflected:

> I think effective partnership operation is very, very demanding and very challenging and I think in the last few years erm... colleges like ours and everybody else who's been affected by this in the public sector I suppose, has been having to learn as fast as they possibly can what good partnership working is about...in my practical experience the sort of components that go into success, ...where we do have success, is to do with a high level of trust and confidence at the **highest** level amongst the contributing organisations. (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

Gillian acknowledged that the success and sustainability of a partnership depended upon high levels of trust but her analysis based on being a key player in MUP and the manager of a large college involved in 'hundreds of other partnerships' identified another critical factor. This was the commitment of senior people in positions of power in the contributing organisations, which is also based upon trust. Thus trust is needed not just amongst the individuals who attend partnership meetings and engage in collaborative activities but also amongst the senior managers of the organisations they represent.

Levels and layers of trust

Diane, principal of a smaller college and a less active member of MUP, also highlighted the role of trust but in addition disclosed the operation of different layers of trust in a partnership. She said:

> To work in **real** partnership you have to have trust and I don't trust everybody round the table, I know that sounds an awful thing to say but it's true, erm...if I'm not in an environment where I feel I can totally trust then I won't say necessarily what I think, I won't lie, never **lie** but I won't necessarily say what I think, now if you can't do that then you can't really work together...I'm being very honest...hahah... (Interview 16, 19/9/01)

Diane revealed the differing levels of trust amongst members of MUP and a strategy she used to manage tensions in the process of partnership working. Diane, a small woman with a physical disability was principal of one of the four smaller colleges in the partnership and often adopted the strategy of keeping quiet at MUP Board meetings. It was not until I went to interview her in the comfortable environment of her college that I discovered the passion and strength of her views on sub-regional collaboration and social inclusion. In her interview, held on the morning of an FEFC inspection, she discussed some of the tensions for her as the manager of a small college located on the periphery of the Black Country sub-region:

> We [the four college principals in the borough] have always had meetings on a regular basis but it wasn't until MUP that in effect we decided that we needed to fight big brother up there at the university...we were not going to be tame little colleges because in our own little world we can be reasonably autonomous and act as we wish... (Interview 16, 19/9/01)

Her remarks refer to the push for sub-regional collaboration being led by the regional university which did not necessarily provide the best progression routes for learners

at Diane's college, as they were geographically closer to other universities. However, despite her strong reservations about trusting some of the actors in MUP, Diane remained a member of the partnership for both personal and pragmatic reasons. Strategically, she could not afford to be the only college principal in the Black Country who was not a member of MUP and personally, she was strongly committed to the goals of the partnership.

Christine, representing careers and guidance services, reiterated the importance of trust and openness in a partnership but suggested that trust may not necessarily be a homogeneous entity but may vary for different individuals and for different purposes. She remarked:

> ...people will trust each other um not necessarily for everything but for the purposes of that particular partnership ....it doesn't mean that you have to trust everybody all the time for every activity but if they can trust themselves for the purposes of that partnership that will do...trust doesn't mean just thinking they're a nice person but believing that this person isn't there just to run away with a contract...you're not going to get it [trust] from all the partners but you have to have a good core of people who are prepared to work together collaboratively on whatever they can... (Interview 7, 11/6/01)

This reflects a pragmatic view of the operation of trust and one that is reflected in the theoretical debate of the concept, which posits that trust is a heterogeneous rather than a homogenous entity (Coulson 1998, Newman 1998). This distinction which is discussed in Chapter 2 suggests that there are different forms and levels of trust and Christine implies that a partnership can function on differing levels of trust and that individuals can trust each other for the purposes of a particular partnership. In this case partnership working may function on the basis of calculation-based trust (Coulson 1998) rather than deep trust (Ring 1997).

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Building trust through partnership working

Some individuals, such as Fiona and Gillian, pointed out that it is necessary to build trust and eradicate mistrust as part of partnership working and that this is something that takes time and effort. Fiona reflected:

> I think you can't bounce a partnership into action…it takes time erm you have to build up trust, you have to get to know people and I think you have to almost let it evolve…you have to be careful not to dominate the smaller organisations in the partnership… (Interview 11, 5/7/01)

Fiona, an assistant college principal, was involved in managing partnerships with voluntary and community groups and had difficulties demonstrating the tangible benefits of the time she invested in partnership working to other managers in her college.

Gillian, a principal from a different FE college, summarised the toughness of the process of building trust, which is:

> …very tough because generally speaking, in the public sector, we operate with a high level of mistrust towards people at the top levels of our parallel neighbouring community of institutions, so that it takes a huge amount of working at and you actually need to have underneath your formal structures all sorts of informal opportunities where people can speak in a very off the record informal way about the real threats and opportunities to their organisation, and you have to actually get through that ground to get the kind of climate of trust and openness that you need in the partnership…
> (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

Fiona and Gillian both indicate that the time taken to build trust and implement partnership working on the ground can be a source of tension for the individuals who represent their organisation in a partnership, as demonstrated in Chapter 6. Time as a

cost of partnership working has already been discussed in this chapter in the context of 'joining-up'. Here it is noted as a cost of building trust. However, the process of building trust also leads to benefits for the individuals and organisations involved as partnership working can function as a mechanism for transforming one type of trust into another and give access to stronger social networks. For example, relationships based on fragile trust can develop into relationships based on resilient trust (Ring 1997) such that individuals start to trust each other unreservedly. The resilience of trust amongst some MUP Board members was quite surprising as illustrated by the following field data:

> When I arrived to observe the meeting, which was taking place in an FE college, I was asked to wait in reception. There were already three people waiting and others arriving behind me. I chatted informally to the people who were waiting and during the conversion asked them about the benefits of being a member of MUP. Two of them admitted that they did not really know why they were members of the executive group but as they trusted and respected the Chair they continued to come to meetings. (Field notes 17/5/01)

For the two individuals who revealed this to me the most important factor that affected their participation in MUP was trust in the person who chaired the partnership. These individuals had reached what Coulson (1998) refers to as instinctive-trust in the continuum of trust based relationships. They were not motivated by the risks and benefits of one course of action over another, as in calculation-based trust, or a calculation of how others will behave based on previous experience of dealing with them, as in experience-based trust, but had developed a high level of trust in each other through partnership working. In MUP, a high level of trust amongst key individuals functioned to strengthen the partnership and sustain

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the networks that underpinned partnership working during the peaks and trough in its lifecourse. In addition to trust MUP was held together by shared goals.

7.3   Developing shared goals in a partnership

For the participants in MUP trust was the most important element in a partnership and shared goals the second. Individuals mentioned shared goals, common purposes, shared objectives, clear statements of why the partnership exists and what its purpose is as necessary for effective partnership working. Shared goals may precede the formation of a partnership or may be (re)-negotiated during the process of partnership working, (both these aspects were represented in MUP), but are critical in maintaining focus and momentum in a partnership. I found that in their declarations and discussions of goals for MUP, members of the partnership followed norms of behaviour and practices based on their individual and collective values and beliefs. These values and beliefs contributed to the formulation and agreement of shared goals for MUP and to the sustainability of the partnership.

This part of the chapter begins by presenting individual perspectives of the importance of shared goals in a partnership, which had a gendered dimension, and then considers the role of norms and values in MUP.

Shared goals and gendered perspectives of partnership

Many members of MUP stressed the importance of developing and agreeing shared goals, mentioned by 45% of interviewees as being necessary for effective partnership working. Also, the data indicate variations in emphasis and tensions amongst individual perspectives that reflect power relations and gender differences. Although

I did not set out to investigate gender differences in relation to partnership working they emerged as a factor in the operation of MUP. The dynamics of gender in partnership working has been explored by Clegg and McNulty (2002) and literature on women managers in education (Hall 1996, King 1997, Shain 2000) suggests that trust, openness and involvement (Hall 1996) are characteristics of female managers. King argues that women managers in higher education offer styles of management and leadership that are different to 'those demonstrated by most men in such positions ' (King 1997, p.94.). The role of gender in partnership working is an area that needs further research but I discuss in this section the differences that emerged from the functioning of MUP.

A noticeable difference was the emphasis placed on ways of working in partnership between female and male managers, illustrated below by the responses of a female and a male member of MUP Board who both identified shared goals as being important for effective partnership. Fiona said:

> Erm shared goals and being clear about what the goals are...you have to give a partnership time...you see you have to be committed you have to really believe, you know, that the partnership's going to work and give it time...and you have to be sensitive to the other partner's ways of working...
> (Interview 11, 5/7/01)

In contrast Ken, head of one of the four TECs in the partnership, believed:

> Oh yes, shared vision, shared objectives, mutual gain, mutual benefits...and for each partner there has to be something in it for them. If there isn't anything in it why do it? Why should I give up my time and effort to do something in partnership with somebody if there's nothing in it for me...in the commercial world that just wouldn't happen. Partnerships do exist but they exist for the mutual benefit of the partners so that mutual benefit has to

be identified, seen and set down in terms of objectives and it has to be monitored and measured so the partnership understands that it's actually getting somewhere...otherwise you can just drift around...somebody says lets have partnerships, it's a good idea...
(Interview 15, 4/9/01)

[This transcript was amended by Ken and does not contain the hesitation marker, erm, as he deleted all occurrences of this item when he returned his transcript with comments, additions and amendments. He also added punctuation to the text]

Fiona is more reflective about the process of working in partnership with individuals and organisations than Ken who projects a more business-orientated perspective. This is also indicated in the tape-recording of their interviews as Fiona's interview contains hesitations, fillers, repetitions and prompts from me whilst Ken speaks in lengthy chunks of discourse and there are few hesitations or pauses. He speaks with an authoritative voice with marked stress to emphasise his points whilst Fiona speaks softly with rising and falling intonation indicating a softer more people centred approach to working with others.

The difference in emphasis between Ken's more business-orientated perspective to partnership working and Fiona's more people centred approach could be attributed to their role and relative position in the hierarchy within their own organisations, as Fiona was an assistant principal with responsibility for community links in a small college whilst Ken was a senior manager in a TEC and so more focused on training and achievement of objectives. However, the difference is also reflected in interviews with other MUP Board members, which suggests that it is a gendered, rather than a managerial or organisational culture difference.

Other female managers stressed that MUP had 'almost capacity built the constituent organisations' and that sharing of information, ideas and good practice was a real benefit for the organisations involved though they were equally aware of the practical challenges of partnership working. Margaret said:

> I've been quite ambivalent about partnership because I think I'm very happy about it in principle and I've been quite baffled about it in practice because we have had far too many partnerships doing the same thing because of the way the government has rolled things out ...but we've all now cut our teeth and we know what good partnership working looks like...so I'm quite happy to stick with it and I think partnership working will generate commitment and enthusiasm by showing where value has been added.
> ((Interview 9, 20/6/01)

Gillian focused on another practical challenge:

> ...doing anything collaboratively takes longer than doing it by yourself and actually establishing a common understanding and a common methodology and an agreed approach requires a time investment at a number of different levels within an organisation...and as the volume of activity has grown over time it has become more demanding. That's a comment I would make not only in relation to MUP but because collaborative work is so much a feature of our style now. (Interview 5, 11/5/01)

However, despite the challenges of partnership working female members of MUP tended to emphasise the benefits of partnership and recognise that there is 'a great deal of benefit in working together' (Interview 9, 20/6/01). In contrast, male members tended to focus on weaknesses and tensions in MUP due to lack of clarity in its goals and objectives. Ian commented:

> I think the problem stems from the fact that...academically, intellectually, hearts and minds, we wanna do something, we wanna be together, we wanna do this but nobody's really got the time to sit down and ask themselves the right questions...you know...there is no proper strategy plan...they keep

talking about this but you ask them and the meeting's cancelled...and then out of the woodwork little projects arrive like this Greenshires thing, where's that come from? It's obviously somebody's pet subject isn't it?
(Interview 17, 6/11/01)

Ian's perspective highlights the problems experienced by MUP during ambivalence in its lifecourse but also illustrate the role of values in a partnership as well as his frustration with other members of MUP Board. Despite these differences in female and male perspectives the commitment of members to the partnership is singled out by Margaret, perceived by other members of MUP as a neutral partnership broker. She commented:

> There is a level of commitment on the part of the principals which is very positive and indicates that they do actually have a kind of corporate agenda as well as an individual college agenda...I think they are actually genuinely enthused by the notion of extending learning to people who are disadvantaged and when they come together [in the partnership] the enthusiasm grows and becomes more than the sum of its parts as it were ...there's something deeply political about it. (Interview 9, 20/6/01)

Observational data corroborates both members commitment to the partnership and their desire to debate the purpose and goals of MUP. In May 2000 an animated discussion between fourteen senior managers lasting over an hour and a half generated numerous ideas about 'who we are and what we're about' as a partnership, as illustrated by the following:

> While Margaret was keen to move things forward and carry on with the agenda, having spent over an hour discussing numerous ideas about MUP as a public-private network, a forum for the dissemination and publication of good practice, a regional political voice and a co-ordinating body for research, it was clear that other members wanted more discussion around the role of the partnership and the emerging role of the LSC. After a further half an hour's discussion the Chair tried to pull the discussion together and suggested:

Margaret: ...the broad remit is a strength not a weakness...sustainability...we could discuss this forever...I propose we give Executive a remit to move forward on this...

Despite this some members clearly wanted to continue this discussion although other members, mainly females, were looking at their watches and exchanging knowing looks of impatience, as it was 11.45, the meeting had started at 9.30 and there were still a number of items on the agenda.

(Observation 2, 12/5/00)

The observation notes indicate the challenges of negotiating and agreeing shared goals through the process of partnership working but also the energy and enthusiasm of participants in engaging in the debate. The participants in MUP devoted a considerable amount of time to debating the role and identity of the partnership, as shown by the research data presented in Chapter 5, and to articulating shared goals around widening participation in post-16 learning, shown in research data presented earlier in the thesis (e.g. MUP document 2000a, observational data in Chapter 6). In meetings, discussion papers and newsletters produced to provide a public articulation of the purposes and goals of the partnership members regularly re-iterated their intention to widen participation, improve the quality of post-16 learning and add value through partnership working. Their aspiration to 'develop and disseminate good practice across the sub-region' was however, tempered with the observation that 'there are too many people out there re-inventing the wheel' (Observation 6, 8/6/01).

In their thinking and their practice members of MUP followed norms of reciprocity, mutual respect and principles of equality. This informed the shared goals they negotiated for the partnership and the way in which they implemented the process of partnership working to arrive at the goals.

Norms of reciprocity, respect and equality

I use norms to refer to accepted standards of behaviour and practices that underpin collective actions in a partnership. This includes rules governing the behaviour of individuals, some explicitly agreed and others implicitly followed, to formulate shared goals and regulate partnership working. Observational data indicates that key individuals in MUP tried to embody norms of reciprocity, respect and equality in all the activities of the partnership. In negotiating shared goals, developing organisational structures for partnership working, bidding for and managing externally funded projects and engaging in voluntary collaborative activities the members of MUP either explicitly or implicitly followed norms of reciprocity. Some individuals, such as Margaret, tried to ensure respect and equality for all partners and revealed this through strategies she used to give equal voice to smaller organisations in the partnership .

Some explicitly agreed norms have already been discussed, such as rotating meetings around the participating organisations, rotating the lead organisation(s) for externally funded projects amongst members and ensuring that all constituencies of organisations with an interest in post-16 learning were represented on MUP Board and involved in its collaborative sub-regional activities. Tensions caused by following these norms in practice have also been mentioned, e.g. the difficulties signalled by Andrew in relation to rotating the venue for meetings. Other norms, such as the level of respect and tolerance amongst members and the commitment of key individuals to ensuring that all constituencies had an equal voice in the partnership, not only in terms of membership on MUP Board but also in actual practice in the form of interaction in meetings, emerged from observation of

behaviour in MUP meetings. The implicit norm of respect amongst members was an aspect of the partnership noted by Roger who reflected:

> I mean people are very respectful...erm I guess in that sense it's a bit clubby isn't it? I don't know if that's a feeling you've had when you've been to meetings...(Interview 12, 14/8/01)

It certainly was a feeling that I had when I went to MUP Board meetings and something that I perceived early in my observations, which was confirmed during the course of data collection. During my first few observations I noticed that Margaret, the Chair, tried sensitively to encourage contributions to the meetings from individuals representing voluntary sector groups, and that all members tried to foster an inclusive and supportive climate for discussions (Observations 1-3). As I continued fieldwork I observed that people did not cut across others but were surprisingly patient, tolerant and respectful even when individuals went off on tangents. This was a characteristic that Roger had also noticed through his participation in meetings and an aspect he discussed with me during his interview:

> Roger: These people [members of MUP] do meet in so many different places just with a slightly different hat on, with a slightly different plan...and you might expect something like MUP to be...you know, well we've heard it all before it was Neil again you know ...
>
> JD: Yes, but no they don't do that...they are very respectful you get the opportunity to say as much as you want and nobody sort of cuts you out...
>
> Roger: Uhm...uhm...nobody sort of throws their hands up when Ken sets off on some tangent...
>
> (Interview 12, 14/801)

This aspect of their behaviour was surprising given that MUP was a partnership of busy senior managers but it reflected their respect for individuals and their attempts to operate on principles of equality. Although equal contributions were not possible due to power differentials amongst organisations and individuals as shown by the analysis of partnership working in Chapter 6, people tried to support the partnership by drawing on their individual and organisational resources, including their individual and collective social capital. This is discussed in Chapter 8.

The norms and principles which shaped partnership working in MUP were reflective of the values of key individuals, such as Stephen, who as 'philosopher king' supported the costs of partnership working by hosting meetings and planning days, as shown in Chapter 6. During his interview Stephen revealed the extent to which values underpinned the work that he did as an individual and as a college principal. He said:

> I'm tremendously proud of what myself and my colleagues here have done over you know twenty years...the number of lives we've touched. My wife has stickers on the fridge at home and one of them is 'To teach is to touch a life forever'...I have the privilege of trying to arrange basically, I'm a resource winner, a business conductor, to make all that happen with a lot of good people who actually do it and as a result of that I'm able to leverage more than if I had just remained as a teacher. (Interview 8, 12/6/01)

Stephen went on to talk about his role in supporting voluntary and community groups by making college facilities available to them at weekends without charge and 'joining-up' with people who shared his values to leverage resources for widening participation.

Shared values

Stephen highlighted the role of values and beliefs and attributed the success of his college, at least in part, to his values:

> It's because of this belief that I can bring some of my value systems to bear and to have an effect on more people, in other words to touch more lives and I'm tremendously proud of the fact that last year this institution touched 44,000 different lives during the course of the year...it's not all success but the opportunities we've created by harnessing resources enable all that to happen...we're pushing kids to the limit to achieve this sort of excellence ... if you look around our side-rooms you'll see the work they've produced...
> (Interview 8, 12/6/01)

He spoke about his passion for learning and for engaging others in learning and proudly gave examples of the kind of work produced by students and the activities organised by the college, such as a passing out parade for young people planning to go into public service which had taken place in the college car park the previous Saturday. In particular, he highlighted the opportunities created for students with disabilities and spoke at length about one individual who had a learning disability, had attended a special needs course at the college and subsequently had been taken on as an employee. This 'young lad' was given a very simple job to begin with as a post boy cum porter but found it very challenging to find the right buildings to deliver the mail but:

> ...over the years he's coped with those skills...and now he's a man who has the most wonderful life, full of self esteem and pride it's a joy to see...he's working, basically, continuously, comfortably but at the limits of his abilities and everybody accepts he's doing a worthwhile job.
> (Interview 8, 12/6/01)

Creating such jobs and supporting disadvantaged individuals in this way to achieve their full potential was, for Stephen, part of exercising his social responsibility and he saw this as a function of the college as well as a personal commitment based on his own values, dispositions, life history or *habitus*. Stephen talked about the role of education in his own life history, his working class family background and upbringing in a small rural community and his position as principal of a college 'in exercising social responsibility' as well as contributing to the economy of the local community. Stephen described himself as an 'evangelist for education' and depicted widening participation as 'winning hearts and minds' and 'teaching as touching peoples lives'.

Other members of MUP also shared these values and were deeply committed to promoting equality and social justice through their actions as individuals and as managers of educational organisations. Although they belonged to many networks and partnerships they continued to see a need for MUP as it provided a forum and a mechanism for taking collective action with individuals who shared a set of values. Through MUP individuals were able to discuss issues that they collectively felt were important and focus collaborative effort on addressing areas of need by engaging in funded projects and voluntary collaborative activities with the overall aim of improving the quality and standard of post-16 learning 'in the patch'. In this respect as a partnership MUP was in the words of the Chair 'a bit leading edge' as their activities preceded the policy driven learning partnerships and the LSC structures with the remit to promote regional collaboration in the provision of post-16 learning.

The key actors in MUP were individuals who shared a passion for widening participation based on their values, beliefs, principles and life histories. They spoke of shifting the world, addressing disadvantage, opening up opportunities for all learners, of coming into education to change the world, of their own success through education and of opportunities denied to other members of their families due to lack of resources or family circumstances. Underpinning MUP was evidence of a shared philosophy of education, of common ideological, moral, social and political values and beliefs and the drive to try and address social disadvantage through education. The idealism of key individuals provided the synergy for expanding the activities of the partnership and shared goals and values held them together despite a period of deep decline.

This chapter has examined partnership from the perspectives of the individuals who participated in MUP. It has revealed that 'joining-up' is an image that captures the spirit of partnership and the practicalities of partnership working, which bring both costs and benefits for the individuals and organisations involved. Participants' understandings of partnership also uncovered a gendered perspective as female managers emphasised different aspects of partnership working to male managers.

The data presented in this chapter shows that the basis of partnership relies heavily on social aspects of participation, such as networking, networks, levels of trust, shared goals and the norms and values of the participants. The data indicate that the characteristics of effective partnerships include:

- opportunities to forge and strengthen social networks;
- high levels of trust amongst individuals and organisations;

- high level of commitment from contributing organisations;

- shared goals and opportunities to negotiate and re-negotiate goals; and

- shared norms and values.

These characteristics reveal the role of social capital in supporting partnership and in meeting the challenges of managing relationships in partnerships, which Andrew described as 'marriages between twelve, fifteen, twenty different people'. The challenges of managing tensions and conflict amongst actors and the time needed to build trust and networks represent the costs of partnership working. The benefits include opportunities to achieve shared goals that could not be achieved by individual organisations or people working individually but can be realised by working collectively in a partnership.

This chapter has indicated the importance of social capital. The next draws on the research data and the theoretical and policy literature on partnership to discuss the role of social capital in sustaining partnership.

Chapter 8

Discussion: the role of social capital in sustaining partnership

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in the light of the theoretical and policy literature on partnership. It begins by summarising distinctive characteristics of MUP, the case study partnership which forms the heart of this investigation, and discussing the inductive process of questioning the empirical data which led to social capital as the conceptual framework that explained continued partnership through peaks and troughs in partnership working. I then draw on the case to discuss the role of social capital in sustaining partnership, using networks, trust, norms and values as the key dimensions of social capital.

The next part of the chapter considers power and inequality in the partnership and reveals that social capital works in similar ways to other forms of capital. The process of partnership working enables actors to achieve collective benefits but it also provides opportunities for individuals to accrue personal benefits, which are not equally distributed. This includes their ability to build new social capital through participation in a partnership and as a result obtain positions of power and influence elsewhere. The chapter concludes by offering a conceptualisation of partnership as a continuum of relationships that are underpinned by different dimensions and levels of social capital. This continuum of features of weak and strong forms of partnership summarises the characteristics found in the literature and in MUP.

8.1 Distinctive characteristics of MUP

MUP turned out to be an unusual and interesting case study of partnership working for a number of reasons but here I focus on three that raised pertinent questions about the basis and sustainability of partnership. Firstly, MUP was a comparatively successful example of continued partnership working in a field where partnerships formed, re-formed and disappeared in response to shifts in government policy and in order to capitalise on funding opportunities (EDRU 1999, Jones and Bird 2000, Institute of Access Studies 2001, Rodger *et al* 2001, Ruane 2002). Ramsden *et al* (2004) have shown that some partnerships have had little impact on policy or practice in the field of post-16 learning. MUP, however, sustained itself over 'thick and thin' and continues to function as a partnership. Also, as a partnership that aimed to widen participation in post-16 learning it achieved some significant successes.

Secondly, in contrast to other partnerships, e.g. learning partnerships (DfEE 1999b, DfES 2001) borough-based partnerships and SRB regeneration partnerships (DfES 2004c, ODPM 2004), MUP was a voluntary partnership which did not receive any external funding to meet the costs of partnership working. Although MUP tried to become a funded partnership during two stages in its lifecourse, Stage 1 and Stage 4 (see Chapter 5), it failed. The costs of partnership working were thus borne solely by the participating individuals and organisations and though this did lead to tensions amongst actors as shown in Chapter 6, it did not lead to the end of MUP. Chapter 6 has also shown that as well as being committed to partnership as a means for widening participation in post-16 learning in the Black Country, key individuals in MUP were committed to collaborative working *per se* and believed that more could

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be achieved by working in collaboration rather than in competition. For example, Gillian described partnership working as liberating and empowering for the participants (Chapter 6), Margaret commented that it was liberating for people to do some 'joined-up thinking' (Chapter 7) and Andrew commented on the wastefulness of ruthless competition (Chapter 6).

The third reason relates to the situated context in which MUP operated as a partnership. Two factors were particularly pertinent in this respect. One important factor was that the actors in MUP were simultaneously involved in many other partnerships in the sub-region and met regularly in these other fora. There thus seemed no obvious reason to continue MUP, particularly when other partnerships, such as lifelong learning partnerships, displaced MUP by taking on the sub-regional role it had articulated for itself (Chapter 6). The other significant factor was that other partnerships in the Black Country were able to attract more substantial funding from government departments and funding agencies than MUP and so were more successful, at least in terms of securing financial capital to support their work. For example, Andrew and Carol were involved in partnerships with budgets of £58 million and £22 million respectively (Chapter 6) whilst MUP managed to acquire £150,000 to £450,000 in sub-regional projects and between £40,000 to £50,000 for smaller locally based projects.

Thus, MUP was not 'a bidding factory' (Chapter 7) though it was successful in obtaining project funding through widening participation initiatives, as shown in Chapter 6. It was not driven by financial incentives to work in partnership and during its lifecourse was displaced by other partnerships, yet did not disappear from

the landscape of post-16 learning in the Black Country. In analysing the research data and interpreting the lifecourse of the partnership, I was confronted with the perplexing question: So why are they still together? The answer to the question seemed to lie in what Paldam has called 'glue [that] makes people work together' (Paldam 2000, p.629). He is referring to social capital as glue. The social networks, trust, norms and values of the participants held the partnership together and enabled them to achieve shared goals. The process of achieving these goals, through partnership working, drew on their individual and collective resources including other forms of capital.

Questioning the empirical data and revealing the role of social capital

I found that interpreting the lifecourse of MUP was like peeling an onion to reveal layers of collaboration and trust and varying reasons for participation in partnership working. Preliminary data analysis uncovered multiple layers of collaboration, represented in Figure 4, and various motivations for engaging in partnership, including bidding for externally funded projects. This suggested that MUP's lifecourse could be interpreted as a pragmatic and strategic response to policy imperatives as it had formed in response to a government initiative and its lifecourse reflected the implementation of New Labour's policies for post-16 learning and its third way approach to governance. This interpretation recognised the importance of the structure in which MUP had to operate as a partnership, in particular the external policy context, (see Chapter 6). This analysis accounted for MUP's early development and success in bidding for externally funded projects but did not offer a sufficient explanation of its ability to survive a period of deep decline and to emerge

as a re-invigorated partnership. It was in this context that individual agency emerged as an important factor in analysing the basis of sustainability in the partnership.

The empirical evidence indicated that MUP would disappear during ambivalence, (Stage 3 in its lifecourse), but Margaret, Stephen, Ian, Christine and other key individuals decided to 'pull it back from the brink' (Chapters 5 and 6). I was left with the question: So what do they gain from this partnership which they do not from others? A deeper probing of the research data revealed the significance of formal and informal social networks, trust and shared norms and values amongst key people, which despite tensions and conflicts arising from power differentials and the personalities of the individuals involved, sustained MUP. This suggested that MUP provided a different kind of social forum to other partnerships in the sub-region and this was the reason people were prepared to devote time and effort to sustaining it.

Further analysis of the fieldwork data revealed that MUP provided a safe forum for sharing ideas, information and knowledge rather than being driven, as other partnerships were, by external policy agendas and bodies such as the DfES, FEFC and LSC. External policy agendas, in particular policies to widen participation in post-16 learning, remained key to MUP's work but for some individuals the partnership also developed to fulfil a number of other functions, including a vital social one which included an element of self-determination. In MUP meetings, senior managers were able to debate and formulate goals and plans for collaborative action to widen participation in post-16 learning in the sub-region without being accountable to an external body. Away from the eyes and ears of funding and regulatory bodies, such as the LSC, some members of MUP Board, e.g. Gillian,

Stephen and Andrew, felt they could to do the things that *they* felt were educationally and socially important rather than those given to them by an external body. This element of self-determination and individual agency contributed to the sustainability of MUP.

For some individuals, MUP was almost an escape from the performativity (Phillips and Harper-Jones 2003) and target driven culture (Avis 2003) that pervaded their everyday working lives and an opportunity to exercise their professional judgement. So MUP *felt* like a partnership that was internally driven by the members who collectively agreed the goals they were going to pursue, though in reality power relationships and the personalities of a few key individuals actually steered the agenda and actions, as data presented in Chapter 6 has shown. However, this feeling of ownership, self-determination and individual agency contributed to keeping the partnership alive. It also meant that members were able to, and did, focus on longer-term strategies to widen participation in post-16 learning than was possible in New Labour's 'initiatives and incentives' approach (Hodgson and Spoors 2000) which focused on short-term projects. For example, they created an accredited route for experienced childcare workers to undertake a part-time degree in Early Childhood Studies which enabled over a hundred non-traditional students to gain a qualification instead of the handful that benefited from Right Track, a HEFCE funded widening participation project.

The above discussion gives an insight into the nature of my engagement with the fieldwork data and the process of theorising partnership. The next section relates the research data to the theoretical framework of social capital as defined in this study.

In Chapter 3 social capital is defined as the networks, norms, values and trust that enable individuals and organisations to achieve mutual goals (see p.93). This definition draws on the partnership literature, discussed in Chapter 2, and theoretical and empirical work on social capital, discussed in Chapter 3, but is essentially grounded in the analysis and interpretation of partnership working in MUP which has been discussed above. I begin by discussing networks as they were the most observable characteristic of partnership working in MUP and then consider trust, norms and values as they underpinned the networks that sustained the partnership and enabled the actors to achieve shared goals.

8.2   Networks and partnership working

Networks are key characteristics of social capital and of partnerships as well as being a prominent feature of partnership working in MUP. Chapter 3 has shown that seminal and contemporary conceptualisations of social capital identify networks as a central dimension of social capital (Putnam 1993, Baron *et al* 2000, Field and Schuller 2000, Giddens 2000, Field 2003; 2005) though there is considerable debate about the meaning, value and policy implications of the concept. The analysis in Chapter 3 revealed that a particular weakness in predominant theories of social capital is recognition of the significance of power relations (Blaxter and Hughes 2003) and access to the right kind of networks due to inequalities embedded in class relations (Bourdieu 1986) and other differences such as learning difficulties (Riddell *et al* 1999). In Section 3.4 of the thesis, I suggested that there were also other areas of difference such as ethnicity, language and sexuality as well as gender that might affect access to social capital, and hence ability to forge networks. In the context of analysing the role of social networks in sustaining partnership this implies that it is

not just networks which are important but also the position and power of the individuals and organisations in the network(s).

This was demonstrated in MUP through the roles of key individuals in developing, extending and maintaining the formal and informal networks that underpinned partnership working, discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 6 has shown how the profiles and personalities of Margaret and Gillian, both senior managers of large institutions, enabled them to drive the expansion of MUP whilst Christine and Richard, both managers of smaller organisations struggled to keep the partnership alive during ambivalence. Margaret and Gillian had access to a wider range of networks than Christine and Richard and even when they were not actively participating in MUP, during ambivalence, their power and influence as individuals meant that they could re-activate networks to re-invigorate the partnership, discussed in Chapter 5. Margaret in particular was able to call on her individual social capital, including her personal position, skills and qualities, to expand and sustain MUP, in addition to drawing on the collective social capital of the networks that supported the partnership.

Theorisations of partnership, like conceptualisations of socials capital, place networks and networking at the core of the continuum of terms and characteristics associated with 'partnership'. These characteristics emanate from both deductive and inductive approaches to theorising partnership and range from Powell and Exworthy's (2000) definition of partnerships as 'quasi-networks' to Castells' description of contemporary society as 'the network society' and networks as a 'set of interconnected nodes' (Castells 2000, p.501) which can expand by integrating new

nodes. In the networks that underpin partnerships nodes represent individuals, who may be representatives of organisations or agencies and who implement partnership working on the ground, as for example in MUP, shown in Figures 9 and 10 in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 has shown how individuals (nodes) belonging to the inner circle (see Figures 9 and 10 in Chapter 6) in formal and informal networks were able to expand the network structure that supported partnership working in MUP by forging links to new nodes through networking. During the expansion of the partnership, representatives of FE colleges, a university, TECs and the careers service extended the networks that supported MUP by adding and integrating representatives of adult education, voluntary groups, private training providers and other organisations into these networks. This was part of the process of 'joining-up' individuals, organisations and agencies in post-16 learning in the Black Country and resulted in an extensive horizontal network structure which is identified in the partnership and social capital literature as a feature of successful functioning networks. In Rhodes' (1996) theorisation of governance, MUP could be conceptualised as 'a self-organising network' as it was a voluntary group rather than a funded partnership and in terms of organisational structure it resembled a networked form of governance (Rhodes 2000, Stoker 2000) rather than a hierarchical or vertical structure. Putnam distinguishes between 'web-like' and 'may-pole like' networks (Putnam 1993) and argues that 'web-like networks' are more effective in enabling achievement of mutual goals. During expansion in MUP, networks resembled a 'web-like' structure with cross-cutting ties and links amongst members which enabled them to achieve considerable success in bidding for external funding for widening participation

projects and organising a range of voluntary collaborative activities, as shown in Chapter 6.

The case study of MUP also shows that the network structure in a partnership does not remain static but may change and contract as well as expand as happened in the partnership during ambivalence. Individuals may become disengaged and break up the network structure or become dormant nodes leading to disintegration of networks. Section 6.3 of the thesis has shown that Helen, an FE college principal, disengaged herself and her organisation from MUP whilst other individuals, e.g. Gillian, Margaret, Andrew and Ian became dormant nodes (see Figure 10). Helen had been a very prominent member of the partnership, welcoming Helena Kennedy at the formal launch of MUP in 1998, but by 2001 she had come to the conclusion that the partnership had become 'a talking shop' and hence not worth the investment of her or organisation's time. Gillian, Margaret and Andrew were pulled away from MUP by other partnerships and more pressing concerns within their respective organisations whilst Ian had to focus on a new job role. This resulted in dissipation of the network structure that underpinned MUP and a breakdown of communication and information flows, which contributed to a loss of momentum in the partnership and a deep decline in its activities.

Ebers' (1997a; 2001) analysis of inter-organisational networks in business partnerships identifies information flows, resource flows and mutual expectations amongst partners as characteristics of successful networks. During expansion in MUP the network structure enabled effective information flows as Jenny, the partnership administrator, proactively used networks and networking as a means of

disseminating knowledge and information to all members. Effective administrative support and Jenny's skills and qualities meant that members were fully aware of the activities of the partnership. However, during ambivalence, the lack of a partnership administrator and dormant nodes in networks meant that information flows were poor or non-existent, as pointed out by Andrew (Chapter 6). Furthermore, the lack of resources to support partnership working meant that MUP almost disappeared from the sub-regional landscape as other partnerships became more significant for the key actors. However, as the story of its lifecourse in Chapter 5 demonstrates, MUP survived the deep trough of ambivalence because key individuals who had become dormant nodes in networks decided to re-engage in the partnership. This demonstrated the strength of relationships amongst key people.

Trevillion's (1999) work in social and community partnerships offers the notion of network density as a means of understanding the strength of relationships in networks. In MUP this was reflected in the layers of collaboration and the cluster of ties and links that developed amongst the individuals, organisations and agencies that became involved in the partnership, shown in Figures 4 and 5 (see Chapter 5). Figure 4 represents the intensity of relationships amongst actors through layers that reflect the strength of ties (Granovetter 1973) or bonding social capital (Aldridge *et al* 2000) amongst individuals. The three layers of collaboration in Figure 4 show the progressive decrease in the density of networks and other dimensions of social capital, from the inner layer of MUP Board to the second layer of funding bodies and the third layer of middle managers and practitioners. The inner layer of MUP Board represents the primary star (see Figure 5), which in Trevillion's theory of networks

and networking signifies stronger relationships amongst actors than those in the secondary star or the outer layer.

Networking, which is a crucial part of the process of partnership working, as shown in Chapter 7, provides the means for 'joining-up' nodes in networks and increasing the strength and quality of relationships amongst participants. In MUP the forum of the partnership fostered the development of bonding, bridging and linking social capital which enabled members to lever resources from external bodies and to draw on their individual and collective resources to plan and implement strategies to widen participation in post-16 learning in the Black Country. Both structures and people were important in this process. The formal structures that the members developed to manage partnership working (see Figure 6, p.159) provided the social spaces for cross-cutting ties and links to develop and grow through networks and networking, whilst the social capital of key individuals, such Margaret, gave the partnership the synergy to expand by forging links to other networks, agencies and individuals.

In the case study partnership, the social interaction of formal meetings and the informal networking or 'hob-nobbing' that preceded and followed scheduled meetings fostered the development of strong bonds amongst members. These group processes supported the development of connectedness (Trevillion 1999, Granovetter 1973), a sense of belonging to a group that is difficult to nail down and quantify but was a qualitative aspect of relationships amongst members of MUP. This aspect of relationships is best captured in Gilchrist's (2000) notion of a sense of 'community' which she found in informal networks in the field of community development. The strength of bonds amongst members also reflects the 'social glue' facet of social

capital which in MUP was based on shared goals, values and beliefs and served to sustain the partnership. The members' commitment to widening participation in post-16 learning was a powerful bonding element that held people together despite tensions in the partnership and a period of ambivalence. In addition to shared values which are considered in Section 8.4 the other dimension of social capital that sustained MUP was trust amongst key individuals, which functioned to maintain relationships in networks and was further developed through networking.

8.3   Trust and partnership

Trust lies at the heart of successful partnership. The centrality of trust and the ways in which it functions in partnership working is confirmed by the empirical case study of MUP, the literature on the theory and practice of partnership, and by applications of social capital to research and policy. Chapter 7 has shown that senior managers of post-16 education and training organisations, with considerable experience of partnership working, identified trust as the most important factor that contributed to effective partnership. Chapter 2 demonstrated that trust is a prominent concept in defining, characterising and theorising 'partnership' in a range of academic disciplines and in different fields of policy and practice. Chapter 3 revealed that the origins and development of social capital as a concept include trust as a key dimension and that seminal and contemporary applications of the concept to research and policy include attempts to measure trust. This study does not attempt to measure trust but found that it was a key concept in conceptualising partnership and in identifying characteristics that sustain a partnership.

On the basis of the research and reflection undertaken for this study I offer a conceptualisation of partnership which draws together characteristics of weak and strong forms of partnership. In Chapter 2, I identified necessary and sufficient conditions for partnership and trust was linked to strong forms of partnership based on the characteristics of partnership drawn from the literature on empirical studies of partnership and inductive approaches to theorising the concept of partnership. The continuum of characteristics of strong and weak forms of partnership is presented and discussed in Section 8.6. Here I focus on understandings of trust as an entity and its role in sustaining partnership.

The partnership literature discussed in Chapter 2 shows that trust is not a dichotomous variable that is either present or not present but a heterogeneous concept which underpins relationships amongst actors in a partnership. There are different forms and levels of trust and the actors in a partnership may engage in partnership working on the basis of varying levels of trust in each other. Christine, who chaired MUP Board during ambivalence, discusses the variable nature of trust and suggests that partnership 'doesn't mean that you have to trust everybody all the time for every activity' (Chapter 7) but that you do need a core of people who are prepared to work collaboratively. This indicates that a partnership can function on different levels of trust for different purposes. Diane, an FE college principal, confirmed that 'to work in **real** partnership you have to have trust' but also divulged that she did not trust everyone on MUP Board (Chapter 7). However, she continued to participate in MUP throughout its lifecourse for strategic, pragmatic and personal reasons. Chapter 7 has shown she could not afford to be outside the sub-regional circle of MUP and shared a passion for promoting equality and social justice with

other members of the partnership. Christine and Diane reveal the variable nature of trust which is also found in theoretical discussions of the concept and in debates about its function in regulating relationships in inter-organisational partnerships (Coulson 1998, Ebers 1997a, Fowler 1998).

Coulson (1998) categorisation of trust and Ring's (1997) distinction between different levels of trust can help our understanding of how trust functions in partnerships. For example, a weak form of partnership may function on the basis of calculation-based trust, that is calculating the risks involved in taking one course of action over another, whilst a strong form of partnership would have moved towards what Coulson, drawing on the work of Lewicki and Bunker (1996) labels 'instinctive trust'. I refer to this type of trust as implicit, unreserved, unconditional trust as the label 'instinctive' suggests a behaviourist instinct rather than the type of trust which results from committed people with shared values deciding to work in partnership. This element of individual agency is not captured by the term 'instinctive trust'. This was the type of trust found amongst the six individuals who constituted the inner circle in MUP (see Chapter 6) and shown by individuals who attended MUP meetings because they 'trusted the Chair' (see p.242). Many members of MUP had unreserved trust in Margaret, who was asked by the founder members to Chair the partnership as she was a trusted broker (see p.152). On the other hand, Diane's participation in MUP was closer to calculation-based trust due to her position as the principal of a small college (see p.240). Thus different actors may participate in a partnership on the basis of different forms of trust in other members. In MUP this revealed the operation of layers of trust.

As well as different types of trust regulating relationships in a partnership, the level of trust amongst actors may also vary. The characteristics of partnership summarised in Table 3 (in Chapter 2) shows that weak forms of partnership are linked to low levels of trust or fragile trust (Ring 1997) whilst the trust in strong forms of partnership is more resilient and deeper. The resilience of MUP has been shown by the fieldwork data and the role of trust discussed in Chapter 7. The commitment of key individuals to forming, expanding and sustaining the partnership depended upon high levels of trust in each other, which underpinned the networks in MUP, and the goals of the partnership. Chapter 7 has shown that participants in MUP identified shared goals as the second most important factor that contributed to effective partnership. A further aspect of trust that was linked to the sustainability of a partnership by members of MUP was the level of trust amongst the senior/executive level managers in the organisations that were involved in a partnership. Gillian highlighted this in her comments about success in partnership working which depends on 'a high level of trust and confidence at the highest level amongst the contributing organisations,' (see p.238). This indicates that it is not just the commitment of the individuals on the ground who implement partnership that is important but also the commitment of the organisations that they represent. Furthermore, this commitment has to extend to being prepared to invest resources, in particular time, to building trust and forging, maintaining and extending linkages in social networks through the process of partnership working. The process of partnership working can function as a means of developing and deepening trust as happened in the 'honeymoon period' in MUP (see Chapter 5), but it carries a cost in terms of time.

8.4 Norms, values and shared goals

Norms and values are not as prominent in discussions of partnership or social capital as networks and trust but they are mentioned in definitions of social capital (Field and Schuller 2000, Putnam 1993, Woolcock 2001) and feature in notions of partnership. This includes references to reciprocity (Fowler 1998, Powell and Glendinning 2002) and the value of 'joined-up' working (Field 2000c, Tett 2005) as a means of achieving equality or social justice through the Third Way (Giddens 1998). Third Way values and approaches to policy development and implementation provide the policy context for this study but ideas of 'joined-up' working and thinking were also features of the fieldwork data and a prominent characteristic of partnership working in MUP. Chapter 7 has shown that the image of 'joining-up' captured the essence of partnership for the members of MUP.

In MUP norms, values, beliefs and principles played a prominent role in the process of partnership working and in sustaining the partnership. The fieldwork data has shown that all members of MUP Board shared a commitment, many a passion, for widening participation in post-16 learning and that this was a powerful bonding element in the partnership. Chapter 5 revealed that this commitment brought the partners together and Chapter 6 demonstrated how it underpinned partnership working during a peak and a trough in the lifecourse of the partnership. Chapter 7 illuminated how the individual and collective values and beliefs of key actors contributed to the formulation and agreement of shared goals for MUP. Margaret, a key actor in MUP, commented that members were 'genuinely enthused by the notion of extending learning to people who are disadvantaged' and Stephen, another key individual, saw the partnership as a way to 'bring some of my value systems to bear

and to have an effect on more people'. These individuals together with other members of the partnership formulated shared goals that focused on widening participation through collaborative working which were articulated in documents (e.g. MUP document 1999f; 2000a; 2000c) and discussed and debated in the forum of MUP meetings (e.g. Observations 2 and 4, see Chapter 6).

Chapter 7 has shown the importance of shared goals in a partnership though there was a gendered perspective in terms of the level of importance attached by members of MUP to shared goals and other aspects of partnership working which contribute to sustainability. Male members of MUP reflected a more business-oriented approach to partnership and stressed that shared goals were critical whilst female members emphasised the importance of developing relationships as the basis for sustained partnership. Female managers commented that building relationships and developing trust through partnership working was a challenging and time consuming process but a necessary basis for effective and sustained partnership.

Shared goals in MUP were based on a shared set of values which Field (2003) argues underpin effective networks and enable the achievement of economic, educational and social goals. Partnership working in MUP was also based on norms of reciprocity, respect and equality. Data presented in Chapter 7 demonstrates that key individuals tried to embody these norms into all aspects of partnership working to ensure inclusivity in the partnership. Norms of reciprocity, trustworthiness and mutuality are identified in the partnership and social capital literature as aspects of networks that enable the achievement of mutual goals (Fowler 1998, Powell and Glendinning 2002, Putnam 1993, Coleman 1988, Kilpatrick *et al* 2001). In practice,

the implementation of some of these norms led to tensions e.g. the principle of rotating the venue for partnership meetings (see p.236) but they affirmed the members' commitment to equality in principle and in practice. Another aspect of mutuality was that individuals and organisations in MUP were prepared to support partnership working with their own resources, e.g. Margaret and the university, Stephen and College 4, as shown in Chapter 6. Although the level of resources varied during the lifecourse of MUP there was evidence that larger organisations were willing to support the smaller ones in the partnership.

The shared values, principles and beliefs of key actors and the norms they followed to implement partnership working provided the basis for sustained partnership. They provided the foundation for the development and expansion of MUP and the roots that sustained the partnership during ambivalence and subsequent re-invigoration. However, although the lifecourse of MUP revealed the positive contribution of different dimensions of social capital to supporting and sustaining partnership, it also exposed aspects of power and inequality in the dynamics of partnership working.

8.5   Power and inequality in partnership

Partnership can enable individuals and organisations to achieve goals which would not be possible without collaboration and co-operation. Chapter 2 has shown that definitions of partnership allude to the potential of partnership to solve problems and address issues which are too complex for individual actors to tackle alone (Geddes 1998, DfEE 1999b, Balloch and Taylor 2001, Tett 2003). This potential underlies the way in which partnership has been embraced by New Labour in its promotion of 'joined-up' working in public sector services (Jones and Bird 2000, Glendinning *et al*

2002, Tett 2005) and the more general shift towards networked forms of governance (Rhodes 2000, Powell and Exworthy 2002). Networked horizontal forms of governance regulated by trust and mutual adjustments rather than hierarchical command and control are seen as more powerful ways of managing and capitalising on collective effort than traditional hierarchal organisational structures (Rhodes 1996, Huxham 2000). In MUP this was evident through the operation of formal and informal networks which enabled the partnership to lever resources from funding bodies, such as FEFC, HEFCE and Ufi for widening participation projects. Margaret as 'kingpin' and partnership broker (Tennyson and Wilde 2000) was able to forge 'good connections' (Paldam 2000) to the regional development agency for the West Midlands and to people in positions of power in the regional branch of Ufi which enabled MUP to access financial resources and increased the power of the partnership in the Black Country, particularly during expansion (see Chapter 6).

Margaret's ability to develop such links, which are described in the social capital literature as linking social capital (Aldridge *et al* 2002), depended upon her personal skills and qualities and her position as a senior manager in a large educational institution. This combination of individual social capital and Margaret's access to other networks through her position and power in the university enabled her to work with other members of MUP to accrue collective benefits for the partnership. This aspect of partnership working illustrates that access to networks and ability to forge links to people in powerful positions enables actors to lever resources, as Woolcock has pointed out (Woolcock 2000; 2001). However, the contributions of key individuals such as Margaret to MUP also reveal how partnership working can reinforce inequalities through the power of personalities.

Chapter 6 has shown how power differentials amongst organisations and individuals affected the level and range of collaborative activity in MUP and the contribution of individual representatives to expansion and ambivalence in the lifecourse of the partnership. The chapter revealed that the contributions of a small number of individuals expanded and sustained the partnership and that their personalities as well as their values and positions in their respective organisations affected the nature and extent of partnership activities. This was evidence of the ladder of involvement and influence that Geddes (1997) found in local partnerships and reflected power differentials amongst actors and the role of personalities in partnership working. Key individuals who were founder members of MUP and led its expansion were powerful personalities who were prepared to use their intellectual, cultural, social and some economic capital to support the partnership but despite their shared norms, values and principle partnership working reinforced some inequalities.

Inequalities related to the power of personalities and the distribution of the benefits of partnership working for the individuals who participated in the process of partnership working on the ground. The operation of formal and informal networks and the opportunities for networking provided by the forum of MUP enabled people with more individual social capital to accrue more personal benefits than those with less social capital. For example, Margaret gained an influential position on the local LSC which other members of the partnership attributed partly to the power and influence she acquired as a result of her role as Chair of MUP. Gillian, like Margaret, benefited personally from her participation in MUP as she obtained a post in the DfES in 2002. Mark, a university representative who left the university during the period of this study also commented on how he had personally increased his

power and influence in the Black Country through his participation in MUP as it had given him access to positions such as membership of the Board of Governors at a local FE college. Thus Margaret, Gillian and Mark all accrued personal benefits through their participation in MUP and increased their individual social capital as they forged new links and connections on the basis of the roles they adopted in MUP.

Other aspects of inequality revealed by partnership working in MUP included the dynamics of gender, discussed in Chapter 6 and manifested in the differing reactions to male and female presenters in a MUP Board meeting and the operation of powerful informal networks amongst some members of the partnership. Field (2003) affirms the power of informal networks and points out that they can serve to 'exclude and deny as well as include and enable' (Field 2003, p.3) and Field and Spence (2000) found that informal networks enabled people to achieve their goals more effectively than formal structures. In MUP the operation of informal networks revealed both the positive aspects of such networks and the downside of social capital (Schuller 2000, Putzel 1997), which functioned to reinforce power relations despite the norms of reciprocity, equality and inclusivity that were central to the partnership.

The above discussion of the role of networks, trust, norms and values reveals the role of social capital in sustaining partnership. It shows as Woolcock (1998; 2001) argues that different levels and dimensions of social capital enable actors to achieve mutual goals and that social capital is a resource which can be used like other forms of capital to support partnership. The analysis of partnership working in MUP also exposes the way in which social capital can function to reinforce power inequalities

and enable those with more social capital to accrue even more than those with less. In this respect social capital functions like human, cultural and economic capital in that those with more resources are able to use them to accrue even more benefits. In drawing the discussion together and providing a contribution to understanding the role of social capital in supporting and sustaining partnership I differentiate characteristics of weak and strong forms of partnership. The characteristics are drawn from the analysis of partnership working in MUP, the literature on partnership and partnership working and the conceptual framework of social capital as a means for understanding the basis of relationships in a partnership.

8.6   Characteristics of weak and strong forms of partnership

Partnership is both a complex concept and a challenging practice as it depends upon establishing, managing and maintaining relationships amongst individuals, organisations and agencies from different organisational cultures, with varying levels of power and resources and multiple reasons for participating in a 'partnership'. The evidence from this study suggests that partnership is not a dichotomous entity in the sense that it either exists or does not exist but like some of the concepts which characterise partnership, e.g. trust, it is more usefully conceptualised as a continuum.

Mullinix (2001) identified a continuum of stages in partnership development grounded in five years experience of creating partnerships in Southern Africa. Tett (2003) suggested that partnership is best seen as a continuum of activities ranging from working with allies or being part of a network to being involved in complex partnerships for capacity building communities. In Chapter 2, I drew on these ideas to argue that partnership can be conceptualised as a continuum of weak to strong

forms of partnership and summarised the characteristics found in the literature on partnership in Table 2 (in Chapter 2) Here I draw together the characteristics found empirically in MUP with those found in the literature and present them in Table 6, on the next page. The characteristics found in MUP are indicated in *italics* whilst those found in the literature are shown in normal type and referenced to their source.

Table 6: Continuum of characteristics of weak to strong forms of partnership

Characteristics of weak ------------------------------- ▶ strong forms of partnership		
Types of trust	Calculation-based trust Experience-based trust	Instinctive trust (Coulson 1998) *Implicit, unreserved, unconditional trust* Experience-based trust
Levels of trust	Low level trust Fragile trust *Mistrust/distrust of some partners*	*Deep trust* Resilient trust (Ring 1997) *High levels of trust and commitment at executive/senior management level* Understanding trust as a heterogeneous concept not a dichotomous variable (Ring 1997, Newman 1998, Ebers 1997a)
Networks	*Single formal structure for partnership work e.g. partnership board* Vertical or hierarchical governance structure: 'may-pole like network' (Putnam 1993) *Poor information flow due to ineffective mechanisms for communication amongst partners* *Externally driven agenda e.g. policy imperative to work in 'partnership'* *Competing priorities of members [individuals and organisations]*	*Multiple formal and informal structures operating effectively to manage and maintain partnership* Horizontal or networked governance structure: 'web-like network' (Putnam 1993, Rhodes 2000) *Effective information flows* Shared communication codes amongst partners (Castells 2000, Putnam 1993, Ebers 1997a) *Agenda for actions internally driven and agreed by partners with strong commitment of people involved* *Quality of relationships amongst members:* connectedness (Trevillion 1999), connectivity (Gilchrist 2000), social cohesion (Green et al 2003)
Norms and values	Formal relations based on business and financial objectives Motivated by self rather than mutual interest	*Reciprocity, openness, inclusivity* Mutual support (Fowler 1998) Equality of participation (Tett 2003) *Shared values, goals and purposes* *Commitment to inter-organisational collaboration per se as well as for achieving mutual goals* *Strong commitment of individuals to aims of partnership e.g. passion for widening participation*
Motivations of participants	Self-interest *Pragmatic reasons e.g. cannot afford to be outside the club*	*Mutual interest* *Strategic interest* *Motivated by shared values, principles, ideological beliefs*

Table 6 shows that different dimensions of trust, networks, norms and values characterise weak and strong forms of partnership and that typically actors in a partnership will be motivated by various reasons for participating in the partnership. In this study, trust was identified by the participants in MUP as the most important feature of effective partnership and networks emerged from the observation and analysis of partnership working as prominent aspects that underpinned partnership. The role of norms and values was uncovered in searching for the answer to the question of what sustained MUP given external developments and internal aspects of partnership working, in particular during ambivalence. The data also revealed different levels of participation in partnership linked to actor's motivations, which ranged from pragmatic, strategic reasons to moral and ideological beliefs and principles, and in some cases included a combination of these various reasons.

The continuum of characteristics of weak to strong forms of partnership indicates that varying types and levels of trust and different features of networks underpin these forms of partnership. Characteristics associated with weak forms of partnership include calculation-based trust, fragile or low levels of trust, and possible mistrust/distrust whilst strong forms of partnership are marked by unreserved, deep trust amongst individuals and strong organisational commitment to the partnership by the participating organisations. In terms of networks, weak forms of partnership may rely upon a single structure, such as a formal partnership board whilst stronger forms of partnership will have multiple formal and informal structures operating in the partnership, e.g. as in MUP during the expansion stage in its lifecourse. Norms and values may be less evident as they can be tacit rather than explicitly discussed and agreed but they serve an important bonding function amongst actors.

All forms of partnership rely upon reciprocal relationships that involve some level of obligation to others and the expectation of gaining some benefit(s) from working in partnership. In MUP this was articulated as the 'value-added' of partnership working and as the fieldwork data has shown for some actors it reflected the view that 'for each partner there has to be something in it for them' (see p.244) whilst for others it was 'a stance of colleges and others...standing together...and saying there is much we can gain from each other' (see p.183). The latter was indicative of a stronger commitment to the principle of partnership working *per se* in addition to the economic, social, and educational benefits of collaboration. Chapter 6 has shown that this highlights the role of individual agency in partnership working and the function of personal commitment to sustaining partnership.

The level of personal commitment of individuals to a specific partnership is another feature of weak and strong forms of inter-organisational and multi-agency partnerships. In weak forms of partnership, individuals may have only a superficial commitment to the partnership, participating on the basis of an external requirement to work in partnership or attending meetings merely as a representative of an organisation or line manager and taking a reporting role, as happened in MUP during ambivalence (see Section 6.3). Such forms of partnership are closer to those characterised in the partnership literature as externally driven partnerships (see Chapter 2). Stronger forms of partnership, are more internally driven by individuals who have a deep personal commitment to the aims of the partnership with an agenda for actions which is agreed by the people who implement partnership working, as seen in MUP during expansion (see Section 6.2).

Externally driven partnerships that form solely for bidding purposes may die when a project is completed whilst internally driven partnerships have a more sustained lifecourse as they often re-form and re-invigorate themselves to undertake other projects and activities. This is affirmed by Seddon *et al* (2004) who found evidence of a partnership lifecycle in their research of partnerships in Australia. In the present study, it is illustrated by the lifecourse of MUP which shows that though the partnership initially formed in order to bid for FEFC external funding for partnership working, the shared norms and values of individuals sustained it during the different stages in its life.

The features of MUP suggest that along the continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership summarised in Table 6, it would classify as a strong form of partnership. All the characteristics listed in the table under strong forms of partnership, derived from literature and empirical data, were found in MUP and to me as a researcher it felt qualitatively like a strong partnership. However, a more fine-grained analysis is possible. During its lifecourse, MUP was characterised by weak and strong features of partnership during different stages in its lifecourse and it is possible to link these to the continuum. During stages 1 and 3 of is lifecourse (formation and ambivalence respectively) MUP was characterised by fewer functioning networks, poor information flows, lower levels of trust and, during ambivalence, members being pulled away from the partnership by competing priorities and responsibilities. During stage 2, expansion, members of MUP were engaged in multiple networks and information and communication flows were excellent, partly due to the personality and skills of Jenny, the partnership administrator, and Margaret, Chair of MUP Board, who was particularly skilled 'in putting the arm round people'. Levels of

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trust were high with Board members being able and prepared to devote time and energy to building trust and engaging enthusiastically in partnership activities.

The stages in the lifecourse of MUP show that a partnership can develop from a weak into a strong form of partnership as MUP did from stage 1 to 2 in its lifecourse but also indicate that movement the other way is also possible, from strong to weak as from stage 2 to 3 of its lifecourse. Thus movement along the continuum is not necessarily linear or one way but may be cyclical, as in MUP where the movement was from weak (stage 1) to strong (stage 2) to weak (stage 3) and then strong again in stage 4 when nodes in networks (Castells 2000) that had been dormant were re-activated and the partnership became re-invigorated. The continuum and the progress of MUP also reveal that the dimensions of social capital which enable partnerships to achieve mutual goals also vary. Thus, for example it is not just networks that contribute to sustaining partnership but web-like horizontal network structures (Putnam 1993, Rhodes 2000) with connectedness (Trevillion 1999, Gilchrist 2000).

The case study of MUP provides an insight into the role of social capital in sustaining partnership and adds to understandings of partnership and partnership working. It shows that social capital is a resource which can support and sustain partnership and that different dimensions of social capital characterise weak and strong forms of partnership. The actors in MUP were able to draw on their individual and collective social capital to expand and sustain partnership and to achieve shared goals as well as accrue individual benefits from participation in the partnership. This included unintended benefits, such as professional learning for the

actors involved who learnt about the work of other organisations through the process of working in partnership with them. In this sense partnership working functioned as a form of continuing professional development for the participants, even as a form of lifelong learning.

The next, concluding, chapter of the thesis considers what we can learn for future practice from this study, which has uncovered the role of social capital in sustaining partnership.

Chapter 9

Conclusion: the potential of partnership and the practicalities of partnership working

This chapter draws together the main conclusions of the study by reviewing the research questions that informed the investigation and reflecting on the implications of the findings for understanding the concept and practice of partnership in the context of post-16 learning. The first part of the chapter focuses on answers to the three research questions, which were explored through the case study of MUP, and discusses the limitations of the study. The second part considers the contribution of the research to informing future practice. It summarises the costs and benefits of partnership working and identifies factors that can contribute to effective and sustained partnership. This includes the role of social capital as a resource in enabling individuals and organisations to achieve mutual goals through partnership working.

9.1 Review of the research questions

This section reflects on the research questions that framed the investigation of partnership and summarises the main findings in relation to each of the questions.

Why is partnership promoted in post-16 learning?

The study shows that the notion of partnership pervades policy and practice in post-16 learning and that this is reflected in other disciplines and fields of policy and practice. Partnership is promoted by national, supranational and international policymakers and is implemented by organisations, agencies and individuals in many different contexts. The question as to why it is promoted in post-16 learning centres

on the notion of the 'value-added' of partnership working and New Labour's policies for widening participation in post-16 learning in England. The notion of the value-added forms part of understanding partnership as a theoretical concept and is considered in relation to the second research question. The contribution of New Labour's policies is considered here.

New Labour's policies for post-16 learning in England have focused on the twin objectives of widening participation in learning and promoting partnership as a strategy for achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness in the planning and provision of education and training. In post-16 learning, as in other public sector services, policymakers have promoted greater collaboration and partnership working between different layers of government and amongst providers of services, including further, higher and adult education (Stuart 2002). This study shows the impact of such national policy imperatives at a local level.

For New Labour, partnership working represents a political choice as it 'tied its colours firmly to the partnership mast' when it was elected to power in 1997 (Balloch and Taylor 2001, p.3) and during its period in office has promoted partnership with vigour (Jones and Bird 2000, Painter and Clarence 2001, Glendinning *et al* 2002) as part of its Third Way approach to policy development and governance (Giddens 2000). This approach of 'joined-up working', which embodies the government's conceptualisation of partnership, has become tarnished as critics have argued that partnership and participation in post-16 learning cannot tackle the structural causes of economic and social disadvantage and deprivation (Coffield 1999a; 1999b; Thompson 2000). However, partnership remains central to the

government's approach to tackling economic, social and educational disadvantage (Tett 2005, Gewirtz *et al* 2005).

For the participants in MUP, New Labour's imperatives represented the policy context in which they had to work as managers of post-16 education and training institutions and organisations. These policy priorities also resonated with their norms, values and beliefs as individuals and as managers of post-16 learning situated in a sub-region with low levels of educational achievement, areas of economic and social disadvantage and pockets of severe deprivation. The study shows how shifting national policy priorities, government initiatives and financial incentives, which represented 'carrots and sticks' (Powell and Glendinning 2002), to widen participation in learning through partnership working affected their work as organisations and individuals. It also reveals how the individual agency of managers and practitioners can shape the implementation of policy imperatives and enable the achievement of shared goals which are determined by the participants in a partnership rather than externally imposed by a government department or funding agency.

During the timescale of this study, the twin priorities of the government of firstly, increasing and widening participation in post-16 learning and secondly, of enticing, encouraging and even requiring stakeholders to work in partnership explains why partnership was so prominent in the field of post-16 learning. Since the research data was gathered the government has shifted its focus to other priorities in education and to other pubic sector services, such as health and social welfare, but partnership remains a significant concept and practice represented in the development of

partnerships for progression (HEFCE 2001). Such collaborative working arrangements have a long history (Bird 1996, Paczuska 1999) and represent earlier attempts to provide access to education and training for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is something that continues to challenge the field of post-16 learning.

How is partnership conceptualised and understood in policy, theory and in practice?

A key theme in conceptualisations of partnership is the notion of adding value through partnership working. This notion of the value-added of partnership refers to the potential of achieving more by working collectively, through collaboration, co-operation and partnership with other actors, than by working individually as a single organisation, agency or person. In Chapter 2, I argued that this could be conceptualised as 1+1+1= more than 3 and could be used as a way of expressing the value that can be added through partnership working. Evidence from the policy, theory and practice analysed in this study supports this conceptualisation.

In New Labour's post-16 learning policy this is represented in the potential of 'joined-up working' to tackle economic, social and educational problems. This characteristic of partnership is also reflected in other arenas of policy and practice, such as international development (Fowler 1998, Robinson *et al* 2000), business (Ebers 1997a; 2000, Ruane 2002), and lifelong learning (CEC 2001, OECD 2001, World Bank 2001), where partnership is promoted as the 'new' way to tackle global, regional and local issues. Notions of collaboration and partnership also underpin wider debates about the role of the government, the state and the individual in

globalised capitalism (Castells 1998, Beck 1992, Rhodes 1996). Such debates include theorisations of governance and the development of organisational structures that promote greater communication and coherence amongst organisations and individuals, such as collaborative and networked forms of governance (Huxham 2000, Rhodes 2000). These more horizontal forms of governance, regulated by trust and mutual adjustments, are contrasted with the 'silos' of vertical hierarchical structures that depend upon command and control (Seddon 2001). In theory and in practice partnership is linked to networked forms of governance (Balloch and Taylor 2001,Glendinning *et al* 2002).

The present study reveals that partnership can be more meaningfully understood as a heterogeneous concept and practice rather than a dichotomous entity. The characteristics of weak and strong forms of partnership drawn from the partnership literature, (summarised in Table 2, p.58), show that both inductive and deductive approaches to theorising partnership indicate a range of characteristics of partnership based on the strength of relationships amongst the participants and their motivations for engaging in the practice. Analysis of partnership working in MUP has illuminated the role of social capital in supporting and sustaining partnership and this evidence has been used together with the partnership literature to propose a continuum of characteristics of weak to strong forms of partnership, (shown in Table 6, p.280). The continuum indicates how these forms of partnership are characterised by dimensions of social capital, such as different types and levels of trust, varying configurations of networks and shared norms and values. It also links motivations for engaging in partnership to weak and strong forms of partnership.

The continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership offers a more detailed conceptualisation of partnership than that found in the partnership literature examined in this study. Research evidence on partnership working in post-16 learning is limited despite the policy thrust in the UK and in the EU. In 2002, Stuart pointed to the lack of guidance on the practicalities of working in collaboration to widen participation in further and higher education despite the policy rhetoric (Stuart 2000). Since then some useful practical guidance on working in partnership has been published which adds to our understanding of partnership processes. Tett's guide to working in partnership (Tett 2003) offers advice, examples and checklists as resources to support effective partnership working and discusses the benefits of partnership in community and adult learning, in particular in socially disadvantaged communities. She also considers the challenges to successful partnership working, such as resource and power differentials amongst actors which have also been identified in this study and in other research (Mayo and Taylor 2001, Geddes 1997; 1998).

The case study of MUP deepens understanding of the practicalities of working in partnership with organisations that have varying levels of power and resources and it highlights the role of individuals in driving and sustaining a partnership. It also shows that it is possible for a partnership to move from being a weak to a strong form of partnership and conversely, to change from being a strong to a weak form of partnership, as happened during the four stages in the lifecourse of MUP. The study thus provides an insight into the complexities of partnership working and reveals how individual and collective social capital can be used as a resource to support and sustain partnership.

How is the process of partnership working implemented and experienced and what sustains a partnership?

The present study highlights the role of social capital in the process of partnership working and shows how different combinations and dimensions of trust, networks, norms and values sustain partnership and enable actors to achieve mutual goals. The participants in MUP identified trust and shared goals as the two most important factors that contribute to effective and sustained partnership. In the case of MUP, the shared goals focused on widening participation in post-16 learning in the Black Country sub-region. The data also indicate the role of structure and individual agency in influencing the actions of individuals and groups in the field of practice. In the case study, structure was represented by New Labour's policy for post-16 learning and individual agency by the norms, values and beliefs of the individuals who implemented partnership working in MUP.

Analysis of the implementation of partnership working in MUP has shown that the trigger for the formation of the partnership was a policy imperative but that sustainability depended upon social glue. The shared values of key individuals provided the bonding social capital (Aldridge *et al* 2002, Gewirtz *et al* 2005) that sustained the partnership through 'thick and thin'. Other forms of social capital enabled the partnership to expand and underpinned its success in a range of collaborative activities. This depended upon the individual social capital of key people, such as Margaret, who was able to use bridging and linking social capital to lever resources from external agencies and draw organisations and individuals into MUP through the power of her personality. The networks that these individuals were able to forge and the levels of trust which underpinned formal and informal networks

contributed to the success of MUP during its expansion and enabled individuals to 'pull it back from the brink of extinction' during a period of deep decline in its activities. The network structure that underpinned partnership (shown in Figures 5, 9 and 10) and the high levels of trust amongst individuals who shared a set of values sustained MUP. These are all characteristics of strong forms of partnership (see Table 6).

In addition to their shared values, which bonded members of MUP as a group, the commitment of key individuals to the principle of collaborative working *per se* also functioned to sustain the partnership. Key actors, such as Gillian, saw collaborative working as a way of empowering the members of the partnership and providing them with the means to address the challenges of widening participation in post-16 learning in the sub-region in which they worked. Their individual agency contributed to transforming MUP into an internally driven, self-generating partnership that was sustained despite periods of deep decline in its lifecourse. The data show that the commitment of the individuals who engage in implementing partnership working and of the organisations that they represent contributes to the sustainability of a partnership.

The study shows that the experience of partnership working for the actors is variable and that the benefits of partnership are not equally distributed. Tensions around resourcing partnership working, such as the time needed to build trust and engage in networking and the administrative costs of maintaining effective communication and information flows amongst members affect the nature of participants' experience of partnership. Furthermore, the dynamics of the process of partnership working are

shaped by power differentials, personalities, levels of trust and gender relations, which enable some individuals to accrue more personal benefits than others. In the case study, individuals with more social capital were able to extend their social capital even further and obtain positions of power and influence elsewhere as a result of their participation in MUP. This reveals the downside of social capital (Schuller 2000) as it can reinforce inequality as well as have positive effects in supporting and sustaining partnership. In terms of positive effects, the case study shows how individuals can use their social capital to achieve self-determined goals within the structures of the external policy environment in which they have to work. The study also reveals that partnership working can fulfil a social and educational purpose for the individuals involved and that these purposes can sustain a partnership as well as the more instrumentalist function of partnership as a means for achieving mutual goals.

9.2   Limitations of the study

This thesis is based on the investigation of one case study of partnership working and hence raises issues of generalisibilty (Bassey 1999) to other contexts. The empirical research does not compare the operation of partnership in different contexts as other studies have done (e.g. Takahashi 2002, Spendlove 2003). Furthermore, it is my interpretation of partnership working and has been shaped by my view of the world. An aspect of MUP which I noticed as soon as I started observing meetings of the partnership was that there was no minority ethnic group representation on MUP Board or in any of its working groups as far as I could ascertain from my fieldwork. Initially, I considered this to be a key weakness of the partnership given the significant proportion of learners in the four boroughs from minority ethnic

backgrounds (over 20% in two boroughs, Black Country Consortium 2000) but upon questioning MUP Board members in interviews discovered that they wanted to avoid tokenism and so had not deliberately sought 'a community representative' as happens in many partnerships. The data on partnership working thus emanates from White female and male managers but this is representative of the make-up of senior managers of education and training organisations in the field of post-16 learning.

As a qualitative study which uses a combination of methods to analyse, interrogate and interpret partnership I would argue that despite the limitations discussed above, this study provides deep and rich insights into the process of partnership working. As such it deepens our understanding of the concept and practice of partnership in the context of post-16 learning, an area that is under-researched and under-valued. It offers pointers for improving practice in partnership working and reveals how social capital can be used as a resource, like other forms of capital, in achieving mutual goals. It also reveals the power of individual agency in sustaining partnership.

9.3   Costs and benefits of partnership working

The major cost of working in partnership is time. The time needed for 'joining-up' individuals and organisations and building trust through networking requires an investment in time and requires a commitment to the principle of partnership and recognition of the practicalities of partnership working. As Gillian, an FE college principal, pointed out 'doing anything collaboratively takes longer than doing it by yourself' (see p.246). This may appear to be an obvious statement but it illustrates the importance of recognising that time spent in brokering and sustaining partnership may not necessarily lead to tangible outcomes in the short-term. In terms of

practicalities this can pose significant problems for the individuals who implement partnership working in an outcome-led performative environment, such as the one promoted by New Labour (Phillips and Harper-Jones 2003, Avis 2003).

In addition to the time of individuals who implement partnership working, the costs of partnership include funding administrative support and a membership fee, if the partnership is subscription based. These can be a more major source of tension in a partnership though in relative terms they are quite small, particularly when compared to the cost of participants' time.

The costs of partnership working are however outweighed by the benefits that can accrue to organisations, agencies and individuals that work in partnership. Partnership can lead to financial, economic, educational, social and personal benefits for the actors involved and result in improvements in services and provision for others. This is represented in the notion of the value-added of partnership working, discussed earlier in this chapter. By pooling resources, such as different forms of capital and tacit knowledge partners can turn less tangible resources into more concrete ones and achieve mutual goals. In MUP, individuals were able to use their intellectual, cultural and social capital to lever financial capital by building bridges and forging weak ties (Granovetter 1973) and good connections (Paldam 2000) to officers of regional and national funding agencies. These activities enabled them to widen participation in post-16 learning in the sub-region by working in partnership with other agencies, such as Ufi to open Learndirect centres in community-based organisations, colleges and private training providers in the Black Country (Dhillon 2004).

Partnership working also brings wider benefits in the form of learning for those involved. Gilchrist (2000) found that informal networks in community development partnerships enabled mutual learning and in a study of UK and Japanese aid projects in Ghana, Takahashi (2002) shows how inter-organisational co-operation in aid partnerships contribute to inter-organisational learning. In MUP, participation in the process of partnership working and in the collaborative activities organised and managed by the partnership contributed to professional and personal learning for the individuals involved and also led to inter-organisational learning.

9.4 Factors that contribute to effective and sustained partnership

This study indicates that various factors contribute to sustained partnership and enable actors to achieve mutual goals, a key characteristic of effective partnerships. These factors include structures that support partnership, e.g. external policy imperatives and internal organisational structures developed by a partnership to manage its operation, and aspects of the social relationships that underpin continued partnership working, in particular dimensions of social capital. These are presented below as a list of factors with examples drawn from the case study of MUP.

Context and structures

- Policy imperatives and government initiatives and incentives e.g. New Labour's third way approach to governance and its emphasis on widening participation in post-16 learning

- Strong commitment from the senior managers of the organisations represented in a partnership e.g. principals and executive managers

- Organisational structures for implementing and managing partnership working e.g. partnership board, working groups and a small monitoring structure e.g. executive group

- Administrative infrastructure to ensure effective and efficient information and communications flows amongst members e.g. partnership office and dedicated partnership administrator

Social relationships and the roles of individuals in partnership working

- Relationships underpinned by dimensions of social capital as characterised in the continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership, summarised in Table 6, e.g. deep/high levels of trust, 'web-like' networks, shared norms and values

- A Chair with the skills and attributes of a partnership broker e.g. trusted, respected figure able to build trust and create a climate of openness and inclusivity

- Ownership of the purposes and processes of partnership; these may change over the lifecourse of a partnership but members need to discuss and agree the role and goals of the partnership in meetings

- Strong commitment of individuals, at all levels of partnership activity

- People who are able forge cross-boundary linkages and develop trust-based networks through networking

- People who are able to make 'good connections' and use bridging and linking social capital to access resources for the partnership

Different combinations and dimensions of social capital and factors listed above enabled MUP to sustain itself and to achieve considerable success in achieving its shared goals of developing and implementing strategies to widen participation in post-16 learning in the Black Country. This was achieved through the use minimal financial resources as MUP was not funded to operate as a partnership from any external source.

9.5   Concluding remarks

Finally, in concluding this study, it is worth noting that the distinctive characteristics of MUP and its progress thorough the four stages in its lifecourse revealed the role of social capital in sustaining partnership in post-16 learning. The use of social capital as a framework for theorising partnership provides a different perspective for understanding partnership and for informing practice. This study offers a conceptualisation of partnership as a continuum of characteristics of weak to strong forms of partnership that can be used to research partnership in other contexts and disciplines, and hence further knowledge and understanding of the basis of partnership. The continuum can also be used in practice, e.g. by individuals who may already be involved in a partnership and wish to improve its effectiveness or those embarking on a new partnership. Although the role of social capital in

sustaining partnership is demonstrated through the case study, the research also shows that social capital is not just a benign entity, which is how it is sometimes portrayed in policy and in practice. In partnership working, social capital is a resource that can be managed and used to obtain individual and collective benefits in similar ways to human and financial capital. Thus, it is not just social capital that is important but particular dimensions and specific combinations which can empower and enable individuals and groups to achieve shared goals.

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Appendix 1

Observation notes of MUP Board meeting

Observation No: 1   **Date: 1/10/99**   **Venue: Greenshire Business Centre**

Attendance: Chair (F) administrator (F) no minority ethnic group representation.
Coding F- female, M- male
Number in attendance: 23

Seating plan

9.15   members arriving and helping themselves to coffee in adjoining room – much laughter and exchange of greetings. The administrator and the Chair introduced me to various members. One of the colleges in the partnership was being relaunched, following the reorganisation of FE in borough A with a new name and some of the discussion centred around this development.

A good rapport was evident both from the non-verbal communication and the level of interaction. Everyone seemed relaxed and at ease. The individuals representing their organisations at this meeting seemed to have established good relations with each other.

9.30   formal meeting held in adjoining room. A formal seating arrangement. Well-attended meeting. Full agenda with invited guest from Government Office West Midlands. 1st major item was regional developments by invited guest from Govt Office.

9.45   presentation by guest from Govt Office – Advantage West Midlands (*see Website for detail about policy and current initiatives*) He used a series of OHTs as basis for his talk.

confirmed that learning partnerships : family organisations will stay post 2001 *(as recommended by Kennedy p52)*

raise standards
promote E.O/inclusion
enhance employability & skills

partnerships mean different things to different people
shared responsibility
shared agenda
clear structures/systems
clear stakeholder engagement – (how to engage learners & employers)

Role of Govt Office
- helping partnerships to develop
- helping to network & share good practice
- how to exploit technology
- agree learning plans
- regional partnerships : in future Govt office will have role in evaluating partnerships both in terms of the process and the outcomes and in managing the partnership fund

What is a learning plan?
- Agreed vision
- Statement of aims & objectives
- Description of how the partnership will carry out functions

Some questions for research project

What is lifelong learning in the context of the region?
Convene a lifelong learning forum   regional cultural
                                                 consortium
Govt Office: info source
Voluntary sector/disadvantaged groups

All members listened very attentively to the presentation & the Chair thanked the quest speaker for his time in coming to the meeting and sharing the Govt Office's thinking with the MUP

10.15   The next part of the meeting was devoted to presentations from each of the 4 Strategic Lifelong Learning Partnerships (SLLP) in the Black Country. Each TEC presented a plan using different technologies.

Presentation from SLLP 1
Presenter, (M), opted for a verbal report using no technology. He made a facious comment to this effect at the start of the presentation! Elements he focussed on included:

Funding opportunity for working as partnership
Guidance
Learning gateways
Power diffused – power lies elsewhere

Coming together of partnership – different planning docs – need to identify lack of coherence

Learning hub is a practical outcome

Learning to Succeed White Paper – response sent

Partnership shouldn't assume powers/resp which belong to other groups eg LEA Schools

Members listening intently with interest. NVC of group was positive (good eye contact, nods of agreement, open body language) despite presenter's use of no technology and his choice to present from where he was sitting rather than from front of the room. There was almost an indication of technology fatigue as some members seemed to welcome the opportunity to listen to just a verbal report. Govt steer towards partnership approach was noted – Blunkett letter mentioned. The speaker was realistic about the potential of partnership.

Presentation from SLLP 2

Presenter, (M)

Borough B described as 'learning borough' …socially and for economic reasons…agenda for living…partnership growing out of other forum… Synergy – added value by coming together … give voice to individuals…spread the message about the benefits of learning…increase participation & skill level

10.40 Chair commented that Borough D & Borough B SLLPs were growing out of existing organisations – leading to improvement of performance against targets (NTT)

some general group discussion of the notion of regional cultural consortium and of a cultural strategy for lifelong learning and also the role of the library service in that strategy.

Presentation from SLLP 3

10.50 Borough C SLLP (see attached papers)

Presenter, (M) used OHTs during his presentation and circulated hard copies stapled together.

The outline learning plan for Borough C for 2000 is part of the regeneration strategy…civic partnership…raise the attainment levels of individuals…promote a learning community…aspirations – social inclusion agenda…workforce learning using business/education links…stimulate improvements in training & education

Presenter's confident body language was noticeable and his clear and concise presentation style. The NVC of the group indicated collective agreement with the elements of the plan (nods of agreement, smiles,) Value for money was emphasised and this struck a chord with the group.

Chair thanked the presenter and commented on the very structured approach to the delivery of the learning plan.

Presentation from SLLP 4
11.05   Borough D SLLP
Presenter, (F) had problems with the technology and started her presentation with hesitations and less confident NVC (um...er...fumbling with jacket...crossed legs whilst facing the audience...). Group's NVC indicated lack of attention...many members were sitting back with folded arms and making unkind comments about the technology...This was the first female speaker other than the Chair.

Changes to attitude are needed...'the learning borough'...as the circles show (referring to the PowerPoint diagram)... the learning alliance is about standards in schools ...in early years...in primary...in secondary... and in post compulsory...the Govt want to improve access to learning...we want learning to be fun...the National Grid for Learning... the library service... the use of ICT are all part of the learning plan...

Chair thanked the presenter and commented that it was worth the struggle with the technology to put over her plan effectively.

11.30   coffee and comfort break

11.40   Chair opened up discussion around Learning to Succeed White Paper and there were a few general comments from other members.

11.55   presentation to update work on FEFC Widening Participation Project (see attached copies of reports).

Widening participation (Kennedy)
- Attracting & supporting new learners
- A suitable curriculum
- Partnership, outreach & community education

Best practice
- Local action learning centres
- Integrated basic skills work
- Economic regeneration initiatives

Gaps
- APL
- Market research
- Community consultation
- Resource barriers to learning (childcare....)

Presenter, (M), used OHTs and gave a clear summary of the findings of the project which he had been seconded to work on. This was his last MUP meeting as he was moving on to a job at a university.

12.20   Discussion of bids for projects. Agenda item 8. Chair provided an update on contact with Ufi& visit by members of Ufi to the university & site visits to

projects in boroughs (see attached report from Ufi). Proposal by MUP to become hub provider was welcomed. Head of Ufi in West Midlands said: "We...feel confident that the Partnership [MUP] will offer strong foundations on which to build a Hub for Ufi." (Letter to Chair 28/9/99)
Key aspects for future actions will include learning, resources, QA and use of ICT.

Chair reported on a separate bid to HEFCE for a community entry programme into HE, a proposal for widening participation through the special funding programme. The lead institution to be the university & other members of MUP to be partners (see attached proposal). This includes community action groups to build a pathway from the community to FE and HE (see page 2 of proposal).

The third bid in response to Circular 99/29 was for a project to support FE/HE transition from vocational routes to HE eg GNVQ to HE. College A to lead this project which also included an element of staff development. (see attached paper)

Members shuffling through papers as Chair talked through the key points of the various bids. Attention beginning to wane, some looking at watches, others gazing into space whilst some read the hard copies of reports.

12.50   Report on website developments (attached report). Chair of group circulated the report and summarised main issues if MUP was to progress the development of a website.
Some comments about how provision of local info/guidance and discussions about a website for MUP was to articulate with Learning direct. Level of uncertainty & need to keep pace with national developments was discussed.

Meeting closed by Chair. Members thanked for attending & contributing to exciting and full meeting of the partnership. Reminder of venue for next meeting and dates of future meetings circulated.

An air of optimism and excitement about the pace of developments was evident at this meeting. Members stayed to chat informally after the meeting and to collect copies of papers and reports. Administrator did a lot of networking and checked that members had received all the papers and could contact her for further info/help.

Appendix 2

Interview questions for MUP Board members

(Senior managers of post-16 education/training organisations)

Partnership

1. How long has your college/organisation been a member of MUP?

2. How did you become involved in the partnership?

3. What are the benefits of being part of MUP?

4. Are there any disadvantages/costs?

5. What keeps the partnership together? (What gives it synergy?)

6. In your opinion, does MUP have a future?

   a). If not, why not?

   b). If yes, what do you see as its role in the future?

7. Is your college/organisation involved in any other partnerships?

   a). If yes, which ones?

8. Is MUP a different kind of partnership from the others?

9. How does MUP try to ensure it is representative of the community it serves?

10. What, in your opinion, makes a partnership work effectively?

Widening access

11. How has MUP tried to widen access and participation in learning?

12. Do you think there's a difference between improving access and widening participation?

13. In your view, which groups are excluded from learning?

14. In your view, what are the barriers to participation in lifelong learning?

15. What strategies is MUP/your college using to change this?