Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

How to ensure partnerships go wrong

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Peters, Geoff (2011). How to ensure partnerships go wrong. In: 25th AAOU Annual Conference: Transforming Asia through Open Distance Learning (ODL), 28-30 Sep 2011, Penang, Malaysia.

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2011 The Author

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://www.aaou.net/aaou2011/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=3

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

How to ensure Partnerships go wrong

Professor Geoff Peters
Faculty of Mathematics, Computing and Technology
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
UK
MK7 6AA
g.peters@open.ac.uk
T:+44 1908 274066
F:+44 1908 652175
Sub Theme: Business Models and the Role of Partnership in ODL

Abstract

This paper is based upon recent academic research on partnership working in a variety of contexts and personal experience of strategic partnerships in the UK. The paper uses examples to draw out some general lessons about when partnerships are likely to succeed and when they may fail.

Background

There is considerable management literature and folklore on the benefits to be gained from organizational collaboration. Typically, authors speak of partners working together to achieve their strategic aims more effectively and better serve stakeholders such as customers, students, shareholders etc by:

- sharing complementary expertise and resources
- developing new products
- reaching new markets
- providing better services
- sharing or exporting risks

In the context of Open and Distance Learning there are potentially many advantages to be had from collaborating with academic partners locally or in different jurisdictions and with commercial and public sector partners that bring complementary expertise. Earlier papers by the author for AAOU conferences have set out different forms of academic collaboration (Peters et al., 1995) and the role of partnerships in different forms of ODL organization (Peters, 2003). Whilst other papers have drawn tentative conclusions from the author's reflections upon experience as a senior manager in an Open University whilst engaged in a large number of partnerships (Peters, 2002). This paper looks specifically at failings and potential failings in inter-organizational collaborations and partnerships. It draws on both experience and academic research into collaborative activity and the systemic nature of failure

Experience revisited

Amongst the successful educational partnerships in the UK and Europe more widely there are many that have produced very little or absorbed vast amounts of energy. Four ODL related schemes that demonstrably did not achieve their objectives serve to illustrate wider pitfalls.

A jointly developed management education programme:

In the 1980s the Open University and a specialist management education college sought to jointly develop a distance taught business and management programme. On the surface the organizational-fit seemed good. At that time the Open University had only a few management courses and little academic expertise in the area, whilst the partner had little experience of distance education. However, the Open University and its partner eventually separated and each developed their own distance taught programmes.

In simple terms, as well as some organizational and personality differences, the major factor was that both partners decided they had learned enough from the other about their respective expertise and could manage alone in the future. Their judgement proved to be correct since almost 30 years later both continue to have thriving distance taught management programmes.

The UK's Open College:

Again in the 1980s the UK Government, buoyed by the success of the Open University decided to launch an Open College that would attract large numbers of people into lower than university level educational programmes. The model involved a national broadcaster to prepare exciting and motivating television programmes, printed resources and Open College courses run by local traditional Further Education (community) Colleges.

The scheme was widely seen to be successful at attracting more learners into education but many of them registered for existing courses run by the FE colleges rather than the branded Open College courses. The end result was that there was no explicit link between the public funding to the Open College and the fees received by local colleges and so eventually the Government withdrew their funding.

UK e-Universities:

In 2000 the UK Government announced a 'new collaborative venture between universities and private sector partners… to meet the competitive global challenge thrown at UK higher education. 'Operating around the world to deliver online courses devised by UK universities it was to be 'a world-leader in the provision of virtual learning, placing the UK at the cutting edge of global developments'.

By 2004 the company set-up to develop and operate the model, UKeU Worldwide Ltd, had become insolvent after spending about £50m ($80m) of public funds and with only 145 students using the specially designed (but never finished) e-learning platform (Peters, 2004). The lessons from this example are many but they include the initiative being top down rather than arising either from demand from international students or a gap perceived by universities.

NHSUniversity:

Like UKeU universities, this was a top down political initiative aimed at creating a ‘corporate university’ for the UK’s largest employer the public National Health Service (Taylor and Fryer, 2005).

Technically this was not a partnership because most of the activity was contained within the NHS. However this enormous organization is widely seen in practice to be a set of different organisations linked by some common aims and an overarching coordinating structure. Indeed it can be argued that the seeds of NHSU’s demise were set in the concept of it being a ‘corporate university’; NHS was not a single corporation and NHSU was not a university (Taylor et al., 2010). Indeed there was opposition to NHSU becoming a university. As well as being a jealously guarded designation many universities were potential competitors of NHSU and the idea of an autonomous NHSU was reportedly problematic for some senior civil servants.

Research into Failure

Drawing on research into the systemic nature of the failure of complex projects the author and colleagues have devised a Systems Failure Approach (Fortune and Peters, 2005) that helps provide a means to investigate and explain failures. Drawing on earlier work which compared systemic representations of failure situations with an idealised model of a functioning system, they have found several recurring themes (Peters and Fortune, 1992):

1. Deficiencies in the organizational structure, such as a lack of a performance-measurement or a control/decision-making subsystem.
2. No clear statements of purpose supplied in a comprehensible form to the system from the wider system.
3. Deficiencies in the performance of one or more subsystems - for example the performance-measuring subsystem may not have performed its task adequately.
4. Lack of an effective means of communication between the various subsystems.
5. Inadequate design of one or more subsystems.
6. Not enough consideration given to the influence of the environment, and insufficient resources to cope with those environmental disturbances that were foreseen.
7. An imbalance between the resources applied to the basic transformation processes and those allocated to the related monitoring and control processes, perhaps leading at one extreme to quality problems and at the other to cost or output quantity problems.

Although not all of the examples that led to these conclusions were explicitly collaborations or partnerships, they were almost always multi-organizational at the very least involving multiple contractors.

Partnership Failings

An application of the Systems Failures Approach to a failing inter-organizational partnership that brought together public and third sector organizations to combat crime and disorder (Ellis et al., 2007) found three key factors:

The perceived absence by many of a ‘performance management sub-system’ within the partnership, i.e. a mechanism for reviewing performance data and allowing sufficient time to discuss and make sense of them.

Unclear or incomplete accountability links. For example, some partners who were responsible for delivering certain actions had good access to the key stakeholders and were inclined to bypass the formal ‘Implementation Group’ that was responsible for coordination all activities.

The level of delegated authority over resources and decision making powers was unclear. This in turn made it difficult for the ‘Implementation Group’ to clarify its own expectations of sub-groups responsible for delivery.

International and Inter-organizational Culture

In an international context culture carries connotations of national and regional history and even stereotypes, but in inter-organizational collaborations cultural diversity, and potential cultural dissonance, is more multi-faceted incorporating different elements that include organizational and professional as well as national culture. In a recent study (Vangen and Winchester, 2011) conducted empirical research with experienced managers and leaders involved in a range of collaborations across the globe. One aspect of their study sought to identify the ways in which cultural diversity contributes to ‘collaborative inertia’ or ‘collaborative advantage’(Huxham and Vangen, 2005). They concluded that it is not the content of the culture itself, but the problematic interrelation between cultures that may induce collaborative inertia or failure to achieve agreed objectives.

At an organizational, rather than a national, level they identified delays and frustrations related to incompatible cultures in terms of administrative and decision making procedures leading to organizations being ill-fit for the purpose of the cross national collaborations.

In many ways this organizational frustration echoes the words of a participant in the earlier study,

‘We do not ever reach an end position; unclear who has responsibilities and who is taking action… [we] do not know if targets are met, and [we] did not know who to ask about it’. (Ellis et al., 2007)

Conclusions or How to ensure things go wrong

Drawing on these and other experiences and current research it is possible to construct a list of things that will substantially increase the chances of partnerships failing to deliver.

1 Keep it Woolly

Ensure the partnership is rooted in a general sense of the merits of collaboration rather than any specific purpose.

2 Grand Vision

Start with a big idea and don’t bother to test it to see if there is any demand or the partners are enthusiastic

3 Miss out key players

The partners will bring particular expertise and experience; there is no need to check to see if all the key competences are present or that you really need each other.

4 Ignore Culture differences

Different countries, regions, organizations and departments will have different norms and values. There is no need to be sensitive to these or to deploy staff that are sensitive to these factors. Cultural diversity will automatically lead to creative solutions.

5 Trust everything will be alright

Regular feedback on progress to stakeholders and participants and mechanisms to re-direct the activity will only slow things down.

6 Keep it lean

There is no need to provide adequate resources; insufficient resources will lead to innovative solutions.

7 Ignore change

As time goes on the strategic environment whether it is economic political, technical or social will change, but if ideas are woolly enough this won’t matter.

References

ELLIS, E., FORTUNE, J. & PETERS, G. (2007) Partnership Problems: Analysis and Re-Design. *Crime Prevention & Community Safety,* 9**,** 34-51.

FORTUNE, J. & PETERS, G. (2005) *Information Systems: Achieving Success by Avoiding Failure*, Wiley.

HUXHAM, C. & VANGEN, S. (2005) *Managing to collaborate: The theory and practice of collaborative advantage,* London, Routledge.

PETERS, G. (2002) Learning in a knowledge-based economy. *Education India Conference: The challenge for higher education in the 21st Century.* Delhi.

PETERS, G. (2003) Models of collaboration and disaggregation in Open and Distance learning. *17th Asian Association of Open Universities.* Bangkok, Thailand.

PETERS, G. (2004) UK e-Universities another failure of systems. *UK Systems Society International conference.* Oxford.

PETERS, G. & FORTUNE, J. (1992) Systemic Methods for the Analysis of Failure. *Systems Practice,* 5**,** 529-42.

PETERS, G., MANN, K. & ORTON, L. (1995) Models for International Collaboration. IN TAIWAN, N. O. U. (Ed.) *Globalised and Co-operative Learning: Asian Association of Open Universities IXth Conference.* Taipei.

TAYLOR, L. & FRYER, B. (2005) Innovating at Scale: The NHSUniversity. in PATON, R., STOREY, J., TAYLOR, S. & PETERS, G. (Eds.) *Handbook of corporate university development: managing strategic learning initiatives in public and private domains.* London, Ashgate.

TAYLOR, S., BELL, E., GRUGULIS, I., STOREY, J. & TAYLOR, L. (2010) Politics and power in training and learning: The rise and fall of the NHS university. *Management Learning,* 41**,** 87.

VANGEN, S. & WINCHESTER, N. (2011) Generating Collaborative Advantage: Managing the effects of cultural diversity in inter-organizational collaboration *Forthcoming*.