Partnerships: With whom, what and why  
(They don’t pay you to think).

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors report a study of current practice with regard to the negotiation of partnerships and co-operative arrangements with outside stakeholders in light of recent government policy changes. It is clear that with the level of government intervention which is now being experienced in universities, partnerships are required to fit within a prescribed model if they are to be sustainable or supported. To a large extent the research agenda of universities is being prescribed and decided from the outside. Thus it is problematic in this climate, how much autonomy universities have to decide research agendas and to forge partnerships and co-operative ventures.

In the study of which this paper is a report, partnerships in the current climate of universities in Australia was the focus. The academics who participated were all working in collaborative research projects in partnership with agencies or bodies outside the university and had received grants and funding for the project. The questions that academics who were interviewed were asked were:

- Briefly describe the purpose of your grant
- Who were/are your partners or collaborators?
- Would you be undertaking the research if funding was not available?
- Comment on the importance of forming partnerships with other bodies when conducting research
- As a researcher in the current context, to what extent is your research influenced by where you obtain the funding?

In the current climate of Universities and teacher education we are being exhorted, if not instructed to set up partnerships with outside stakeholders as a means to fund research and scholarship and also as a means to ensure that whatever research is undertaken is able to be “commercialized” and marketed. Increasingly Universities in Australia are being thrown on their own resources to fund research given the fact that the government funding for Universities is at a level of approximately 34% of what is needed. Any funding which is available for research or for learning and teaching has to be competitively vied for and as a result of such contests, the inevitable league tables of universities are constructed and emblazoned across the media, websites and any other public forum that will give it air space. In this climate the rich tend to get richer and the poor get punished for being poor. Commercial partnerships have thus become an important contributor to university resources.

In order to gain support for research an external partner needs to be wooed and danced with or around just as dancing partners would. This of course influences the nature of research and the audience for research findings. One has to question to what extent researchers are free to publish and report findings which are potentially unpalatable to the partner who is putting up
some funding and expecting a particular outcome which is favourable to their position. The authors are aware of occasions when reports that we have produced following research studies for outside bodies including governments, have been buried deeply and not actually ever seen the light of day due to the fact that they do not paint a glowing picture. In this paper the authors have undertaken a study of research partnerships which are currently being undertaken within their own universities and have asked the researchers whether their autonomy as a researcher has been affected and/or compromised as a result of the partnership with an outside agent or body. This is a key issue explored in this paper.

An Australian Government Report from 2000 includes comment about partnerships in educational research and provides a note of caution about the impact the outcomes of such partnerships are likely to have in academe.

For a period of time government has actively encouraged partnerships between university researchers and schools particularly action research-based projects. Indeed, encouraging links with industry and the practical application of research findings are embedded in the objectives of the Australian Research Council (ARC). Despite the general point just made, innovative forms of co-operation with education practitioners to achieve such outcomes, however, are not necessarily conducive to the types of publications necessary to win traditional academic acclaim (DETYA, 2000, p.44).

Here then is a dilemma – the government supports and encourages partnerships and industry links but the research outcomes of these partnerships do not match what has been the expected level of rigor and robustness of pure academic research and publication. Another issue is that in many cases action research and case study has been seen as among the preferred methodological approaches in educational research. However, policy makers are now locked into the evidence based turn which expects that rigorous metrics and statistical analyses are part of the research data collection process so that as well as qualitative outcomes and findings, a quantitative dimension is also required. Policy construction does not rely on qualitative data for the most part but on what adds up when you are trying to win an argument and on what can be clearly evidenced in measurable ways. This probably explains the plethora of literature which is currently emerging on mixed method research where both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are employed in parallel. Large scale studies which are robust and produce hard evidence are now more and more in demand in all areas and educational researchers who do not accommodate to this trend, risk being overlooked and marginalized. In terms of research which has an “impact factor” the creation and dissemination of new cutting edge knowledge is an essential ingredient, but the question which is becoming more and more pertinent centres around who it is that sets the problem or research focus.

Models of Inquiry

Traditionally the focus or topic of research has been set by the researchers themselves as insiders within universities. In the DETYA (2000) report it is stated that in

…the traditional model of knowledge production… the research agenda is largely set by academics working within a comprehensive and hierarchical self regulating organizational structure. There is an emphasis on the supply side of knowledge under this approach (p.50).
This traditional approach however, is being challenged by the notion of partnerships with outside agencies and bodies as the problem is largely set by the outsiders and the quality control is also set by the outside partner. This “partnership” model is characterized by:

- Problems substantially set and solved in the context of application
- Use of approaches and resources that cross discipline boundaries
- Knowledge creation reliant on diverse skills and experiences
- Less emphasis on fixed organizational and hierarchical arrangements
- Quality control set by outsiders in addition to peer review and
- An emphasis on ‘demand side’ knowledge production (p.50).

The partnership model clearly shifts the locus of control out of the university and into the context for which the research is being produced. The question again can be raised as to the impact this shift has on the verisimilitude of the research findings. Then there is the blurring that is occurring increasingly between what constitutes research and what constitutes consultancy. Again the DETYA (2000) report gives some insights into models of knowledge creation in Australia.

There are four models of systematic inquiry which have current relevance to the impact of educational research in Australia, and which help shape the forms of interaction between researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

1. Traditional knowledge production
2. Investigator-controlled applied research
3. Investigator-user linkages
4. User-oriented action research

Consultancy advice could be argued to represent a fifth model that is increasingly common in education. However, consultancy overlaps to a large extent with models 2 and 3. In essence it refers to a range of administrative arrangements that vary considerably in terms of what is done, how it is done and the reporting of findings (p.50).

Traditional knowledge production involves two forms of research – basic research and applied research. Basic research is that which is experimental and theoretical work undertaken without a specific application in view. Applied research is seen as original work to acquire new knowledge with a specific application in view. Diffusion of findings in both basic and applied traditional research is in academic channels and uses specialized language which is often condensed and abstract.

Investigator-controlled applied research has practical implications and involves partnerships which are used for collaboration and feedback. There are dual channels of communication – academic and popular. This kind of research has implications for policy and systemic change.

Investigator-user linkages involves program or policy evaluations and provides answers to specific issues or problems. These problems can either emanate from the users or the researchers. Diffusion of results is through reports and interactive techniques and will usually revolve around focused studies with direct implications.

User-oriented action research is usually undertaken between academics and school based practitioners where the practitioners (users) initiate the process as a means to respond to local
problems. The research is collaborative and action is an essential element. The findings of such research are both in-house and are also shared more widely.

These 4 models which are articulated above form an element of the interpretative framework for this paper.

**Data and interpretation.**

The comments of the participants indicated that the purposes of the research funds were varied. Some of the partnerships were with colleagues through an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant and Education Faculty grants including an equity grant. One was with colleagues and funded through the Australian Teacher Education Association. Three involved schools with curriculum innovations, for example, classroom approaches to teaching and collaborative learning in maths and science in middle school and another focused on the professional development for teachers. One was a partnership with the Department of Immigration, another with a health department and one was with the Technical and Further Education sector.

When the researchers were asked if they would undertake this research if it was not funded the overwhelming majority of respondents said ‘No’. For example one said ‘No- [because of] lack of time and resources’. Some added that they may do it but it would only be on a small scale. One respondent claimed that it ‘Depends on scope and complexity – generally no’ and another said ‘Not on a national scale’. Another researcher explained

> You couldn’t do it because when you’re doing classroom research you’ve got to release teachers from the classroom so that you can give them professional development, and you can talk through a lot of issues with them. They won’t do it after school and I think it’s probably unfair of us to ask them to do it after school or in their own time.

Research is an ethical enterprise. In this case discussed there is a personal time cost to the individuals involved and the researcher needs to take account of the social benefits of their endeavours. The costs/benefits ratio is a basic dilemma for educational research. How you approach schools and gain the trust of the teachers and the school administrators involves considerable time and effort by the researchers.

Participants explained ‘access to organizations’ is difficult. Cooperative partnerships require a common need agreed to by the partners. The need to exchange ideas and share expertise is required or the need for applied research where university researchers converge with the needs of external bodies, so it is often the partner bodies’ interests that determine the relevance of the research project. In funded research projects it is often framed by issues relating to government policies and priorities that may influence the research agendas.

In discussing elements of such dilemmas, one participant stated:

> … because our partnership was already in place they [the schools] were willing to come on board and participate in the study. Schools where I haven’t had this collaboration before, they’re not, even though they know me; they know the research, in this assessment culture we have at the present moment, that’s inflicting our education system. They’re not really interested in participating in things which
are going to progress the discourse on collaborative learning in maths and science. They are more interested in “how do I get my kids to achieve better on literacy and numeracy tests, national tests?”

This response thus alludes to the careful consideration of political agendas as well as ethical issues involved in conducting research. Additionally there is a clear need for sympathetic consideration, by the researcher, of all the professional, personal and political pressures on participants.

Discussing the extent to which the participants’ research is influenced by where funding is obtained, one respondent suggested that it ‘shapes the approach, it doesn’t direct it’ and another made the point that it is ‘Increasingly salient but not yet totally deterministic’.

I think in developing applications you are always looking to be the best fit applicant as it may well be that you are adapting or shifting a research focus to meet the needs of the group. It is the chicken and the egg, if you don’t get the funding you can’t do the research and if you don’t meet the needs of the funding brief then you aren’t going to get the money in the first place… I wouldn’t apply for something that I didn’t feel engaged with.

Researchers need to be attracted to and prepared to become engrossed with the main concerns of the area of study. Nevertheless research partnerships are sometimes difficult to establish because funding bodies do provide parameters and guidelines.

I think to be realistic we have to say that it is influenced by where we obtain funding because the funding sources give you the parameters and guidelines. They provide the boundaries if you like around your research. The art of a researcher I think and as an academic is to take your ideas and make them work within those boundaries. It’s the next step to producing an output if you like rather than just keeping your ideas as a nice bit of theory that is tucked away in your diary under the bed.

Being in the ‘real’ world of practical implications and economic and political agendas is an element that comes through the data. The respondents mentioned the current focus on testing students and on curriculum areas of literacy, maths, science and information and communication technologies as presently influential in the Australian context. This set of priorities, however, does not suit all educational researchers. A respondent claimed,

Research using ICT or looking at Science curriculum seems to attract a lot more funding or has a lot more opportunities so other research which might be more social or cultural is quite limited. Therefore if your passion is with the latter then you need to wait around or else try and reshape your passion.

In regard to the notion of the types of agencies with which partnerships were set up, one respondent said ‘I go where people support what I do' and another reported ‘I approach anybody who will listen’. Others suggested ‘Public sector agencies and colleagues’, ‘Teachers’, schools and people seeking a deeper understanding of evaluating the value of their work’. Another responded commented,

Sometimes you get together because you’ve got some kind of tangential shared interest and problem and it’s the synergy of working together that leads to that shared view where you want to go and the interpretation. So you need all the
contributors to produce that different or cutting edge spin on what it is that you want to achieve.

One respondent emphasized that the heart and the passion of one’s original area of study is important.

A long time ago somebody said to me when I first started out in my career, never forget your heartland, and my heartland has always been in two fields… I maintain my professional links… I see the conceptual frameworks of the geographers who deal with the issues of time and place as being vitally important in terms of how we translate the intellectual learning spaces today.

It is how the partnerships give a synergy and uniqueness, a new way of looking at concepts and practices that provides the energy that is crucial to many current research projects.

One of the crucial areas that respondents commented upon was the issue of whether they felt bound to produce answers which are palatable to the funding body. There were a variety of responses. There was the idea of ‘the objective reporter’

If there is any conflict of interest or any underpinning notion that it might compromise the study that’s a choice I would make before I decided to apply for a particular grant. To not have the freedom to be objective for me would destroy the very reason I would want to get engaged with it.

Another type of reaction was to suggest that it doesn’t make sense to present a damming report because people are not influenced by negative findings.

It doesn’t make sense to produce a report which is damning of whatever you are examining because people aren’t influenced by negative things. They are more likely to be influenced by something that suggests that it can be improved in some way… if they are very negative they will just turn off.

As a researcher you want to produce findings that show integrity to your research and also to yourself and to what you believe – so I think it’s trying to find the balance between speaking the truth and showing the integrity of your research but not showing it in such a way that it is actually detrimental to educational reform or people funding you or whatever.

However, some researchers do report examples of how subtle influence has been brought to bear on one project as well as indicating there are some compromises made.

We feel considerable pressure to word things in way which the funding body might find acceptable. If we have to tell them something that we think that they don’t want to know we would have to word that fairly carefully and we do get expressions of concern from the provider organisations sometimes after we have done the research and we are in the writing up stage.

The way that you word things has to take account of the perceptions of the people that fund you and the people on whom you are dependent for ongoing co-operation for future research.
Another example of what happens when finding bodies are not happy with the final results was discussed.

I have had situations where I have produced non-palatable outcomes for a funding body. The funding body was very quick to send the research team an official letter to that effect. However I think that one of the things that we need to remember as academics is that we do have a degree of freedom and it’s that integrity that comes with that freedom that we need to be reminded of when we get into these situations I will never compromise on that.

Most of the respondents claimed they ‘never compromised’ and were not unduly influenced. For example when commenting about being influenced by where research funds are obtained one replied,

No, I conduct independent research. I feel no obligation whatsoever to come up with results that will please those people funding it. I’ve never felt under that pressure.

Another respondent emphasised how the data speak for themselves and that he doesn’t compromise.

I am very data led. I will allow the funding body to engage in a discussion regarding methodology, processes and so on but the data speak for themselves. I have produced reports for the Education Department which at one stage they were a bit unhappy about but that’s the way the data fell out. I reported that in articles as well. So I have never had any flack because of it either.

Most respondents suggested that they had not felt pressured. One respondent suggested research could look like collusion between the members of the research partnership. In this way professional detachment and integrity are seen as crucial.

The key issue is maintaining professional detachment in the relationship that gives you the freedom to report honestly and openly on what you find within your research, so as it is not seen to be as some collusion between yourself and the funding party.

In terms of how all these partnership issues impact on their own research, a typical response was

The influence and the impact is that they may shape the directions I am taking but I don’t think they actually influence it at a fundamental level. It’s not about chasing the money. I want to do this because it is important not because there is money attached to it. Once the money defines the research directions again I’ll be young and naïve and say - we’ve sold out.

Some researchers spoke of the idea of favouring challenging partnerships where there is a cross fertilization of ideas.

I prefer partnerships that are challenging, that bring together really unexpected people and I think that helps me as a researcher because in Education you often
have to delve into other fields like Economics, Psychology or all sorts of different fields that are outside my education. Partnerships with differences can produce a lot of innovation but that could explode as well because you’ve got too many personalities.

The local community, seen from a national and international perspective is another challenge, as is the challenge of shifting perspectives on learning and teaching.

It seems to me that the notion of co-operation is a new and an old construct. I suspect that it has been highlighted increasingly now as the ground is shifting in educational research from thinking about teachers and learners separately to thinking about teachers as learners and learners as teachers. So we are into a new zone in co-operative partnerships.

Working in funded research partnerships also keep researchers focused on the ‘real world’ and thinking carefully about the multiple interpretations, meanings and implications of what you are doing.

They make you think about the implications of what you are doing in other people’s lives who are in the real world, who are trying to achieve related outcomes, who are practical, so in that sense they keep your eye focused

Cooperative partnerships also open up new possibilities as well as shifting researchers out of their comfort zones.

They have provided me with opportunities to do things that I might never have considered if I wasn’t in some form of partnership both working collaboratively with colleagues and extending my horizons beyond the university context into what you might call the real world. I am aware of how it shifts me out of my comfort zone of just working within the university domain and saying, hang on what we are doing here impacts on lives way beyond the university and contributes to this whole notion of contributing to the growth, the development, the emergence of new ways of being in society as a whole. I find it quite amazing.

Conclusions

Research partnerships, according to the participants in this study, are seen as being the preferred and most successful way to undertake funded research in the current climate of universities and competitive funding. In this study it has been found that the traditional type of research which may be regarded as the conceptual, theoretically oriented (blue-skies) research undertaken in a spirit of genuine inquiry where there is no specific application envisaged at the outset of the research, is not the dominant model. Indeed it appears that when partnerships are involved, it is unlikely that the type of research undertaken will be of the basic traditional kind. More commonly, where traditional basic research occurs it is by a lone researcher working without any specific funding.

Competitively funded collaborative research as reported in this study appears to favour the Investigator-controlled applied types of research which has practical implications and where there are dual channels of dissemination of findings – academic channels as well as popular
channels. This kind of research is also likely to have clear implications for policy and systemic change.

In this study the second most preferred model of collaborative research was what has been termed here the Traditional applied research where original research has occurred but has a specific application in view. Diffusion is by academic channels and the reports will be couched in academic, often condensed and abstract language.

The third preference in types of research undertaken by the participants in this study was user oriented action research where the university academic partner is teamed with practitioners from schools and where the local problem is one articulated by the schools. The schools involved in this research want to see the study result in a direct action and the findings will be disseminated throughout the school and in the university and also more broadly in the education system and in the community.

Within this study, as well as no partnership research being of the basic traditional variety, no reported research was of the Investigator-User-linkage type. This is the type of research that involves program and policy evaluation and provides specific answers to problems set by either the user or the researcher. However, this is not to say that staff at the 2 Universities surveyed are not undertaking these kinds of studies – it is more likely though that where these kinds of studies are undertaken they are classed as scholarship of learning and teaching rather than as research.

In the DEST (2005) Evaluation of Incentives for commercialization of research in Australian Universities it is suggested that a segmentation of academic researchers’ attitudes can be discerned. They see that there are 3 categories of academic researcher:

- The ethical pure researcher: people who had an inherent distaste, ethical and/or moral, for having any involvement in the application for commercial benefit of any new knowledge they may create
- The career academic: people who identified and disclosed potentially commercial opportunities but did not want to be overly involved in the commercialization process … do not have ethical reservations about generating earnings or other benefits for the university or themselves from commercialization of their research outcomes
- The financially ambitious: people with a personal commitment to being involved in ensuring the commercial application of their research outcomes and the potentially resulting financial benefit to themselves, not just to their university; a few of this group may well end up as successful technological entrepreneurs (p.64).

What we see occurring then is a clear categorisation of research types and researcher types in the current context of research in universities. The more we are driven by competitive funding and the need to commercialise research outputs, the wider the gap between traditional and other types of research is likely to become. Perhaps also, as commercialization of research becomes more imperative, the gaps between academics who undertake research will also increase.

Bibliography