

## **AARE 1998 Conference Paper**

### **Making a Difference through Effective Educational Alliances**

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#### **Abstract**

Today we are part of an increasingly seamless education environment and a more global and interrelated world. Decisions, whether they be explicit or implicit, to approach education, research and professional development in an isolated and fragmented way is to deprive oneself and others of the rich opportunities available and possibly sets oneself and others up for failure. Furthermore, an isolationist approach does not acknowledge the challenge of maximising benefits for all stakeholders within the context of decreasing resource allocations from commonwealth or state governments. This paper presents examples of how people from schools, universities and community groups or businesses are collaborating to address the educational challenges of today in ways which are beneficial to all concerned. The alliances studied are at different stages from planning through to implementation and evaluation.

This paper presents different forms of alliances and their accompanying features and benefits. The different case studies of alliances are analysed as a basis for examining:

- principles underlying the alliance;
- qualities and competencies required of members;
- scope of the alliance; and
- implementation issues.

#### **Introduction**

The higher education sector is giving increasing emphasis to partnerships between different education, community and business groups as a means of enhancing the quality of course offerings for students. Alliances are also an integral means of increasing one's resource base through winning competitive research and development grants either in the government or commercial sectors. There is a continuing need to decide how appropriate and effective alliances can be formed which enhance the mission of each organisation while contributing to a new vision and initiatives. These questions are to be addressed in the context of an increasingly seamless education environment which extends beyond state and national boundaries.

Faculties of Education are drawing upon their relationships with schools and school systems for course development and implementation, educational research and staff recruitment (Perry, Howard, Dockett and Tracey, 1998). There has been increasing emphasis on field based components of teacher education courses and these have been critiqued with respect to the genuineness of the partnership with questions being raised about mutual benefits and joint decision making (Day, 1998).

Gore (1995) emphasises that teacher education-school partnerships or alliances do not guarantee reform and that their effectiveness involves both working across organisational cultures and gaining substantial institutional support "in the form of resources, motives, and commitment". "[P]artnerships between schools and education faculties must be carefully formed and nurtured" (1995, p32). The question remains: what makes an appropriate and effective alliance?

The requirement that universities increase their income generation activities and ensure quality courses and services places more emphasis on the need for commercial nous, and clear accountability and reporting procedures (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1998). Alliances between education institutions and business are a regular part of the American scene where alliances focus upon a range of activities including public accountability, setting educational standards, funding specific educational and research programs and extending school-community and school-business links (The National Alliance of Business Incorporated, 1996). A case study by Hanson (1998) of the Human Systems Engineering (learning) Model showed effective business, university and government collaboration was associated in part with individual organisations being able to pursue their own goals within a common vision and goal. The success of this alliance was also associated with participants being able to work with and support each other and an acknowledgment of the longer time needed to produce quality outcomes.

In the education sector many decision makers are learning new skills in making decisions about when and how best to collaborate with other organisations, whether they be educational, community or business, to further the mission of their own institution. Representatives of schools, universities and other educational organisations involved in alliances are required to move beyond their own organisational and professional boundaries. Leidtka highlights the difficulties and challenges involved in such collaborative ventures.

[E]ffective collaboration is difficult to achieve in a climate of business as usual, as it relies on qualities not present in most organisations. Successful collaboration requires the development of new skills, mindsets and corporate architectures. The quality of many attempts at collaboration today is discouraging, as any time-stressed, meeting-saturated manager will testify. The risks and effort involved in working across lines of business often seem to outweigh the benefits in organizations where turf protection has been the norm and where competition for corporate funding has been the only reminder of interdependence. (1997 p 286)

People involved in educational alliances need to have an understanding of how effective educational alliances are developed and the issues which need to be addressed in their implementation. This paper studies factors and issues involved in four case studies of educational alliances in which the School of Education (NSW) at Australian Catholic University has been involved. An educational alliance was defined as a formal agreement between two or more parties to work together to achieve particular educational outcomes. To address the issue of how can we make a difference through effective educational alliances the following research questions were adopted for this study:

What issues needed to be addressed in the development and implementation of the educational alliances?

What ethical issues needed to be addressed in an educational alliance?

What role did the culture of the organisations play in the development and implementation of the alliances?

What different approaches did participants adopt in the educational alliances?

## Methodology

Four case studies of educational alliances were analysed. These alliances were between the School of Education and:

- NSW Department of Community Services;
- NSW Department of Education and Training;
- Parramatta Catholic Education Office; and
- OPTUS Communications.

These case studies were selected to provide contrasts in focus and purposes, nature of the organisations, and histories of the alliance.

Data were collected through survey and interview. A collaborative grounded theory approach was adopted for the analysis of the data. The researcher's analyses and interpretations of the data were checked with each respondent to ensure that there was agreement on the issues, approaches, and factors that emerged from each of the case studies. Senior members from each of the organisations who were directly involved in managing the alliance were the participants in the study.

## Case studies

Case Study 1: Department Of Community Services - (Manager Training Services)

### **History of the alliance**

Collaborative work with the Department of Community Services (DOCS) began in 1989. This work emerged from the close liaison that already existed between one member of staff at Australian Catholic University (ACU) and DOCS staff. The formal support stemmed from the willingness of senior staff in the two organisations to explore ways in which ACU's Habilitation course could be offered in more flexible modes to residential care assistants

employed by DOCS, particularly in rural areas. They were also committed to joint applications for government funding to respond to this industry training need. The project was funded initially through the New South Wales Government's Education and Training Foundation and then through ACU nominating the course for joint Commonwealth/Industry funded places (40% funded by DOCS). The project was more attractive to potential participants in the program knowing that credit would be granted for the inservice courses they had already completed with DOCS (Chesterton & Johnston, 1996).

The formalising of the alliance occurred with agreements on specific projects to be funded by DOCS such as the program for residential care workers, an evaluation study, and the development of core training materials. A formal agreement about the nature of the alliance between the two organisations is now being prepared. The latter agreement while not legally binding formalises the goodwill and provides a basis for continuing collaboration even when the current key players may change roles. This agreement will articulate the values, purpose, outcomes and review components of the alliance.

The joint approach to community needs which has emerged can be attributed to mutual good will, continuity of staff in the area, tenacity in pursuing a vision for the community, and "a willingness to move into the unknown" and to do some risk management. There was always an underlying respect for the particular roles of DOCS and ACU. Both groups acknowledged the importance of the good will and trust that had been established between the key people involved and the goals and values that they shared. There was more explicit discussion of goals and values as the alliance developed ensuring that people involved shared similar visions both for the bigger picture and for individual projects.

### **Outcomes and issues**

The collaborative work has been extended beyond this first project to include:

- Participation in DOCS and ACU selection panels;
- Membership of DOCS policy committees and ACU course committees;
- Extension of ACU accreditation arrangements;
- Formal endorsement by DOCS of ACU courses, modules and units;
- Formal evaluation of initial joint initiatives;
- Professional development offerings for DOCS;
- Discussion of joint appointments and staff exchanges; and
- Moving from purchasing a service or product from ACU to working together within the larger scene of responding together to the needs of the community.

A key point in the development of the alliance was a movement from the "one way traffic" of purchasing a service or product. While many of the students in the Habilitation courses were DOCS employees there was little sense of joint commitment to advancing the field. The goodwill established by the course co-ordinator and Head of Division contributed to a trusting long-term alliance between DOCS and ACU. Regular planning and review meetings provided forums in which the effectiveness of the project was monitored and a joint vision and commitment was developed.

The overarching ethical consideration in the alliance was the integrity of the representatives in pursuing the goals of the alliance and of their own organisations. With this basis there was open discussion of specific issues such as appropriate resources and support for particular projects and joint ownership of materials.

Members of both organisations found they had a common understanding of each other's contexts as they all worked within bureaucracies. The involvement of staff from both organisations in committees and advisory groups for the other organisation also provided an extensive understanding of their organisational cultures and contexts. The close knowledge of the way each organisation worked enabled members of the alliance to see how its benefits could be extended to different levels of the organisations.

Other issues which needed to be addressed in the development of this DOCS-ACU alliance included:

- Role of DOCS employee competencies within the ACU course framework;
- Not being constrained by the formal brief or mandate and moving to a joint agenda and a shared responsibility to children, families, and people with disabilities;
- Realising that the reality is not that each organisation can do it all and do it better than anybody else to a new way of seeing the complementary roles of the two organisations and other groups in the community; and
- Acknowledging the time involvement of staff if the alliance was to be effective at different levels of the organisations.

Case Study 2: Department Of Education and Training - (Director of Personnel)

### **History of the alliance**

The formal development of this alliance project began with ACU's response in 1997 to the request from the Department of Education and Training for expressions of interest to provide a tailor made teacher training program targeted at current DET staff to become secondary teachers. DET was looking for an innovative and culturally suitable model at reasonable cost. The informal development of the alliance between ACU and DET extended across meetings of Deans and Heads of Schools from the NSW Teacher Education Council (TEC) with senior staff of DET, meetings of TEC executive with DET, and liaison between ACU and DET on areas of mutual interest. This was building upon ACU's established profile and credibility with the Aboriginal community through existing programs and its already extensive collaborative work with DET.

This Aboriginal education project built upon the relationships between School of Education and Yalbalinga staff at ACU and staff in Aboriginal education and the Personnel units in DET. Through this alliance there is a rich understanding of the needs of DET's Aboriginal staff participating in the program. This understanding has been mutually beneficial with staff from both organisations sharing their perceptions of student needs and discussing how best to respond to them within the contexts of available resources and the students' work situations. This shared commitment by the people from each organisation to the needs of

Aboriginal people, to implementing affirmative action strategies and to being proactive in addressing students' needs has been a key element of the alliance.

Some of the other positive features of the alliance have been:

- Ease of communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people involved in the planning and implementation of the alliance;
- Participation by senior officers of DET and ACU in key meetings to establish relationships and plan for the work of the alliance;
- Each organisation allocating appropriate people to work on the development and implementation of the program;
- Regular meetings with appropriate people, attended or guided by senior officers, to establish the "ground rules" and operating constraints of each of the organisations;
- Setting up clear processes for communication and feedback during the development stage and ongoing follow up during the implementation phase;
- DET and ACU staff being prepared to "work on each other's turf";
- Respect by each organisation and all participants of the resource constraints within which the program is to be offered; and
- A willingness to explore new ways of delivering the program in light of course demands and quality, DET and ACU resources, and staff's and students' work contexts.

### **Outcomes and issues**

Initial outcomes of the alliance have been the development of genuine professional relationships between the two organisations and all participants. This relationship together with the honest and open communication has facilitated the development of a teacher education program that addresses the cultural and learning needs of DET Aboriginal staff. The flexibility of both organisations has allowed a more creative approach to be taken to the field based components of the course.

Other outcomes of the alliance have been:

- The development of a new and deeper understanding of the role of each organisation and the constraints under which each operates. This understanding, along with the richness each organisation's staff gains from the other, will be the genesis for new ideas and further alliances, particularly in areas of Aboriginal education and culture.
- Early identification of problems, for example students facing difficulties undertaking some of their assignments, and solutions being implemented on a case by case basis, for example DET providing additional support to students where necessary.

Issues that have been addressed or still need addressing in the alliance have included:

- A shared commitment by the senior officers of each organisation to think laterally and move outside the usual management and other structures to facilitate the implementation of a new and innovative model. This includes the senior officer in each organisation being prepared, if necessary, to stretch the boundaries and take some risks.
- Addressing the different RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) entitlements of each student through a series of "enabling units";
- Reviewing selection procedures to ensure they are not unnecessarily rigid;
- Acknowledging the time commitment that was required for an effective development phase of the project;
- Developing a joint training program for student mentors;
- Ongoing and open communication about student issues and progress;
- Increasing involvement of students in the implementation and review of the program; and
- Working with the Aboriginal students and other people to incorporate research as an integral part of the field based approach to the program.

Key ethical issues in the alliance are honesty and integrity in addressing the demands of program quality, cultural sensitivity, responsiveness to student needs, and a continuing awareness of the key teacher demand areas in DET's employment program. Maintaining a central focus on Aboriginal issues and the cultural demands of the program has facilitated a creative and open approach to cultural issues. The regular meetings of all involved have assisted people in understanding the organisational cultures within which the program is being implemented and resourced.

Case Study 3: Parramatta Catholic Education Office-(Director of Religious Education and Educational Services)

### **History of the alliance**

Parramatta Catholic Education Office (CEO) and ACU established a Liaison Committee in 1993 for the purpose of exploring possibilities of cooperation between the two organisations in a proactive way, acting as a means of maintaining communication on matters of mutual interest and for working on immediate priorities of course delivery. The Committee consisted of three senior staff from each organisation responsible for course delivery and professional services. Immediate priorities for 1993 included academic credit, modes of offering of courses, guidelines on staffing for particular courses, costs for delivery of courses and services and exploring ways in which CEO and ACU could cooperate in research projects. Other matters considered in 1993 included staff secondments and exchanges.

The Committee has continued to meet four times a year and though there has been change in some membership two members from each organisation have been present across the life of the Committee. The Liaison Committee has an oversighting role but no direct management role with respect to particular initiatives. This across-organisational structure has allowed the alliance between the two organisations to develop "more in the nature of an ongoing relationship within which a range of initiatives emerge."

There have also been annual meetings of the Directors of the CEO with Pro-Vice Chancellor, Dean and Heads of School from ACU and annual meetings of staff from the two organisations. These sets of meetings have facilitated communication and involvement of people at different levels of the organisations. There is also significant participation by staff in boards, chapters, committees and working groups of the other organisation. Several staff have been involved as mentors for staff from the other organisation. Professional networks extend across many areas and levels of the two organisations and have been the source of a range of course, professional development and research initiatives.

The development of the alliance between the CEO and ACU has been enhanced by common values and educational vision, a commitment to a strong Catholic presence in the broader educational sector, a willingness to share expertise, and a commitment to being efficient in the use of resources. The alliance was given a direction more than boundaries and has been very effective in helping people "keep pace with rapidly shifting agendas". Key qualities in the people who have made the alliance a reality are good communication skills, commitment to the greater good, flexibility, sensitivity and a sense of humour.

### **Outcomes and issues**

The alliance has shown how the two organisations can accomplish much more together than either organisation could have done alone. There is a sense of pride and achievement in what has been accomplished through the close cooperation, mutual support and sharing of expertise and resources. Some of the specific outcomes or achievements have included:

- Offering of specific postgraduate courses in Religious Education and Educational Leadership;
- Joint professional development programs such as ELIM which is a national residential program for educational leaders;
- Articulation of professional development into formal award courses as in TESOL;
- Establishment of University partner school and an ACU Learning Centre in Western Sydney;
- Joint staff position in social justice and christian values, staff secondment in TAS, and staff exchange of services;
- Joint development of field based learning initiatives; and
- Increasing attention to the research needs of the schools and system.

In the early days of the alliance there were issues related to territories and to the personalities of people involved in some of the initiatives. These sets of issues have been addressed through "formalising" understanding of roles, emphasising the importance of meeting the needs of both organisations, use of informal networking and communication, and "plain perseverance". A continuing issue for some initiatives, particularly in the area of field based learning, was resourcing. Addressing this issue required more flexibility on the part of ACU and an increasing awareness that resourcing some initiatives needed to be across more than one calendar year. These tensions draw attention to a major ethical question which has had, and still needs, to be addressed in particular programs and initiatives: that is whether particular strategies are being adopted because they save money or because of their inherent learning or educational value.

The formal and informal networks have facilitated the understanding of the situations and cultures in each organisation. At times there have been lapses in the understanding of the realities of the other party which have been addressed through broadening the communication base by including more staff and being proactive in anticipating the communication needed to facilitate future initiatives.

Case study 4: OPTUS Communications - (Education Manager/Strategic Account Manager)

### **History of the alliance**

OPTUS Communications, the School of Education at ACU and the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (ERC) formed an alliance towards the end of 1997 for the development of a series of social justice TV programs. The first series of TV programs, "Where to Australia?", focussed on social justice issues for senior school students. During 1998 a second series, "Sources of Hope", was planned focussing on professional development for teachers and people in the community. The alliance between OPTUS and ACU was extended during 1998 to include a two year, joint research project into the effective use of broadband communications for the delivery of flexible learning.

The planning and scheduling of the topics for the two TV programs for 1998 involved senior staff from each organisation. The first TV series, "Where to Australia?", was designed to be a learning and assessment tool for postgraduate students in ACU adult and community education courses at. The second series involved staff from across all areas the School of Education. The collaboration between the three organisations occurred at several levels from senior staff to technicians. Adult and community education courses were chosen as the major group for the first series because:

- The topics addressed areas of public stereotypes, values and misinformation and needed to be researched by the participants;
- Current and authoritative information and social critique were essential; and
- The issues addressed and the approach taken were suitable for an educational cable channel.

The research project was planned jointly by senior staff from OPTUS and ACU thus ensuring the outcomes would benefit both parties. Cooperation in the research at the levels of both senior staff and people involved in particular initiatives has meant that staff from both organisations have gained from accessing current knowledge and best practice in the use of broadband technology for learning.

For both of these initiatives, the TV programs and the research project, the coming together of the technical expertise from OPTUS and the social justice expertise from ERC and the learning and social justice expertise at ACU complemented each other. More explicit criteria

emerged during the first twelve months of both projects for addressing procedural issues and gauging the quality of the outcomes.

Throughout the alliance the ease of contact of staff from both organisations, the interaction of staff across different levels, and the honesty with which issues were raised and discussed were a key strength of the alliance. There was always an explicit respect for each other's area of expertise and a readiness to see how the alliance could respond to changes in resource infrastructure and take advantage of developments in technology and research. Issues that arose in the implementation of the alliance were readily addressed with decisions being made by senior staff in the alliance.

### **Outcomes and issues**

The formation of the alliance fulfilled goals for each of the organisations. It allowed OPTUS to meet its education commitment of:

- Working with the broader education community through the provision of an education pay TV channel; and
- Establishing partnerships with education communities in the trial and development of broadband communications applications.

ACU was able to extend and evaluate its projects for enhancing learning through the use of information technology. ERC pursued its research and advocacy agendas with current justice issues and engaged school and community groups in consideration of these issues through the medium of TV.

Through the broadband research project OPTUS is better informed about how to make more effective use of communications in its corporate training programs and for preparing multimedia solutions for the education market. ACU has evaluated several key initiatives in this area including the preparation of programs for cable TV as both a learning and a teaching tool. ACU is also researching the effectiveness of the "Where to Australia?" programs for Year 11 and 12 classes.

Issues included:

- Having sufficient staff expertise available through ACU to implement the alliance at the different levels of course development, TV production and research;
- Training postgraduate students in the use of a professional broadcasting tool as part of their course assessment;
- Different organisational perspectives on the research project and its outcomes;
- Copyright and use of material from both the TV programs and the research project; and
- The production of the TV programs not always being on schedule.

This last issue was due in some cases to the demands of other projects, clashes in schedules and changes in production procedures at the OPTUS studios, and staff changes at ACU and OPTUS. When a sufficient bank of programs was available more realistic schedules were able to be prepared. The planning for the programs also improved with the development of production guidelines for ACU staff and students and the availability of an ACU staff member for training and mentoring purposes. ACU is moving to a position of being able to stand alone in the production of these materials with the goal being that the product can be used in a number of forms including OPTUS Education Channel, packaged video products and digitised material for broadcasting over the web.

The Research Management Committee insisted from the beginning that the different organisational perspectives were to be brought together in the one research project. ACU staff approached the research from both an academic and course development-implementation perspective while OPTUS approached it from a technical training perspective. The differences in these approaches were also addressed explicitly in the section of the contractual agreement related to the publication of material from the project.

Explicit attention has needed to be given at all times to issues of copyright and use of material from the TV programs and research project. The honesty, integrity and respect amongst all participants in the alliance have facilitated the development of clear guidelines for the resolution of these issues. Other ethical issues have been related to the occasional involvement of some people, when they have not expressed the same level of respect for others involved in a project or task. This issue has been discussed openly and resolved.

## Discussion

The analysis of the four case studies, which were quite different in purpose, approach, organisational contexts history, and extent and levels of people involved, showed that there are a number of factors that contributed to their effectiveness. The analysis of factors contributing to the effectiveness of each of these alliances needed to examine both the informal and unexpected benefits, the formal stated outcomes, as well as other organisational issues such as the resource implications. The informal benefits include the vision and structures that have been developed, the inter-organisational structures, the cultural and ethical understandings and unplanned initiatives.

In each alliance there was a commitment to address social and community issues as well as the explicit formal outcomes of individual projects. DOCS and ACU were committed to working together for the good of the community, DET and ACU to addressing equity issues for Aboriginal teachers and students in education generally, Parramatta CEO and ACU to addressing issues related to Catholic presence in education and to the larger justice agenda and OPTUS provided ACU and ERC opportunities to educate the wider community on justice issues. Each alliance had extended or enriched its original vision and was open to new possibilities which express the goals of the alliance and the vision of each organisation.

Organisationally each alliance had extended its area of responsibility beyond specific outcomes to developing a general framework within which the partners can make decisions about further initiatives. For DOCS and the CEO there was wider scope for these initiatives than there was for DET and OPTUS where the initiatives were more explicitly related to but not constrained by the formal outcomes for the alliance. All of the organisations involved were prepared to take risks to enrich the benefits of the alliances. Each organisation had moved beyond buying a product or expertise for itself to the hard area of working mutually to achieve benefits both within and across organisations.

This mutuality was possible because the alliance became a new micro-organisation in which people were continually working in each other's area or "turf". This involvement in each other's turf had become a specific focus for the DOCS and CEO alliances with formal discussions about staff exchanges and secondments. These possibilities had begun to be discussed informally with both DET and OPTUS. This requires risk taking on the part of individual staff as well as the organisations themselves.

The mutuality was also possible because participants in the alliance had moved through a questioning level of seeking greater knowledge and awareness of the different people and their organisations to a deeper level of trust and support. This trust was developed through the personal and professional integrity of all participants and the open discussion of all issues that emerged.

While the alliances had a legitimate authority of their own there were differences in the scope and structure in exercising this authority. The DET and OPTUS alliances were defined by the specific purpose of the alliance while with DOCS and CEO there was greater scope for the authority that was then delegated to particular people for the pursuit of individual projects or tasks. The senior participants in all of the alliances were responsible for prompt, flexible decision making with clear accountability and communication back to their own organisation's decision making processes and protocols. They were key drivers for ensuring that their organisation's commitments were met.

A significant issue in each alliance was resources. At no time was the alliance constrained by the budget for a specific outcome. They all were involved in identifying how financial and staff resources could be allocated to particular initiatives. One of the hidden resource costs was the time staff devoted, both within and outside scheduled meetings, to ensuring that there was easy communication on any issue. Each organisation needed to examine the extent to which they had adequately resourced the time costs of the alliance and whether they assumed too much on the part of their staff. Making it part of the work plan for staff legitimised their involvement in the alliance or in one of its specific projects.

The growth of other initiatives was related in part to extending the number of staff involved in across organisational networks, meetings and projects. This increased the ownership by

people working in different areas or levels of the individual organisations of the alliance and its particular projects. This practice also assists participants in learning about and valuing the other organisation's mission, culture and core business.

The effectiveness of these alliances at the level of both formal and informal outcomes cannot be separated from the way the participants discussed ethical and cultural issues. A key ethical issue was delivering quality outcomes within a flexible approach to the alliance. Other ethical issues included:

- Maintaining personal and professional integrity;
- Addressing resource issues;
- Ownership of materials and ideas;
- Ensuring that the alliance and each organisation derived clear benefits;
- A readiness to change approach or stop an initiative when needed; and
- Pursuing specific projects within people's understanding of the greater social and common good.

## Conclusion

While alliances are not a universal panacea they do provide a new paradigm for organisations to work and grow together. The four case studies have demonstrated that alliances explicitly bridge the seamless educational environment and offer better than expected outcomes if managed correctly. For an alliance to be effective there needs to be a sharing of visions and values, good management and accountability procedures, appropriately skilled personnel, adequate resources and time, a commitment to addressing ethical issues, and a readiness to continually learn more about the other organisation's mission and culture. Alliances to be effective cannot be constrained by narrow performance and accountability procedures and rigid bureaucratic processes as time is at a premium and flexible decision making is crucial.

Some of the questions which need further study include:

- How do you choose the right people for an alliance?
- How do you ensure participants are skilled for the relationships as well as for their roles in the alliance?
- What inter-organisational structures enhance the effectiveness of alliances?
- When do you close down an alliance or project and how do you do that in such a way that it affirms the value of the alliance and relationships while addressing the need for new vision and structures?
- How do you choose the right project for the alliance?
- How does the time invested in collegial relationships benefit the organisations as a whole as well as the expected formal outcomes?

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