Co-operation, Collaboration versus the Trials and Tribulations of Tripartite Partnerships: A case study of a Skills For Life Management and Leadership Programme

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Abstract
This paper examines through a case study, issues arising from the delivery of a management and leadership programme accredited by the University of Wolverhampton in partnership with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) as part of the Skills For Life Quality Initiative (SFLQI). The (SFLQI) offers a framework for quality improvement of adult literacy, numeracy and language across organisations. Leaders and managers are the key players in achieving this. Interviews with participants, university tutors, and other consortium members unearth challenges inherent in maintaining a balance between the requirements of funding bodies and university regulations. The need for clear expectations by all partners from the outset is recognised as a mitigating factor.

Introduction:
The Skills For Life (SFL) strategy was first launched in March 2001. Formidable targets were set to help adults improve their literacy, numeracy and language skills. Findings by the working group commissioned by the government identified one in five adults in England as having difficulties with functional literacy and one in three adults as having difficulties with functional numeracy (DfEE, 1999). In Britain today we face an increasingly demanding and fast moving world of business. It is absolutely essential that education prepare learners for work as the cost of poor literacy and numeracy to the government is estimated to be about 10 billion pounds a year.

‘Each new learner must be given a high-quality learning experience that motivates him or her to keep on learning and to achieve. High-quality provision underpins our entire literacy and numeracy strategy.’ (DfES, 2001)

The Skills For Life Quality Initiative:
The Skills For Life Quality Initiative (SFLQI) offers a framework for quality improvements delivered through three key aspects: the development of a regional infrastructure, a range of professional development activities and a network of facilitators who will work directly with providers to offer support in embedding skills for life within their organisations. To implement the government’s skills for life strategy, there is the need to build a strategic whole organisational approach to skills for life within institutions. Leaders and managers are key players in achieving this. The overall aim of the Skills for Life quality initiative is to drive up quality through two key objectives. These are:

- To professionalise the skills for life workforce
• To develop a whole organisation approach to skills for life provision that promotes the development of organisation and management structures that use literacy, language and numeracy as the core building blocks of learning for all learners.

As part of the SFLQI, the University of Wolverhampton in partnership with the Centre For British Teachers (CfBT) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has for the past three years (September 2003 – June 2006) offered an accredited module titled, Leading and Managing Change and Quality Improvements in Skills For Life. This innovative programme continues to support skills for life leaders and managers nationally to develop and embed skills for life across their organisations.

Research on the potential benefits/possibilities and drawbacks of collaborative partnerships abound. (See Huxham, 1996; Pratt et al. 1998, Tett et al 2003, Winer and Ray, 1994) Collaborative partnership arrangements have long been considered an important way of working in education (Dyson and Robson 1999.) Collaborative working, it is claimed can foster a more inclusive education system thereby progressing the government’s widening participation and Lifelong Learning agenda. (DfEE 1998, Scottish Executive 2000b). However, all partners must be willing to acknowledge differing cultures, preferred ways of working, values, norms and power relations. (Winer and Ray, 1994)

Meeting the funding body’s target numbers for engaging leaders and managers on the skills for life programme meant a distance/blended learning model was the only viable option for delivery. For some participants who had very little experience of higher education work, meeting the level three academic criteria for assignment completion was a daunting task even with plenty of support from university tutors. For many adult learners, learning a new skill or concept could produce anxiety, not to mention fear of external judgement. (Brookfield, 1986, Middlewood, 2004.)

This paper will seek to examine the extent to which the collaborative effort between these three consortium members enabled participants to achieve the overall aim of the Skills for Life Quality Initiative, which is to drive up quality through two key objectives. These are:

• To professionalize the skills for life workforce
• To develop a whole organisation approach to skills for life provision that promotes the development of organisation and management structures that use literacy, language and numeracy as the core building blocks of learning for all learners.

Collaborative partners must have a shared vision of what they are seeking to achieve. For the vision to become reality, it is essential that there is commitment and trust on the part of all members and that clear goals for accomplishing the shared vision exist. (See Kerka, 1997, Winer and Ray, 1994).

The Programme:

The LSC SFLQI Leadership and Management programme is a blended learning programme consisting of four modules that are taught over two days and three modules taught by distance learning (accessed on CD). Participants are offered face to face tutorial support by university tutors on training days and the rest of the support is offered on-line. The benefits of on-line learning in widening participation abound in the literature (See Cornelius, 2002, Palloff and Pratt, 2001). The programme is accredited by Wolverhampton University. The materials for
each day consist of an activity pack and supplementary reading. The programme aims to enable participants to:

- analyse critically the skills for life provision within their organisation
- analyse the key leadership and management issues that underpin the development of effective provision
- identify, appraise and assess in detail a particular aspect of provision that requires development as part of their institution’s skills for life strategy
- draw on a range of effective audit and survey techniques to achieve this.

The assessment is designed to accredit the quality improvement work leaders and managers are undertaking within their organisations and the embedding work they have been carrying out with their facilitators. They could use the action plans and the critical analysis they are working on with their facilitator in the assignment.

The Research:
Qualitative approaches were used in gathering the views, opinions and experiences of respondents. These include university staff responsible for the development and management of the programme, trainers and facilitators employed by the lead consortium and the participants themselves.

University of Wolverhampton staff:
Information was gathered from university tutors responsible for the planning, development and delivery and management of the programme through semi-structured one to one interviews. Questions asked centred around the extent to which university staff felt the collaborative partnership with the CfBT, managing the project of behalf of the Learning and Skills Council had enabled participants achieve the accredited outcomes of the management and leadership programme. The full time project manager and two other full time university staff were interviewed. Some interview questions also aimed to assess the common challenges facing collaborative partnerships. Interview data with full time staff was transcribed and a content analysis made. Key issues centred on shared vision, power relations, trust, communication, clarity of purpose, roles and responsibilities and participants’ support.

On shared vision:
Collaboration is facilitated when there is clarity on all sides as to the purpose of the partnership initiative, thereby promoting a common sense of purpose and commitment as well as shared responsibility (Tett et al, 2003, Pratt et al, 1998). A key factor for effective partnership working therefore, is a strong and shared vision for the partnership itself in which partners feel equal in terms of commitment and how they are valued, and are clear about their roles and accountabilities. All university staff interviewed were clear about their roles and partnership expectations although they did not see themselves as equal partners in the relationship.

Power relationships:
All university staff alluded to the unequal nature of the relationship. The other two partners, they felt, pulled the power strings. ‘They had the money, they had the power,’ one said. Collaborative initiatives backed by national policies can attract huge amounts of funding which is beneficial. The down side for the less powerful partner (s) is that such initiatives
often come with strings attached. (Tett et al, 2003). The LSC pulled the power strings, they had the money. But for a collaborative effort to be effective, it is important for partners to be seen to be positive about one another. No one partner should be seen as domineering and controlling. Administrative processes can also be seen as subtle forms of power that could hinder or help joint working strategies (Tett et al, 2003).

‘Every little document, had to be vetted, approved and badged by the LSC,’ said one staff. ‘It was so frustrating. They insisted that you couldn’t send out any document unless it had the LSC badge’ Delays caused by such bureaucracy was frustrating.

‘You had to do what you were told, even if it wasn’t sensible’, said another university staff. One conceded however: ‘We had more influence towards the end.’ Also on the positive side, two of the staff interviewed praised the high quality training venues and hospitality provided by the lead partner.

On communication and trust:
Open and frequent communication is essential for any effective collaborative partnership and good communication is essential in building up trust. All three staff felt that regular consortium meetings were useful in sharing information, clarifying each partner’s responsibilities and reiterating expectations. Trust is emphasised as a key element in effective partnership working. (Kerka, 1997).
‘The bedrock of communication is trust.’ (Bendle/Carman, 1996). From discussions with staff, it became clear that this was achieved by the third year of the project.

One member of staff said: ‘It takes time to build trust, I don’t think they trusted us at the beginning.’

Staff felt they were given more freedom to be innovative in their management of the programme once a certain degree of trust had been established. Having an influential funding body like the LSC working in partnership with the university certainly resulted in a raised profile and increased credibility in project development, management and delivery.

Roles and responsibilities:
All three staff felt that roles and responsibilities had become clear by the period under examination, but this was not the case at the start of the project two years earlier. They also highlighted the challenge of working with partners who had little idea of the nature of adult learning and adult learners. CfBT, working on behalf of the LSC, was responsible for recruitment of participants on to the programme. The entry criteria on to the programme related solely to job responsibilities as skills for life managers or co-ordinators. Advice and guidance on to the programme was minimal. One university staff called it a ‘business model as opposed to being educational or developmental.’ ‘They’, (the funding body) he added, ‘were purely target driven, more concerned with deliverables.’ Recruiting the target numbers of leaders and managers on to the programme became the driving force. Some managers who had little interest in the accreditation were enrolled on the programme to meet target numbers. This resulted in poor retention in some cases and low submission rates as some participants could not cope with the demands of higher education level three work. Quality assuring and co-ordinating a national programme also proved a huge challenge for university staff even with the help of a full time project manager and full time administrator. Adults learn
effectively and are more committed when they see the clear relevance and application of any professional development activity.

‘Whatever the programme, the effectiveness of its components depends, in part, upon the extent to which there is a recognition of those factors which affect the learning of adults.’ (Middlewood, 2001, p 189)

On Participants’ support: University tutors cited the assignment brief and the documentary evidence by way of high quality assignment submissions as evidence of their enabling participants to improve the quality of skills for life provision and manage change within their organisations. In the stronger assignments:

- The critical analysis of the effectiveness and quality of the range of Skills For Life provision within their organisations and partnerships was sound.
- A SWOT analysis or similar identified a specific aspect of their institution’s skills for life provision that needed further development.
- The implementation plan detailed how the quality of delivery within the identified aspect is to be improved and how actions taken will realise change.
- The stronger assignments had considered all aspects of the plan including resource management, stakeholder analysis and monitoring of outcomes
- Targets that will be used to measure change against actions taken have been clearly articulated.

Trainers and Facilitators:
The Skills for life leadership and management trainers and facilitators are self-employed consultants working on behalf of the LSC but managed by CfBT. The trainers delivered day one and day two of the blended learning programme and briefed the participants on the requirements of the accreditation. They were charged with the responsibility of ensuring that links were made between the activities carried out over the two days and the university assessment requirements

Skills for life facilitators are trained consultants who work with providers to develop a more strategic approach to embed literacy, numeracy and language within organisations. Facilitators play a key role in ensuring providers’ training needs are met, in ways that will help to improve quality and develop a whole organisational approach. Facilitators broker staff development opportunities for teachers and managers to providers.

A focus group comprising four facilitators and four trainers was convened to elicit their views as to the extent to which they felt they had enabled participants on the leadership and management programme to meet the two key aims of the skills for life quality initiative. A semi structured interview schedule was used and the discussion was carefully planned and directed by the researcher to ensure that the two key aims were explored in detail – ensuring a whole organisational approach to skills for life and enabling participants develop as skills for life professionals. The discussion that took place was transcribed for analysis.

Of the four facilitators who participated in the focus group discussions, two knew very little about the leadership and management programme except for the briefing they had at a facilitator’s briefing event. They felt that this was insufficient to be of benefit to the managers they were working with.

One facilitator said, ‘What help could I offer? I hardly knew the programme.’
The other two who happened to be trainers felt well equipped to support their managers in meeting the outcomes of the accredited programme.

One said: ‘Being a trainer, I knew the programme well which was a great help both to me and my provider.’

All four facilitators felt they had more success with the second aim in that they had access and information relating to a range of professional development activities in skills for life, which their managers could engage in. They were able to question, challenge and support their providers in a range of ways. There were able to foster ‘openness and a spirit of enquiry which are the essence of professionalism in its broadest sense.’ (Hughes et al, 2005)

When I asked the trainers the extent to which they felt they had enabled participants meet the programme outcomes, responses were largely positive. The activities over the two days, they felt were relevant and related to leading and managing a change initiative of this nature. They felt that participants were effectively engaged in and enthusiastic about the tasks. Feedback on activities, they felt showed a sound grasp of strategies for embedding skills for life across organisations in the majority of cases.

All four trainers however were concerned about the low level of skills for life expertise of some participants on the programme.

‘They never should have been sent, it was embarrassing to say the least. Some didn’t have a clue. How can they be expected to manage let alone lead a high profile initiative like this?’ one said.

The four trainers also alluded to task overload. A trainer expressed this sentiment:

‘We probably tried to cover too many activities in two training days, but we had no control over that. We had to deliver the package we were given’

Another said: ‘I think some participants felt overwhelmed by the pace, too many activities, more time to reflect between tasks would have been useful.’

Still another added: ‘By the end of the second training day, you could hardly get some managers to concentrate, mostly the ones new to their posts. It was just too much.’

This may well have related to the inconsistency in the way training days were structured. While some participants had a couple of weeks in between training days to reflect on activities and apply theoretical discussions to their practice, others had only a couple of days.

**The Participants:**

In order to gain participants’ perceptions of the extent to which the collaborative project had enabled them to achieve the outcomes of the leadership and management programme, an analysis of evaluative questionnaires completed by forty participants who attended the programme was carried out.
Participants highlighted what they saw as the key strengths of the leadership and management programme.

- The leadership and management programme had prepared participants for raising the profile of skills for life within their organisations.
- The content of the programme was appropriate to their job roles and outcomes were well explained.
- The training and accreditation has helped participants manage change and improve the quality of skills for life provision.
- Supporting materials provided by the university were of high quality. The CD Rom and blended learning materials had aided their learning and informed their coursework.
- The programme encouraged reflective and critical thinking.
- On-line and telephone support was well received by students.

Identified challenges highlighted from evaluative questionnaires offered to the participants include:

- Lack of time. Inspections getting in the way. This challenge was highlighted by nine managers.
- Lack of clarity as to how the leadership and management accreditation fits into the wider continuing professional development framework for the post-compulsory sector.
- Lack of understanding of the Higher Education level 3 academic criteria
- Low levels of managerial experience

A focus group with 10 participants on the leadership and management programme was also held. The aim of the discussion was to generate further qualitative data on participants’ perceptions of the outcomes of the collaborative initiative. The students were asked how the activities undertaken during the directed training sessions prepared them to lead and manage Skills For Life developments within their organisations. Questions were asked about the embedding of Skills For Life across the provision and vocational tutor engagement. Responses were also sought on their own professionalism resulting from their engagement on the programme. To what extent has the programme enabled them to reflect on their roles as Skills For Life leaders and managers? The key themes arising from focus group discussions are summarised below.

On become reflective practitioners: The opportunity to reflect on their roles as skills for life practitioners with others in their field was highly valued by all focus group participants. (See Moon, 2002, 2005, Schon, 1983, 1987, Hughes et al, 2005, Boud and Walker, 1998.) The pre course tasks, the training activities and more importantly, the accredited assignment gave them vast opportunities to not only to critically examine their skills for life provision and their roles within the institution, but also suggest realistic actions for improvement.

One manager commented. ‘In the hustle and bustle of your every day responsibilities, you hardly get time to think about what you do let alone consider how effectively you do your job.’

‘An important part of being a professional is adopting an open, questioning approach to the field in which we work, including our own contribution.’ (Hughes et al, 2005)
Participants found it particularly useful to reflect on effective leadership and management strategies including the sharing of ideas and good practice with other managers. They also cited the opportunity to reflect on how the management structure of their organisations facilitated or hindered skills for life developments. They were able to identify the list of colleagues who impact on the quality of experience of skills for life learners in their organisations. Reflection on practice is a useful tool for developing self awareness and self-knowledge which can lead to improvements in practice.

‘Reflection can provide teachers with the courage and intellectual capacity to turn insight into improved action. With structure, challenge and support the reflective process enables thinking and practice to move forward.’ (Fish, 1995, p.2).

Lack of senior management support: From focus group discussions it transpired that not all senior managers were supportive of the Skills For Life agenda which meant that some middle managers who attended the leadership and management programme could not progress the whole organisational approach agenda following the two directed training days. For some, the rhetoric of their senior management teams did not match their practice and some participants felt that their senior managers simply paid lip service to the skills for life agenda.

‘A senior member of staff should have overall management responsibility and accountable for Skills for Life. Senior managers from across the organisation should work together to create a coherent approach to the embedded learning model by developing and sharing operational plans, which address the aims and objectives within the strategic plan.’ (DfES, 2004)

The whole organisational approach demands that all staff at all levels are actively involved in the vision, more so senior managers. Some participants had no time off their normal duties to complete the accredited outcomes of the programme, which made life difficult with what they saw as the ever-increasing work load of managers in the post compulsory education sector. The lack of time off work for completion of programme outcomes was common to all participants interviewed. Some participants were also facing the pressures of inspections in addition to their usual responsibilities. If any major change is not to be seriously hampered, senior management team must be willing to not only to champion the skills for life agenda but also to commit to providing financial and technical support and resources.

Funding for cover costs: This was seen as a significant shortcoming on the part of the LSC, the funding body and lead partner of the initiative. While the accreditation was offered free to skills for life leaders and managers, cover costs to attend training was not provided for. Two managers from work-based learning provision in particular felt this drawback was significant as they played multiple roles within their organisations.

On the plus side, participants felt that the training venues and hospitality provided were generally above standard.

On vocational tutor engagement: One of the activities engaged in during the training event is the task of gaining support and commitment for skills for life across the organisation, in particular, vocational tutor engagement. This links to the partnership goal of ensuring the whole organisation approach by embedding skills for life within vocational programmes of study. The level to which the training prepared participants for this task was sought via one of
the focus group questions. This came out as a significant challenge for all participants. One manager expressed her sentiments thus:

‘It’s a daunting task. Many vocational tutors just don’t see the point. The level of resistance from staff is so high, it's hard not to get discouraged.’

Lack of experience: Some participants lacked sufficient knowledge of the Skills For Life Quality Initiative to benefit from the training. ‘I am new in post. I don’t know much about this really. I suppose this is my chance to learn.’ said one newly appointed manager. These participants lacked the confidence not only to undertake the accredited programme, but to act as change agents as well.

Conclusion:
Further work is certainly required to establish the impact of the leadership and management programme on the two key priorities of the skills for life quality initiative - the whole organisational approach and in professionalizing the skills for life workforce. The evidence so far suggests that the programme has raised the profile of skills for life within organisations and leaders and managers are starting to reflect critically on their roles as skills for life professionals. Heavy workload, lack of senior management support and resistance by some vocational tutors still pose real challenges in progressing the skills for life agenda. Collaborative initiatives often consist of partnerships with very different knowledge bases, assumptions and values. Professional rivalry and conflicting interests can sometimes make the task of real collaboration challenging. (Huxham,1996). The evidence does not suggest that such was the case in this instance. Multi-agencies must continue to work together to ensure successful programme planning and delivery to progress the widening participation agenda. Successful collaboration requires patience and commitment on the part of all members. It takes time to build trust.

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