Critical Attributes of Public-Private Partnerships: A Case Study in Vocational Education

Hitendra Pillay, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

James J. Watters, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

Lutz Hoff, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

ABSTRACT

The term ‘partnership’ is increasingly used by governments, industry, community organisations and schools in supporting their daily businesses. Similar to the terms ‘ICT’ and ‘learning’, ‘partnerships’ are now ubiquitous in policy discourse. Yet, the term remains ill-defined and ambiguous. This study reviews and reflects on a government led industry-school partnership initiative in the state of Queensland, Australia, to understand how the term is used in this initiative. Given the frequent use of Public Private Partnership (PPP) language, PPP was used as a framework to review this initiative. The methodology of this qualitative case study involved consultations with stakeholders and an analysis of Gateway schools documents, policy documents, and literature. The review suggests that despite the use of terminology akin to PPP projects in Gateway school and policy documents, the implicit suggestion that this initiative is a public-private partnership is untenable. The majority of principles shaping a PPP have not been considered to a significant extent in the Gateway project. Although the review recognises the legitimate and sincere purpose of the Gateway schools initiative, the adoption of a PPP framework during the design, monitoring, or evaluation stages could have strengthened the initiative in terms of outcomes, benefits, and sustainability.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Equity and Beneficiaries, Gateway Schools, Industry-School Partnership, Internal and External Efficiency, Partnership Principles, Public Private Partnership, Sustainability, Vocational Education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the word ‘partnership’ seems to have become a new mantra for public sector policy formulation. Partnership as a general concept means to bring capacities of two different entities together in pursuit of a mutually beneficial enterprise (Pillay & Hearn, 2009). While this may be stating the obvious, in recent years different conceptual frameworks have been used to research, design and support this inter-organisational arrangement called ‘partnerships’. Consequently, different interpretations of roles, processes and impacts of
partnerships in provisioning agreed goods and services emerged (Acar & Robertson, 2004; Cardini, 2006). The various permutations of partnerships range from formal contracts to informal community relationships. In this study we seek to reflect on the concept of ‘public private partnerships’ (PPP) in education which, over the last decade, has increasingly taken centre stage in public sector education policies in the UK (Davies & Hentschke, 2006; Gulson, 2007), the USA (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2006) and Australia (Caldwell & Keating, 2004; Crump & Slee, 2005). The term PPP is used to denote collaboration between government departments (public), the business sector and civil society (private) in a benevolent connotation of cooperation, trust, and the achievement of shared objectives (Cardini, 2006). The UK education sector embraced PPP as a new form of social relations between education providers and the government in which partners would benefit from cooperation proportionate to their investments in order to achieve effective and efficient delivery of education services (Davies & Hentschke, 2006). PPPs in the education sector are not new. In Australia, for example, there is the long standing arrangement between the government and private school systems such as the independent schools and church schools (see Weihe, 2008). Similarly, in vocational education, partnerships with industry for vocational education and training purposes can be observed in various apprenticeship programs. What is new is the rapid expansion in the use of PPPs. It is claimed that the adoption of neo-liberal polices and marketisation of education and training may increase quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the system of education services (Caldwell & Keating, 2004).

This study reports on aspects of a larger research study of the Gateway initiative (Hay & Kapitzke, 2009; Kapitzke & Hay, 2011). The focus of this larger study is on theorising industry-school partnerships and to investigate the processes, elements and outcomes of these partnerships. Preliminary research provided evidence for variations and gaps in their structures and implementation processes (Kapitzke & Hay, 2008). In this study we first review PPP typologies and establish a synthesised framework. It is comprised of the underlying principles used to inform the different typologies of private, public and community partnerships. We then juxtapose these principles against the Gateway school project, which is an industry-school partnership project initiated by the Queensland state government, to review and understand the nature of these partnerships.

REVIEW OF UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS IN PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS

Proponents of public-private partnerships in education (Ball, 2003; Caldwell & Keating 2004; DEEWR, 2012; Deloitte Access Economics & Queensland Resources Council, 2011; PhillipsKPA & DEEWR, 2010) note three apparent benefits. These are cost efficiency; responsiveness to local demands to overcome an over-reliance on a centralised and rigid state bureaucracy; and adaptability to changing work practices stimulated by industry-led continuous knowledge innovations.

The cost efficiency argument is linked to the ever increasing demands for education services in the midst of a perceived inability of the state to fully fund this burgeoning demand. The number of people seeking education and training either to enter the workforce, to up-skill, or to change jobs, is steadily increasing. This trend has been accompanied by escalating costs associated with providing high quality public education and training. Thus, governments may no longer have the means to singularly support this demand. Cognisant of their resource constraints, governments invited industry to be partners in the provision of a skilled workforce for their respective industry sector (Caldwell & Keating 2004; DEEWR, 2012). After all, the major beneficiary from governments’ invest-
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