Getting smarter, leading strategic partnerships in Higher Education

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1. Introduction

This small development project takes consideration of an earlier study funded by the Leadership Foundation entitled "Optimising the potential of third space professionals in UK Higher Education", Whitchurch (2010) which looks at new ways and opportunities for working, focusing upon underpinning cultures and services. A key challenge for HEI's and one that this project considered is how to move to a model of being smarter, more effective and responsive to need in all aspects of its services: academic, research, third space and support enabling effective partnerships in a climate of continuous change.

This project aimed on a small scale to map key business process entities within a higher education model of public private partnerships and develop a pilot strategic partnership framework that could be adaptable for higher education partnership development. The project team wanted to:

- Define what leading strategic partnership meant to the higher education workforce as well as those we wish to partner with
- Map out ways in which the current economic challenges and policy changes will affect the nature of partnership working
- Define the key components of effective engagement and partnership
- Consider how higher education can get smarter at partnership development by mapping workforce, systems and business processes requirements
- Create a pilot partnership model based upon best practice and initial research findings
- Contribute to the Leadership Foundation research agenda - LGM in practice: leading strategic partnerships and organisational development

With this in mind, the following research questions were established for the project:

- What does it mean to lead strategic partnerships in higher education?
- How can higher education get ‘smarter’ in partnership development and delivery?

School of Education Futures and its role in the pilot

The focus of the project was based upon the working practices of the School of Education Futures (SEF) at the University of Wolverhampton. SEF has a wide range of partnerships that are already well established with schools; local authorities: private providers; research institutions, voluntary and social enterprises and employers. Changes brought in by the Coalition Government in 2011 through the Royal Assent of the Education Act in November 2011 has meant that SEF has had the opportunity to consider its existing partnerships including those with Schools, Children’s Centres, Further Education Colleges and Local Authorities. An example of this is that SEF developed new ways of working in partnership with newly established Teaching Schools. The Teaching School model has created a national network of teaching schools that will offer teacher training and professional development in partnership with the higher education sector and other providers of education and training. This means that new ways of delivering and developing teachers for the future within practice are being established through teaching schools in partnership with HEI’s.

SEF has also seen a continual growth in opportunities to work in collaboration with Colleges of Further Education which include Foundation Degrees; teacher training and continual professional development (CPD) for the Further Education workforce. Another area of growth is the accreditation of employer and private providers existing programmes. These range from small CPD programmes to full awards where SEF has been involved in validation approval, content design and development and joint delivery and assessment. These are programmes that are local, national and increasingly international. Opportunities are continually emerging to develop a wide range of professional programmes for all aspects of working
with children, young people and families across the wider education sector and SEF needs to be in a position to respond rapidly in these potential new engagements led and supported by fit for purpose robust systems and services. There are also a wide range of partnership opportunities outside of programme development and CPD in research and knowledge transfer that are undertaken by the School. Many of these require a form of partnership engagement and development.

New ways of working together has led to a recognition that existing partnership arrangements and services offered by the University needed to be reviewed in light of these changes. This includes thinking about the strategic relationship between partnership and the operational business processes and systems that support the day to day working practices. This project has enabled this to begin and add value not only to the changing leadership and working practices within SEF but to the wider University proposals for developing services and systems that support partnership. The project focused upon SEF in its research focus and was mindful that many of the challenges being faced within one particular School would be replicated in others. This is particularly valid in light of the changes in the way HEI’s will be funded going forward following the Browne Review (2010).

2. Methodology

Literature Review

A Literature review was undertaken to create a contextual understanding of the policy and practice environment that maps the key characteristics of partnership frameworks/ definitions in higher education and collects evidence of good practice, nationally and internationally. The headlines from the review will be discussed in section 4 of this report.

Focus Group

Two Focus Groups were established one which had representation from the University services and one with a Local Authority. The attendance at the University Focus groups was disappointing and reflected the challenges of getting staff together. The data gathered however was extremely valuable to the findings of the project and the results will be shared in section 4 of this report.

Online Survey

An online survey was sent out to 60 people who were representatives across a range of services in the University, 2 private providers and a Local Authority. 43 responses were collected and the data analysed. The results of the survey which contained both open and closed questions are shared in section 4 of this report.

Partnership Framework

An initial partnership framework was created which established 4 key focus areas: leading strategic partnerships; relationship management; partnership development and partnership systems and processes. During the project the framework has undergone a series of changes reflecting the responses from the focus group and online survey and further opportunities that the researchers have had in working across the University in the development of processes to support partnership.

Other forms of data collection

Attendance at cross University partnership and collaboration meetings has also enabled researchers to collect further evidence of practices across the University and to join in discussions on developments proposed for moving partnership developments forward across the University.
3. Activities Undertaken & Completed by March 2012

A range of project milestones were set between August 2011 and May 2012. (See appendix one). The key milestones have been successfully completed in terms of the following areas:

- Literature review to support the project
- Focus group
- Online survey
- Partnership framework (draft)
- Interim report
- Dissemination activities in place (see section 6)

4. Summary of key findings

This section brings together the key finding from the project.

Strategic Partnership in higher education - initial literature review

This initial literature review is divided into six sections: 1) definition of partnership 2) importance of partnership 3) evaluation of partnership 4) barriers to partnership 5) improvement of partnership, and 6) models of partnership.

Definitions of partnership

Kirk (2010) defines partnership as the maintenance of networks of schools and other agencies committed to these values in the education of teachers. There is also partnership capital which develops over time as trust is established among partner organisation(s) and vision is shared, which contributes to its sustainability (Eddy, 2010). Butcher, Bezzina and Morgan (2011) distinguish between transformational and transactional partnerships. The former is based upon active engagement and a focus on shared goals and reciprocal benefits. In the latter each organisation is committed to achieving its own goals with little attention paid to the benefit of the other partner organisation(s). Although relatively little is known about partnership (Briggs et al., 2007; Hoffman-Johnson, 2007), institutional partnership can be related to four themes: 1) the reasons for joining a partnership (voluntary/compulsory) including motivation 2) the context of a partnership (Clifford and Millar, 2008) 3) the process involved in sustaining a partnership including the role of champion/initiator, and 4) student learning issues (Amey et al., 2007). The leadership of such partnerships is little understood too (Briggs et al., 2007). The vagueness of the concept of partnership is not restricted to education only. In health and social services too partnership is open to many interpretations (Glendinning, 2002). For instance, El Ansari and Hammick (2001) perceive collaboration in health and social services as a process as well as an outcome, although research into partnerships has “centred heavily on process issues, while much less emphasis has been given to outcome success” (Dowling et al., 2004, p.309). Despite the variation in how partnership is defined, its importance is widely recognised.

Importance of partnership

Partnerships challenge the traditional roles of the universities as transmitters of discipline specific knowledge and workplaces as less active partners in the learning processes and products (Choy and Delahaye, 2011). Academic partnership has become present, embedded in organisational cultures, and is increasingly organized in a wide variety of structural forms and for different purposes among

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2 However, partnership does not always benefit the partner organisations. Baines and Chiarelott (2010) noted that in one case partnership was damaging to course quality, organisational reputation, and staff autonomy.
individual researchers, academic institutions, international development agencies, and governments (Obama and Mweam, 2009). Academic partnerships turn universities into entrepreneurs and enable cost-containment, and they also allow partners to rapidly respond to workforce shortages and new job markets. Together, universities can take the best in specialized fields and join them with their counterparts at similar institutions to rapidly build new programs in targeted growth areas (Reinert, 2006). From a policymaker’s perspective, partnership is a “strategic way of meeting the state’s education and economic goals” (Amey et al., 2007, p. 5) and a key element of current UK Government policy for education (Briggs et al., 2007). Indeed, partnerships between schools and universities have been well developed as an approach in initial teacher education (ITE) in the UK since 1994 (Mitchell and Alexandrou, 2011). It helps maximize resources to achieve local and state economic development goals (Amey, Eddy and Campbell, 2010). According to Smith et al, (2005, p. 29), there is a “clear evidence from the early-1990s that a significant body of opinion within the Scottish HE providers of ITE favoured progressive attempts to move towards more complementary, and ultimately collaborative, models of partnership practices in ITE. Such opinion showed full awareness of the thinking on partnership models being developed elsewhere especially in England, and willingness to engage with the issues which would be involved in implementing these models”. The importance of partnership is documented in other countries too.

In Australia, a partnership within the University of Western Sydney and four inter-related colleges significantly enhanced the organisational impact and effectiveness of each partner (Sebalj et al., 2007). Partnership is very likely to increase effectiveness and efficiency in the fiscally constrained environment of higher education (Hoffman-Johnson, 2007). In the US, a partnership model allows the Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM) at The George Washington University to focus on the content of the courses while the sponsor funds the effort and regional partners administer the program (Cushman, 2010). The GSPM program has been a useful model for creating a cooperative international program that meets an educational need, addresses the challenges of running such a program, and successfully launches a partnership to bring world-class coursework to an underserved audience (Cushman, 2010). From a developing country’s perspective, strategic international research collaboration between research communities located within Africa and those in developed countries, as well as regional partnerships among African universities themselves, represent the most productive framework for reinforcing and strengthening research capacity within sub-Saharan universities. Partnerships can also support the integration of Africa more strongly into the ‘emerging global knowledge economy’ (Obama and Mweam, 2009).

Partnership has a role in creating an integrated knowledge base in teacher education by: 1) adjusting the definition of the teacher’s role to include engagement with learners, teaching new entrants, and researching professional practice 2) exploiting the REF requirement on impact to strengthen the engagement of teachers in the planning, conduct and evaluation of practitioner research 3) expecting teacher educators to have continuing engagement with professional practice (Kirk, 2010). Partnerships between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) are viewed as “essential for the benefits of the learners” (Fraser et al., 2009, p. 19). Partnerships are needed to “address disaffection among learners through reforming secondary education as a whole; pool local area resources efficiently, and reduce social segregation which is currently exacerbated by finding differences” (Briggs et al., 2007, p. 7). On the other hand, in Health, knowledge of “whether partnerships ‘work’- in the case of producing benefits to those who pay for, provide or use services-remains very limited…..evidence for the success of partnerships is sparse. If evidence-based policy means more than an empty slogan, then this is surely a large gap in knowledge that needs to be filled (Dowling et al., 2004, p.315). Research partnerships can promote knowledge production and sharing; stimulate the pooling of financial and high level human resources across different countries; and create collaboration among the wide range of participants for reciprocal benefit (Obama and Mweam, 2009).

HE in FE partnerships “sits centre stage within so many Government plans because it is an area of interface between the key stake holder groups and also offers a flexible and responsive environment for
realising strategic plans” (Fraser et al., 2009, p. 18). At the institutional level, through partnership there has indeed been a “real change in power relationships though perhaps not of the sort originally looked for by the government. Indeed far from reducing the influence of higher education, the collaborative model potentially at least increases it” (Furlong et al., 1996, p.53).

Public-private partnerships can also be an influential approach for development, providing enduring solutions to some of the greatest challenges (Brady, 2009). Partnerships between HEIs and industry have been identified as a primary means of addressing higher education’s role in economic development, globally and in South Africa (Kruss, 2006a). It is argued that in pursuing new forms of network partnerships in a strategic manner, and by limiting the scale of the old forms of consultancy and contract partnerships, universities are more likely to be able to achieve the kinds of academic, financial and national developmental benefits that they value, rather than being driven primarily by financial imperatives (Kruss, 2006a).

**Evaluation of partnership**

Evaluation of partnership is problematic, not only for those involved in partnerships but for academics and others with a wider interest in public policy, its governance and mechanisms for delivering services (Glendinning, 2002). Partnership success is evaluated by examining the possibility to create social capital (Edens and Gilsinan, 2005). Despite the importance of the evaluation of partnership, evidence to assess effectiveness, in Health and Social Care for example, is less clear (El Ansari and Hammick, 2001). In their consultation on partnership quality assurance framework (PQAF) for healthcare education in England, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2004, pp. 2-3) outlines six principles which underline the development of the partnership framework and how these could be addressed: 1) streamlining and reducing the burden to stakeholders 2) recognition that healthcare providers are joint providers of healthcare education 3) meeting all stakeholders’ needs 4) proportional approach 5) approaches lead to quality enhancement, while meeting diverse stakeholder quality monitoring requirements, and 6) aligns with Standard Model Contract in England”. The PQAF is made up of five elements as follows: programme approval; ongoing quality monitoring and enhancement (OQME); Major Review; benchmark and quality standards, and the shared evidence on which conclusions and judgements are based. Glendinning, (2002, p. 115) argues that a pluralistic approach to evaluation is appropriate and partnership can be evaluated against six key criteria, which include: “effectiveness, efficiency, equity, acceptability, accessibility, appropriateness, accountability, ethics, responsiveness and choice, and implementation and roll-out”.

**Barriers to partnership**

Although several barriers to partnership were identified in the literature, the benefits outweigh the challenges (Brophy, 2011). Partnership working is “uniquely challenging. When individuals from differing backgrounds, cultures, organisations and sectors get together to solve problems they enter a maelstrom of conflicting perceptions, arguments, needs and emotions” (Lines, 2007, p.1). This cross-organisational collaboration is “often challenging to develop and hard to sustain” (Amey et al., 2007, p. 12). The absence of effective collaboration is related to the “lack of understanding about how partnerships between parents and professionals do, and should, function in the special educational context” (Pinkus, 2005 p. 184). Collaborative leadership across “multiple organisations at both strategic and operational level may be constrained by personal ambivalence, by power issues between organisations, by issues of resources, and by the differing agendas and cultures of each organisation in the partnership. The mutual trust and tolerance of difference established ‘around the table’ by partnership members cannot easily be translated into mutual trust among the multiple senior and middle leaders involved in the partnership. Partnerships are led by the needs of young people, yet they are not included in the framework for collaboration” (Briggs et al., 2007, p. 1). International partnerships are highly dynamic and complex phenomena embedded with varying configurations of power and resources; which can strengthen the cooperation between developed and developing countries (Obama and Mweam, 2009).

According to Fraser et al., (2009, p. 24), there a number of current challenges and opportunities for HE in FE partnerships:
The development of HE Centres through the HEFCE Strategic Development fund and the New University Challenge is changing the way some HE in FE looks and feels.

The Credit Framework developed by DIUS, the Burgess Group and Universities UK to create a common accreditation approach for HE in England so as to facilitate FE to HE progression.

The HEFCE drive for the development of HE strategies and a widening participation strategic assessment by FECs will necessitate partnership to be ever more clear about their division of responsibility and partner expectations.

IQER is the first FEC focused QAA review method to involve the management of all HE in FE provision, however funded, but still includes an emphasis on awarding bodies and partnerships.

Considering, or being successful in gaining Foundation Degree Awarding Powers, may strain or radically change relations between colleges and their partners.

The current lack of ASNs and a general reduction in available funding may require HE in FE partnerships and their members to make some tough choices.

Similar barriers to partnership in initial teacher education in Scotland included the resistance of Scottish schoolteachers to accepting formalised, enhanced roles and responsibilities within partnership, and the failure of Scottish Ministers and administrations to place sustained discussion of underlying issues of partnership sufficiently high on the political agenda (Smith et al, 2005, p. 20). When the “centre of attention of effectiveness is focused solely on outcomes, the gains and benefits of the process that multiple partner groups go through in finding common ground and working together is at best underestimated, and at worst forfeited” (El Ansari and Hammick, 2001, p. 227). Partnerships are problematic and require lengthy processes of negotiating the curriculum and pedagogies to support learning based in the workplace (Choy and Delahaye, 2011). Other barriers include organisational requirements, negotiating university expectations and emphases on workload, space, resources (Judith, 2011) and time (Brophy, 2011; Judith, 2011). Barriers to partnership can be addressed in both philosophical and pragmatic ways (Mlcek, 2009), reduced, and a climate for more strongly collaborative working established (Briggs et al., 2007).

**Improvement of partnership**

There are numerous ways to improve partnership.

**Active partnership**

The equality of all partners (HEFCE, 2009) necessitates the active engagement of staff for effective partnerships (Sebalj et al., 2007). It was found that partners would like more active engagement (Lawes et al., n.d.). Partnerships between HEIs and FECs have to be created, nurtured and extended so that there exists a strong as well as sustainable HE and FE partnership system, which not only involves the active and participating HEIs and FECs, but a very broad group of stakeholders. These stakeholders will need to provide “peripheral support in terms of policy enhancement, sustainable streams of funding, etc. and opportunities for continuous improvement” (Fraser et al., 2009, p. 24-5). This active engagement necessitates also the need for a definition and restructure of the roles and responsibilities of HE staff and school staff within ITE partnership (Smith et al, 2005; McCray, et al., 2011). Enabling equal power distribution between the partners is also essential (Pinkus, 2005), which requires commitment to collaborative working at all levels (HEFCE, 2009). By establishing commitment to collaboration, university leaders enable organisational networks to “mobilize support and overcome well-known barriers to sustaining collaboration” (Harris, 2010, p.32), which is the aim of this project.

**Appropriate skills**

Senior managers involved in HE in FE need to understand the strategic implications of current policy development and be appropriately equipped with “entrepreneurial, global management as well as change management skills” so that the boundaries of the system could extend beyond the UK (Fraser et al., 2009, p. 24-5).

**Appreciation of partner’s contribution**
It is important to have a “mutual respect for each other’s areas of knowledge and expertise” (Briggs et al., 2007, p.27). If the wide range of HE in FE stakeholders want their expectations met and their support appreciated, then they need to “listen to these professionals and recognise the value of the contribution they make” (Benefer et al., 2009, p.44), and the priorities they want to pursue (Bosma et al., 2010). All categories of staff should be involved in some capacity (HEFCE, 2009). For Rogers et al., (2011), the key question is not about how to convince the partner organisation(s) of our capability, but rather, how the partner organisations together can improve their work. This requires mutual commitment and responsibility (Sigurdardottir, 2010).

**A tailored leadership approach**

A “less painful approach to leadership needs to be found that is tailored to the needs of partnership working……the Nexus Active Leadership Model offers such an approach….its foundations lie in the good practice and experiences of those that have worked with and within partnerships and have recorded their insights in publicly available case studies” (Lines, 2007, p.1). It “highlights and concentrates upon seven areas key to the effective leadership of partnership. These areas can be subdivided into three leadership approaches and four key supporting activities. Three leadership approaches: hub (or platform) leadership; leadership through dialogue; emergent leadership. Four key supporting activities: thinking about and analysing a partnership and its surrounding context as an open, evolving system; exploiting the entire place- time continuum of communication available to a partnership; pragmatically searching out and utilising potentially useful ideas and approaches from a very wide variety of sources; effectively evaluating the work and processes of a partnership” (Lines, 2007, p.2). Partnership needs time (Breault and Breault, 2010; Killion, 2011; McCray et al., 2011) to build relationships (Bosma et al., 2010), collaborative leadership, establish mutual trust (McCray et al., 2011) and develop partnership activity (Briggs et al., 2007), including the sharing of decisions (Bosma et al., 2010).

**Clear communication**

Communication with stakeholders must be a part of the daily life of the organisation (Bosma et al., 2010; HEFCE, 2009), with well-developed communication routines and competence in using different methods to communicate with different stakeholder groups. According to Lawes et al. (n.d.), stakeholders and partners would like to be kept better informed while ensuring local visibility and personal contact. Therefore, knowledge about stakeholder’s opinions, expectations, knowledge and needs must be collected and understood by the regulatory body (McDonald and Hammer, n.d., p.7). Durrant, Dunnil and Clements (2004, pp. 165-6) suggest there is a need to negotiate protocols for communication and monitoring; ensure that those involved are not only fully briefed but feel included. A communication model (McDonald and Hammer, n.d., p.6) that supports a number of mechanisms for sharing and disseminating information is essential. All communication should be “clear; concise; has a clearly defined action plan; targets appropriate audience; allows constructive feedback; follow-up to determine effectiveness; acted upon; proactive rather than reactive, and follows agreed timeline”. This also involves clarity of roles (Durrant, Dunnil and Clements, 2004; HEFCE, 2009; Pinkus, 2005) and expectations (Eddy, 2010).

**Consistent approach and policy**

Understanding what is required for effective partnerships is important in determining when and how to engage in these collaborative arrangements (Amey, Eddy and Campbell, 2010). This requires the examination of the forces that foster its development and facilitate or challenge its implementation. It is also critical to determine the appropriate outcomes, measures of success, and forces that lead to continued collaboration (Hoffman-Johnson, 2007). Based on a study of research partnerships with industry across the higher education sector in three high technology fields in South Africa, Kruss (2006b) highlights the significance of policy coherence between organizational levels within an institution, the importance of seeking a balance between financial and intellectual research imperatives, and the necessity of promoting a strategic balance between the forms of partnership that are allowed and encouraged to develop. At the partnership level there is a need for pragmatic 21st century solutions for partnership provision across “wide geographical areas and across busy cities; coherent systems and
personalised support for learners to evaluate, take up and succeed in the opportunities open to them” (Briggs et al., 2007, p. 2).

Experience and expertise
The emphasis should be on the right people to manage and operate the partnership (Waller, 2009). It is important to choose credible, experienced and expert teams and work to clear ethical guidelines (Bosma et al., 2010; Durrant, Dunnil and Clements, 2004), but there is value in targeting credibility and different levels of seniority across organisations (Lawes et al., n.d.).

Flexibility and responsiveness
It is important to be flexible and responsive (Bosma et al., 2010; Durrant, Dunnil and Clements, 2004) and be willing to compromise (HEFCE, 2009). Kruss (2006b) highlights the need for flexible regulation within institutions to provide levers and incentives without being heavy-handed or constricting. It is suggested that partnerships should focus on a limited number of key issues; initial concentration on practical issues should not result in the loss of a more strategic perspective; flexibility to respond reactively to changing external circumstances; an agreed mechanism for dealing with conflicts or disagreements (HEFCE, 2009).

Sharing of knowledge, vision and resources
To make partnership effective, leaders should create a common vision (McCray et al., 2011). A characteristic of partnership at Ohio State University is a robust knowledge management solution that is transforming the ways the expertise and knowledge of faculty and staff are documented and shared (Cain et al., 2008). Partnership demands distribution of knowledge-power relations between the university and the host organisation (Choy and Delahaye, 2011). Clarity (HEFCE, 2009) and consensus about the purpose of the partnership is essential (Pinkus, 2005), although it is difficult to ensure that the visions are indeed common (Mun Ling, L., n.d.). Briggs et al., (2007, p. 2) highlighted the “alignment of purpose of partner organisations, and mutual understanding between partners; mutual benefit to partner organisations”. Reciprocal benefits increase the capability of affiliated organisations (Killion, 2011). The sharing of resources is also key to the success of partnerships (Bosma et al., 2010).

Supportive structure and environment
Structure means building on existing networks; some central co-ordination for partnerships; appropriate administrative support; creation of sub-groups and working parties, bringing together FE and HE staff around topics of mutual interest (HEFCE, 2009). To undertake their work effectively HE in FE, academic and support staff professionals in the colleges need the “space, freedom and infrastructure to work with each other and relevant collaborators across partnerships” (Benefer et al., 2009, p. 44). Other environmental conditions such as the creation of lateral and hierarchical communication channels, plus the provision of a supportive work environment were important for effective partnerships (Sebalj et al., 2007).

Sustainability
Another important dimension of partnership is to make it sustainable (Eddy, 2010). Sustainable partnerships are based on being flexible to new inputs and adjusting accordingly. If partnership is seen as part of the organisation’s academic processes and therefore longer-term, new ways of conceptualising and planning for the partnership need to occur, including considering how it will be sustained and institutionalized” (Amey et al., 2007, p. 12).

The role of champions
The value of having a ‘champion’ and ‘patron saint’ (Bosma et al., 2010) was seen as very important in promoting community support and acceptance of public-private partnerships (PPPs) (Waller, 2009).

Transformed perceptions
Beliefs regarding the centrality of interdisciplinary and collaboration for research universities can serve as a critical driver of institutional rhetoric and activity (Harris, 2010). Lavdas et al., (2006) argue that HEIs
are perceived as key partners/providers and this perception transforms the role of the HEIs within the context of strategic partnership interests (at national, regional and institutional levels). In order to develop a “collaborative partnership, the conception of partnership must change from one based on exchange to one based on a common vision. To achieve this, there is a need to establish dialogue between the University and schools and firmly base research on practice to develop knowledge about supervision and teaching and learning” (Mun Ling, L., n.d., p. 12).

**Transparency and accountability**
Implementing “transparency and accountability mechanisms for monitoring the partnership” is central to forming effective partnership (Pinkus, 2005 p. 184). This includes fairness in sharing risk, openness, sound financing underpinnings (HEFCE, 2009), sound documentation, predictability and a clear understanding of performance requirements and clarity in what governments want and expect (Waller, 2009). Partnership should create real benefits for all partners, while keeping them informed of the costs of working in partnership (HEFCE, 2009). Indeed, the primary aim of most college and university partnerships is to support their affiliated institutions or systems (Bass, 2010).

**Models of partnership**
A few models were found in the literature, although it should be noted that “there is no ‘single’ or ‘right’ model of Learning Partnership delivery, and that the most effective Learning Partnerships are not simply ‘delivery machines’” (Rodger et al cited in Briggs et al., 2007, p.8). Learners should drive the partnership: they are the *raison d’être* both of the partnership and the policy, and they offer purpose for collaborative leadership” (ibid, p.23). According to Furlong et al. (1996, p. 54), “by 1995, three ‘ideal typical’ models of partnership had started to emerge, which were characterised as ‘HEI-led partnership’, ‘separatist partnership’ and ‘collaborative partnership’. For them, the key question is whether these different models of partnership actually make any difference with regard to teacher professionalism. This view was confirmed in a recent study by Fraser et al. (2009, pp. 19-21) who indicated “there is no single widely replicated model of the HE in FE partnership”. However, they categorised five possible ways with regard to the current diversity of practice: 1) course type (prescribed/non-prescribed); 2) course delivery (integrated/collaborative/dispersed); 3) funding (indirect funding/franchise partnership-direct funding- consortium funding/partnership- mixed economy institution); or award (bilateral/multiple bilateral/ multiple collaborative); 4) student (FEC/HEI); and 5) networks. Their model (Fraser et al., 2009, p. 23) shows that “HEI and FEC partnerships are surrounded by a wide range of stakeholders....while these organisations, groups and initiatives each offer a range of support, within this model they are allocated to one of fifteen broad headline categories of support to illustrate the range and diversity of HE in FE peripheral stakeholder interest and focus:

1. Policy and strategy
2. Funding
3. Forum
4. Championing the HE and FE sector
5. Facilitating networking
6. Ensuring academic quality and standards in the HE provision
7. Dissemination of good practice
8. Providing a framework to guide FECs for provision of high level vocational skills
9. Skill brokerage among the stakeholders
10. Coordinating initiatives and programmes
11. Champions in the sector
12. Development of pathways
13. Supporting widening participation
14. Supporting research and scholarly activity
15. Providing a repository of HE in FE resources”

Other examples of partnership models were highlighted by Stone et al. (2009, pp.13-4). For example, a model that is implemented at the University of Bedfordshire College Partnership has six dimensions to
its work: 1) an Aimhigher programme 2) community engagement 3) partnership quality assurance and enhancement 4) creating, updating and disseminating strategy, policy and research 5) workforce development and 6) working with schools and colleges. Another example is at the University of Central Lancashire [UCLan] Partnership Network which operates under a devolved model, with a small central team, the Partnership Development Team, who coordinate the partnership strategy and works proactively in building and maintaining positive relationships across the network. The establishment of such relationships is crucial to the success of partnership (Breault and Breault, 2010). Amey, Eddy and Campbell (2010) propose a model of partnership development that emphasizes the role of social and organizational capital in the formation of “partnership capital” that contributes to the long-term success of collaborative efforts. Because there are a few models of partnership, there is a need for more research to understand the dynamics and ways to approach learning partnerships between universities and organisations (Choy and Delahaye, 2011).

Defining partnership in higher education

From the research undertaken (focus group and online survey), it became clear that trying to define partnership in higher education leads to a wide variation of definitions which are considered in the literature review, focus group and online survey. The statements below reflect this in the online survey where participants were asked to define what partnership meant to them:

“Reciprocal, fruitful, respectful, ethical, sustainable, holistic, values-driven relationships between organisations support the mission of involved organisations.”

“Through shared leadership, vision and governance, emotionally intelligent capacity is enabled, greater than that of the partners operating alone to mobilise resources, knowledge and services to the benefit users and providers alike”

“Working together in a long term relationship with a shared vision. This includes maximising the strengths of each partner to ensure value for money. A partnership should be a true collaboration, sharing knowledge, effective planning in order to maximise the beneficial impact of the partnership to the student, workforce, community and partner institutions”

“A partnership in higher Education means to me that those institutions with direct funding channels can draw down Government funding and students places and share them with other institutions which have specific expertise. Both the larger and smaller institution can benefit from this arrangement and between them can offer young people a rich and diverse education.”

“Partnerships are a lever of success between organisations. They allow for organisations to create connections which benefit all partners and achieve greater outcomes than the partners could achieve separately”.

“It is worthy of note that often the term ‘partner’ is used for two people who have a relationship that has many characteristics of a marriage but without an official ceremony. Such a partnership is often recognized in law. Thinking about partnership in this way reveals that partnerships have the potential to be very meaningful, worthwhile and demand to be taken seriously. However, some may engage with strategic partnerships for other motivations for example they have been told to, or they judge they need to engage with strategic partnerships to survive in a particular market. Therefore when defining the term partnership it is important to define the motivations for engaging with strategic partnerships. In summation, partnerships are messy, complex and in my view this area needs researching.”

Key words that appeared many times in the focus groups and online survey included ‘working together’, ‘collaboration’, ‘shared vision’ and ‘added value’. The project started with its own definition and through its research would alter this slightly to now read:
“Effective partnerships in higher education develop a shared leadership and vision, through effective strategic planning, maximising the resources of each partner as well as being collaborative in pursuit of funds which ultimately deliver assistance in: research; learning and teaching; innovation strategies; professional and business development; strategic options; consultancy; knowledge transfer, shared services, cost savings and other services that are mutually beneficial and add value to the student, the workforce, the community and partner institutions” Vincent (Unpublished)

Leading strategic partnerships

A number of key concepts have emerged from the literature review, focus groups and online survey that help answer the question posed as to what does it mean to lead strategic partnerships in higher education. These are highlighted below.

- "leading and influencing without authority", looks at how we work across an organisation and with partners. It considers a leaders circle of influence and control and the challenges faced at all stages of a partnership. To be successful it was recognised by the focus group and within the online survey that a partnership strategy needs to be operationalised and supported by all partners in developing systems and processes that enable this to happen. Strategic influence is not about the partner organisation alone. It is the ability to influence the internal services of all partners to make changes to support the direction of the partnership. The findings from the online survey recognised the importance of influencing the shared understanding of the vision.

  “Strategic influence is really important in partnership development as is having someone to continually drive the partnership forward at an operational level and not lose sight of the rationale behind the partnership” (online survey)

- "emotional Intelligence" in leading partnership is linked to the notion of developing and building upon relationships and influencing internally and externally the direction of the partnership and creating an environment of trust, a term used many times in the focus groups and the supporting literature reviewed.

- "understanding power relationships" were recognised in the literature review, focus groups and online survey and also came out at a dissemination event undertaken in January 2012. A question was raised about what is power and does the notion of power affect relationships in leading strategic partnerships. The idea of equal relationships in a partnership was discussed and it was recognised that the relationships in partnerships is very rarely equal and that this needed to be recognised in leading partnerships.

  “The issue of who has power in the relationship is also important as smaller organisations can feel over whelmed by the larger organisation.” (online survey)

- "visibility" leadership of partnership was seen to need to be more visible not just at stage one of the partnership. This was seen as different to operational management of a partnership and an ongoing process to ensure that the views of the partner are continually understood.

  “leadership behaviour should be visibility with the workforce and the customers” (focus group)

This is supported by Laws et al (n.d) who suggests the need for visibility and personal contact in partnership to enable partners to be better informed.

- “enablers” those leading partnerships were seen as conduits to change. Leadership here was recognised as driving the vision established in the partnership forward. It was seen that at an
operational level challenges could be faced at all stages of the partnership and leadership of partnership required skills that enabled the partnership to keep focused upon the direction it set out to achieve.

- “situational leadership” was seen to be a key leadership model in how partnership is being led by those who answered the question on how they have led or have been led in partnership. Blanchard, (2010) focuses on the value of situational leadership and high performing leaders who are people-oriented, customer-centred, and performance-driven. These are leading traits for relationship management which this report has found to be a key driver for successful partnerships. The theoretical basis of situational leadership is that there is not one best fit for leading and managing people.

- “communication and listening” skills came out as highly desirable in successful partnerships in the focus groups and online survey. The focus groups felt that listening skills were required at all stages of a partnership to understand what a partnership required strategically and operationally. A discussion took place in the focus group as to the challenge of being seen to be listening and taking on board the needs of a partner on a day to day basis. This was seen as a challenge when each partner had their own separate business processes and practices and how to make sure the challenges of working within the scope of each other’s practices were recognised.

- “integrity and commitment” were the two highest scoring behaviours required of partnership leaders in the online survey. This led to a discussion in the focus group on the content of a partnership agreement states how the partners agree strategically to a partnership where resources are not always available to ensure that the outputs and outcomes of the partnership are achievable. This was also found in the literature review where

- “leading and managing change” it was recognised within the focus groups and online survey that the public sector is going through complex and continual change and that partnerships established even within the last 12 months will look different in a year’s time. The leaders of partnership require skills to ensure that they are continually aware at policy and organisational level of the internal and external factors that drive change and ensure the partnership is still ‘fit for purpose’.

- “critical friend” a notion posed in the focus group was that of the person leading strategic partnerships holds a role of a critical friend. Once a partnership is underway and those who are involved are often too busy to consider is the partnership still valid and to drive forward changes that are required in the partnership.

- “a tailored leadership approach” the literature review offered an insight into the Nexus leadership model where the foundations are based upon the good practice and experience publicly available in case studies (Lines 2007). The three elements to the approach include hub leadership; leadership through dialogue and emergent leadership. One of the key aspects here of leading partnership is the effective evaluation of the work and the processes of partnership (Lines 2007). The use of case studies that show collaborative working in higher education are reflected in the work of Walsh and Kahn (2010).

Barriers to partnership

The literature review found several barriers to effective partnerships which included: organisational culture; poor communication; power issues; lack of resources; trust and complex relationships not supported by clear roles and responsibilities within the partnerships. The results from the online survey showed that unclear deliverables; unachievable outcomes and unclear partnership agreements were seen as the most significant barriers. The focus group focused upon the issue of inconsistent approaches to partnership working and the communication between strategic and operational level services that
support partnership. In all of the research findings it was felt that Universities are very good at relationship building and being innovative is their approach to partnerships. Where there were challenges was in how this was communicated internally to ensure that the outcomes agreed could be met in the time with appropriate services and resources.

What was clear in the focus groups and online survey was that all respondents looked for solutions to making a partnership work effectively. The key challenges have come from the changing relationships with partners and the wider range of products and services the University now offers. It was felt these have always been available on a small scale. As the University grows its partnership range and products it was felt this needs a more strategic approach to ensuring that all aspects of University services are aligned to working in new ways in order that they can adapt and respond quickly and confidently.

“You need strategic support from employer; need systems and processes to enable not hinder; right people in right place; sufficient resources to meet demands” (online survey)

“There are communication barriers ..... the link between developing relations and the development of the core business processes to support the partnership is not clear” (focus group)

“The person who creates the initial relationship is not necessary the right person for establishing the working practices with the partner as they do not have sufficient knowledge of the systems and processes that need to support partnership working” (focus group)

Partnership Development

The literature review that was undertaken found very few models that could support the development of a holistic approach to partnership with higher education. Partnerships are created in stages Vincent (unpublished):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage one:</th>
<th>Pre partnership (establishing business need and case and conducting due diligence checks)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage two:</td>
<td>Identifying requirements for a partnership (partnership development proposal – CPD; award; accreditation; research opportunities; other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage three:</td>
<td>Relationship management (identification of strategic and operational networks across partnership)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage four:</td>
<td>Partnership contractual arrangements (partnership agreement; memorandum of understanding; operational level working practices; service level agreements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage five:</td>
<td>Partnership reviews (Project and Programme Boards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage six:</td>
<td>Exit strategies to a partnership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each stage has teams from different organisations involved in the development of the stage and this requires opportunities to influence the outcome of each of these stages. This requires a strategic partnership lead to have a good knowledge of the culture of the partner and their working practices and a shared understanding of the vision and values of the partnering organisation. Leading strategic partnership will look at ways to minimise differences, manage differences and value the differences that each partner represents.
Kesar (2005) developed a 3 stage model that describes the importance of personal relationships and social structures that can lead to success or in some instances to failure of the partnership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Commitment</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Sustaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External pressure</td>
<td>Sense of priority</td>
<td>Integrating structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Rewards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Networks</td>
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<td>Networks</td>
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Kezar (2005)

In this model the term network is described in the establishment of creating networks across the institution in stage one which is a continual theme across all three stages. In the research undertaken by Walsh and Kahn (2010) the concept of partnership networks features in many of the case studies as a way of sustaining good partnerships. Walsh and Kahn (2010) (figure one) have developed a model for collaborative working in higher education that draws upon Bhaskar’s notion of stratification in social reality Bhaskar (1979). This model takes into consideration individual, social interactions, social structures and corporate bodies. They set out a series of indicators about how and organisation roles, working practices, relationships and agreements are embedded to establish a stable network.

Figure one. A stratified model for collaborative working in higher education Walsh and Khan (2010)

The theme of effective networking and collaboration continues through the focus group and online survey. What is being expressed is the need to ensure that not only is the strategic relationship established firmly between the partnerships but also the day to day operational practices across all organisations undertaking the partnership.

The online survey showed that a wide range of documentation is used in the creation of partnerships with all having some form of partnership agreement and memorandum of understanding. Less clear is the use of exit strategies from partnerships. Highlighted below are some of the key challenges faced in partnership development noted in the online survey:

“Gaining approval for a new partnership development”

“Government funding, competitive market changes, operational ability to secure and maintain contracts”
“Understanding the roles of who within the organisation should be leading on the operational and strategic planning of the partnership development”

“HEIs are in a period of massive change as are other organisations but HEIs do not seem to have the capacity to move quickly; this causes frustration and potential loss of partnership”

“One key issue is that of partners (particularly from developing countries) having sustainable resources”

**Relationship management**

A key consideration voiced by external partners in the focus group was the need to develop a common language of communication.

“could it just be in a language that anybody can understand really and I just think sometimes we convolute and complicate it” (focus group)

The development of clear communication strategies internally and externally for partnership was highlighted in the focus group and online survey as a priority area for developing smarter working practices.

“There is no clear communication strategy for communication with partners which enables them to engage actively with events outside of their contract for specific work being undertaken.” (online survey)

“Maintaining regular communication with name contacts in each organisation is essential”. (online survey)

Communication with stakeholders must be part of the daily life of the organisation (Bosma et al., 2010; HEFCE 2009) with well-developed communication routines and competences in using different methods to communicate with different stakeholder groups.

The role of the client manager was seen as extremely influential in the success of the partnership in the online survey:

“Too many client managers for an organisation - needs to be far clearer at strategic and operational level who is responsible for what”

“The strength of the strategic members of a partnership within their internal organisations can heavily influence the time and commitment made available to partnership relationships”

“Relationship management of partnerships”

Another area of consideration is the external factors that can influence partnership relationships

“Impact of wider policy initiatives and significant changes in the external operating environment” (online survey)

“External factors can change the relationship between partners and this does not always lead to a review of the partnership roles as it is often mid cycle and swift” (online survey)

**Systems and processes**

The online survey showed strong agreement for all of the following statements:
• Business systems should be in place to support partnership between organisations
• Business processes should be in place to enable seamless transition of information between partners
• Support services within an organisation should be involved in the development of new partnerships
• Shared staff development enables effective partnership
• Quality processes are clearly understood in a partnership

The 3 areas with the lowest engagement with partnership in business and system development were IT services, Identity management and student support.

The following statements reflect the key challenges of developing systems and processes to support partnership working identified in the online survey and focus groups:

“The nature of agreements differ and the extent to which central processes/systems are required to support these also varies”

“IT issues and common timetable synchronisation can be problematic”

“The routine involvement of the various parties is now written into planning processes. Main challenge, processes not being adhered to. Short cuts, stages missed out, some aspects not covered at all, no central involvement, no executive approval etc.”

“Developing structures for full participation in the development of systems and processes to ensure all those involved in the actualization of the partnership at all levels 'own' the partnership and recognize all members of the partnership as important contributors to the partnership. Further that all systems and processes are clear and there are clear structures for review, improvement and clear lines of communication for members of the partnership to engage with if problems emerge”

“Communication about systems and processes that apply / need to be followed”

“Processes are in place for partnership development but they are not always followed. There is a general lack of understanding on how partnership development should work”

“Time and no clear process around how and what needs to be done”

The literature review found little that focused upon the systems and processes that underpin effective partnerships in higher education.

6. Partnership model for higher education

Appendix 2 outlines the final initial model for this project. This outlines the key entities that have been identified by the literature review and the research undertaken by the project team. Four key themes merged from the research:

1. Leading strategic partnership
2. Partnership development
3. Management of relationships
4. Systems and processes

5. Hard and soft impacts from the project
The project has enabled a cross University and partner conversation to begin that looks at all aspects of partnership. The researcher has been able to contribute findings to the development of aspects of working practices that were under consideration in the development of new business processes to enable more transparent and faster approaches to some aspects of partnership. This has included:

- Feeding into the development of a new partnership agreement template
- Offering evidence from the research on aspects of services that need to be included in an Operations Manual that clearly identifies to the partner and the University all of the responsibilities linked to key processes
- Raising the profile of partnership across the University and SEF to give opportunities to rethink partnership engagement
- The opportunity to raise key findings in meetings that has led to a greater understanding of the key issues surrounding partnerships

The impact of the project is at still at an early stage and a more in depth analysis of the findings is required to ensure that there is an opportunity to influence further the 4 key aspects identified in the partnership framework:

- Leading strategic partnerships
- Partnership development
- Relationship management
- Systems and processes

6. Dissemination plans

Dissemination of the project findings and partnership framework has already begun:

- In January 2012, the initial results from the focus group and literature review were shared at a presentation given at the University of Leicester
- The results were shared at the SEF Research Conference in June 2012

7. Future opportunities

SEF have been awarded the opportunity to build upon the work undertaken in this project by securing funding from LFHE to consider International partnership working. This will be an opportunity to take the findings forward and extend them to an international dimension which has only been briefly consider in this project.

Christine Vincent who led the project will also continue to build upon the findings of this project in her work supporting her doctoral studies in strategic partnerships in higher education. Dr Mahmoud Emira who undertook the literature review will also continue to research leading partnerships in higher education.

8. Potential influence on future practice

There are a number of key finding that can influence the future practice in the development of strategic partnerships in higher education. Areas that would be recommended for consideration in future practice include:

- A clear partnership model that shows all stages of partnership and their interactions within the organisation and externally
- Clarity of the leadership roles of strategic and operational partnership
- Clear identification of client managers and their roles and responsibilities in all stages of partnership model
- Internal and external communication strategy to support partnerships
- Staff development to ensure all parties understand clearly the business and systems supporting partnership
- Development of an exit strategy for partnerships
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