

## **Getting Started: Initiating Partnerships for Success or Failure**

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## **Abstract**

*The initiation phases of many school/university partnership projects are often hurried affairs because time-lines for funding have to be met. As a result participants often have little time to engage in processes of consultation and equitable selection, nor to negotiate processes for democratic management and compatible priorities, goals, expectations and views of teaching, learning, research and partnership. This paper will draw on research that shows that these aspects have a significant impact on the success of partnerships and that the initiation phases of partnership projects need to be more carefully structured to enable the time and opportunities for the foundations to be carefully laid.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the funding available for projects involving partnerships between schools and universities aimed at educational reform and professional development of teachers and teacher educators. The impetus for funding such partnerships derives, in the main, from two sources. The first is the almost universal agreement that new models of professional development are needed if teachers and tertiary teacher educators are to be able to meet the challenges they are currently facing (see for example, Collison & Ono, 2001; Guskey, 1995; Hargreaves, 2000). The second is the suggestion by many that a feature of new models of professional development should be some form of partnership between schools and tertiary teacher education departments so that reform and development in the two sectors are reciprocal (see for example, Center for Educational Renewal, 1994; Sealey, Robson & Hutchins; Ramsey, 2000).

These trends have given rise to a number of funded research and development partnerships in Australia and South Australia, some of which I have been involved in as a university colleague. These comprise the Innovative Links Between Schools and universities for Teacher Professional Development Project (1994-1996), the National Middle Schooling Authentic Assessment Research Circle (1997), the School-based Research and Reform Project (1998-1999) and the Learning to Learn Project (2000-2002). A common element in all of these projects has been that they have been initiated quickly in response to short time-lines for accessing funding at the national or state levels. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) have drawn attention to the importance of the initiation phase in change-based projects describing it as 'the process which leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change' (p. 47). In this paper I examine themes that emerged from research conducted into the initiation phase of the Innovative Links Project in order to identify conditions that supported or hindered participants in this important phase.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Innovative Links Project was an action research based professional development project, initiated in Australia in 1994 as a National Professional Development Program. The project was funded on a year-by-year basis until early 1997. Schools involved in the project worked with academic associates, using collaborative action research to implement programs of school reform aimed at improving teaching competencies and learning outcomes for all students. Each university hosted a Roundtable made up of the academic associates, teachers from the affiliated schools and other stakeholders.

Over the three-year life of the project in South Australia, six schools (two primary schools for students aged 5 - 13 years and four secondary schools for students aged 13 - 17 years) and six teacher educators were involved in the Roundtable. Two of the schools were in country

locations. The teacher educators were drawn from the University's two schools of education and when the project began they were spread across three metropolitan campuses. Each teacher educator had a history of working closely with schools through the practicum, consultancy and/or collaborative research projects and each worked closely with one of the participating schools.

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger study that was conducted as part of doctoral research over the final eighteen months of the project. The research was largely qualitative in nature and used an interpretative methodology which attempted to make sense of the subjective meanings of participants (Neumann, 1997). However, it contained a quantitative element in the form of a survey of all participants (see below). Data for the parts of the study reported in this paper were collected through:

1. a survey sent to all staff in the six participating schools towards the end of the project, with follow up interviews with six purpose selected informants in each school. The questionnaire required respondents to indicate on a four point Likert type scale ('not at all', 'a little', 'to some extent', 'to a great extent') their agreement with statements about various aspects of the project. It also contained space for written comments. Of the 217 questionnaires distributed to teachers, 108 were returned (49%).
2. three semi-structured interviews conducted at regular intervals throughout the final twelve months of the project with each of the university participants. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

Statistical data from the questionnaire were tabulated using SPSS to provide frequencies of particular responses. Qualitative data were coded and categorised using QSR NUD\*IST 3 (Richards & Richards, 1994) in order to identify emerging patterns and themes. Data analysis revealed a number of key themes related to participants' perceptions of the assumptions about conditions under-pinning the expectations of the project and the conditions they actually experienced.

The larger study discerned findings about three phases of the project: the initiation phase, the implementation phase and the outcomes phase. In this paper only the findings about the initiation phase are presented.

## **THEMES IDENTIFIED IN THE INITIATION PHASE OF THE PROJECT**

The key themes that emerged from the data analysis of participants' perceptions of their experiences in initiating the project were:

- the opportunities for participation in the project;
- participants' motivation in becoming involved; and
- participants' opportunities to interpret project expectations at the local level.

These themes are explored in the rest of the paper by identifying for each one the conditions that were influential in supporting or hindering participants in the initiation phase of the project.

### **Participants' Opportunities for Participation**

The data collected from teachers and academics in the project indicated that the opportunities for active participation in the project were limited to select groups of teachers and academics. The research revealed that the main conditions limiting or supporting involvement in the project were:

- the selection processes;
- the consultation processes;
- the time available for processing and planning; and
- participants' propensity for risk taking.

### **Selection Processes**

Of the 108 teachers who responded to the questionnaire, only 22.2% reported having high involvement in the project. Of the remainder, 30.6% had some involvement, 13.9% had a little involvement, 6.7% had no involvement because they were new to the school in 1997 and 16.7% had no involvement for other reasons. Those teachers who indicated they had been involved in the Innovative Links Project a little, to some extent or to a great extent were asked about their reasons for involvement and the collation of their responses is shown in Table 1. They then went on to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

**Table 1**

### **Reasons for Involvement in the Project**

**(n=71, missing = 1)**

**not a some great**

**at all little extent extent**

o. I wanted to improve aspects of the wider school 2.8 9.9 38.0 49.3 **1**

environment for teaching and learning.

d. I was keen to work with like-minded colleagues. 9.7 13.9 27.8 48.6 **2**

n. I wanted to improve aspects of my practice. 5.6 9.9 40.8 43.7 **3**

a. I was interested in the identified focus for work 5.6 12.5 41.7 40.3 **4**

reform.

c. I was invited to join in the work reform. 16.7 11.1 36.1 36.1 **5**

l. I was consulted about the proposed focus for project 16.9 22.5 29.6 31.0 **6**

work.

f. I was encouraged by the enthusiasm of school 6.9 20.8 43.1 29.2 **7**

leaders.

b. The focus for work reform was linked to other 21.1 14.1 36.6 28.2 **8**

professional development experiences

(e.g. study, involvement in other projects).

- m. I was a member of a focus group identified to 38.9 11.1 23.6 26.4 **9**  
engage in work reform.
- p. I was consulted about the decision for the school to 34.7 18.1 20.8 26.4 **9**  
participate in the project.
- i. I thought there would be benefits from the 18.1 15.3 41.7 25.0 **11**  
school/university partnerships.
- j. I was interested in working with university 26.4 26.4 26.4 20.8 **12**  
colleagues.
- k. I was given detailed information about what the 18.1 25.0 36.1 20.8 **12**  
project involved and so could make an informed  
decision.
- h. I was encouraged by the enthusiasm of colleagues. 12.5 25.0 43.1 19.4 **14**
- e. I felt under pressure from school leaders to 53.5 25.4 16.9 4.2 **15**  
participate.
- g. I felt under pressure from colleagues to participate. 71.8 14.1 12.7 1.4 **16**

In some schools, the nature of the focus of reform limited involvement to those who were members of a particular group. For instance, one teacher explained how the school's focus on developing middle school structures and practices affected who was involved:

I mean the specifics [ of the focus for reform] were probably something that only four or five [ teachers] ... [ who] were involved with the [ Years] sevens, eights and nines ...They made those decisions because they were directly involved.

In Table 2, it can be seen that some respondents confirmed that their non-involvement was due to participation being limited to a specific focus group (47.4% - to a great extent) and/or to not being invited to participate (42.1% - to a great extent).

**Table 2**

**Reasons for Non-involvement in the Project**

**(n = 18)**

**not a some great**

**at all little extent extent**

b. Participation was limited to a specific focus 10.5 5.3 36.8 47.4 **1**  
 group of which I was not a member.

d. I was not invited to participate in the reform 31.6 15.8 10.5 42.1 **2**  
 work which was the focus for the project.

f. I had too many other professional 31.6 5.3 21.1 42.1 **2**  
 commitments to become involved in the  
 Innovative Links work reform.

c. I was not consulted about the proposed 31.6 15.8 15.8 36.8 **4**  
 focus for the project work reform.

a. I joined the staff of the school after the project 52.6 10.5 15.8 21.1 **5**  
 had commenced.

l. I was not consulted about the decision for the 57.9 5.3 15.8 21.1 **5**  
 school to participate in the project.

e. I was not interested in the identified focus 47.4 10.5 26.3 15.8 **7**  
 area for work reform.

h. I was reluctant to spend time out of the classroom. 52.6 10.5 21.1 15.8 **7**

k. I was given insufficient information about what 57.9 15.8 10.5 15.8 **7**  
 the project involved and so couldn't make an  
 informed decision.

i. I had doubts about the benefits of 78.9 15.8 5.3 0 **10**  
 school/university partnerships.

j. I felt anxious about working with university 89.5 5.3 5.3 0 11

colleagues.

g. I was skeptical about the motives of 89.5 10.5 0 0 12

those who became involved in the Innovative Links work reform.

From a comment made by this teacher, it appears that, at least in this school, all staff had the opportunity to volunteer for involvement:

People were asked, as we do with all working parties here, ... and everybody that [ sic] wanted to be involved in that working party and take it to that next level were involved from what I can gather.

In Table 2 it can be seen that another factor limiting teachers' decision to self select for participation was the extent to which they were already involved in other activities at the time. Almost half of the non-participants reported that at the time of selection they had too many other professional commitments to become involved (42.1% - to a great extent). It can also be seen that for more than a third of respondents arrival in the school after the commencement of the project was a reason for their non-involvement in the project (21.1% - to a great extent; 15.8% - to some extent). In interview one teacher revealed her reasoning as:

When I came to [ the school] I was totally overwhelmed ... I think it was a world that I hadn't experienced and I, being my timid self ... didn't want to put myself forward at all in a situation where I didn't feel comfortable or knowledgeable.

Another teacher reported that she was not given the chance to become involved because participants had already been selected prior to her arrival. However, for this teacher being new to the school provided the incentive to join the project:

I guess it was a good opportunity, too, to get to know other staff members because at that stage I hadn't known too many of them because it was still early in the transfer.

For the six academics who made up the team from the University of South Australia the opportunity to participate also began with an approach 'from the top'. One recalled being contacted by the, then, Dean of Education, who had been a member of the Consortium that developed the project:

I got a phone call from [ the Dean] at 11 o'clock at night ... and he said that he'd been involved at the national level of the new project which he wanted our university to be part of. He was due to go [ to a meeting about it] the next morning, but couldn't make it so he invited me to represent the University ... I've got no idea why he chose me, he didn't say, but I have heard since that he tried other people [ laughing] before getting me at 11 o'clock to see whether I'd go.

Despite such short notice, the academic attended the meeting which took place at nine o'clock the following morning in Sydney. He was then asked by the Dean to organise a team of teacher educators from the University to initiate and facilitate the University of South Australia Roundtable. He issued the invitation to the four people (including me) with whom he had worked on developing a Masters level course in Teacher Development. Once

associate schools were selected it was discovered that one of them had a long-standing relationship with another academic from the university. The academic team invited him to become the academic associate for that school.

It can be seen that although the Innovative Links Project was intended to provide the opportunity for all staff in schools to become involved, the research found that school and university leaders targeted specific people or focus groups for involvement in the project. In doing so they selected those whom they thought were interested in the focus of reform and/or were part of a focus group and/or were likely to have an influence on colleagues. The idea of 'starting small, and with people who are basically on side' is one that is advocated by Hattam, McInerney, Lawson & Smyth (1999) as essential to significant school reform. They suggested that 'the knowledge developed by a school-based investigation might be represented to a larger section of the school to promote debate and action more widely in the school' (p. 27). There is no doubt that in involving a small group of interested staff members, leaders were hoping that they would begin a 'ripple effect' that would have organisation wide implications. However, Elmore (1995) warned of a significant danger in this approach

This strategy immediately isolates those teachers who are most likely to change from those who are least likely to embrace reform. This dynamic creates a social barrier between the two, virtually guaranteeing that the former will not grow in number and the latter will continue to believe that exemplary teaching requires extraordinary resources in an exceptional environment. (p. 17, cited in Fullan, 1997, p. 219)

Leaders were faced with a significant dilemma. They no doubt knew that it would be virtually impossible to persuade all staff to give unanimous support for the proposed innovation, and the difficulty of achieving such support is acknowledged in the literature (Fullan, 1997). However, by specifically targeting those teachers and academics whom they thought were most likely to achieve successful change, they risked alienating from the beginning those who saw project involvement as the province of the favoured few.

A final factor that impacted on the selection process in some schools was the high rate of staff turnover. It appears that teachers who were new to the school in each of the three years of the projects' life were poorly informed about the project and often did not have the option to become involved.

### ***Consultation Processes***

The data in Tables 1 and 2 show that the consultation process in some schools also contributed to relatively low levels of participation by teachers. Table 1 shows that less than a third of participants reported that they had been consulted about the decision for the school to join the project (26.4% - to a great extent) or the proposed focus for project work (31% - to a great extent), while 34.7% indicated they had not been consulted at all about the decision to join the project. Even less (20.8% - to a great extent) reported that they had been given detailed information about what the project involved so they could make an informed decision about joining. The reasons for non-involvement shown in Table 2 confirm that lack of consultation about the proposed focus for the project was a factor for over half the respondents who had no involvement in the project (36.8% - to a great extent; 15.8% - to some extent).

Teachers' comments in interviews also revealed that the consultation process was not fully democratic in some schools:



There were teachers who did feel that they weren't involved in the planning of the program and that was one of the issues raised.

As I worked on the project I came to understand that, unlike my assumption that it had been negotiated with staff at the end of 1994, it had actually been negotiated with some staff but imposed on many and that people were in teams and that the purpose of that as a strategy was very, very unclear in the school.

One of the academics also expressed the view that in some of the schools the decision to join the project was made by the principals:

It's usually money-driven. The bloody principals are out there being entrepreneurial, getting money for their schools, when the troops on the ground have got very little idea about what the project entails.

Like the teachers, the academics were not consulted in the project development phase and had to make a decision about whether to participate based on the limited information provided by the academic who attended the meeting with the project developers. However, shortly after joining they were provided with some written material outlining the project proposal and expectations.

Overall, the findings revealed that in most schools there were staff who felt that they did not receive enough information about the project to be able to make an informed decision, or who were not convinced that the school's chosen focus for reform was appropriate. Day (1999) recommended that

those leading change in learning communities ... must ensure that the 'players': a) are convinced of the merits; b) feel a sense of ownership through participation in processes of decision-making and c) have the intellectual, practical and affective support necessary to change. (p. 155)

Unfortunately, these conditions were not evident in most schools. The schools in the project varied in the extent to which structures were in place which enabled participatory decision making to occur. It appears that in several there were no adequate structures in place to enable those leading the change process to consult with all staff about the merits of the project or to engage them in the decision making to the point where they felt some ownership of the project.

### ***Time for Processing and Planning***

The problems in selecting and consulting participants were compounded by the limited amount of time they had to make decisions about whether to commit to the project at an organisational and personal level. The academics were under pressure from the National Executive to have the project up and running within a matter of weeks and schools were given only two weeks to apply to become involved. In the rush to initiate this project they did not have the time to work out shared goals for their own involvement, a common understanding of the role of critical friend or processes for the democratic operation of the Roundtable.

Nor did participants in schools have the luxury of an extended period of time in which to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of involvement in the project, identify and promote a focus for reform and negotiate realistic ways of interpreting and implementing the

project expectations. Instead of taking time for careful planning, academics and teachers tended to work out these aspects 'on the run' which had some adverse consequences in terms of confusion, lack of coherence and lack of commitment and involvement by a sizable proportion of teachers. The following comments are indicative of the negative effects of the short time line for initiation:

I remember signing some submission for funding for Innovative Links. ... I was ... the union rep [ sic] at the time. I remember being given this document [ and told] , 'Please sign this. We have to get it in, fax it, within ten minutes.' ... I didn't have a chance to read it and I signed it without having read it.

Not always clear for staff members not working on focus group - time-lines made it difficult to consult at all levels.

A growing number of theorists have drawn attention to the importance of allocating adequate time in the initiation phase of reform projects for:

- sharing information, discussing issues and problems, developing a common conceptual framework, teasing out differences and similarities and defining terms (Soliman, 2001);
- committing oneself to the effort of innovation (Hargreaves, 1994);
- planning (Dawson, 1994);
- and preparation (Adelman & Panton Walking-Eagle, 1997):

Adelman & Panton Walking-Eagle (1997) summarised the importance of time in these early stages in this way:

Many teachers do not initially have confidence in or commitment to the validity of these reforms. They need time to understand the purposes of these innovations, to read the research literature on the student outcomes that might be expected if the innovations are implemented, to discuss the proposed new strategies with other teachers, to observe the strategies in action if possible, and to practice using the innovations themselves in a risk free environment. (p. 95)

### ***Propensity for Risk-taking***

The short time-line for the initiation of the project, together with limited information and lack of consultation, meant that those teachers and academics that agreed to participate did so in the face of a considerable amount of uncertainty. Many had no clear idea of what was expected of them and this lead to feelings of anxiety for some, as can be seen in these comments by a teacher and an academic:

I had really no idea. I knew it was basically trying to help students perform better and help teachers perform better but aside from that I didn't really know ... I felt a little bit lost, like I was just wandering through the woods so to speak. But probably about a third of the way through it started to come clear and a little bit more focused and everything.

It wasn't really clear what's expected when, by whom and for what reason. So I felt a little bit as if I was stepping into the dark ...that I didn't really know too my own

satisfaction what exactly the project was going to be about. ... I would have liked more clarity in the project design.

They were also expected to take on new roles about which they felt less than confident. For instance, one academic said about the role of critical friend:

That would include things like role expectations of what exactly we were there for. How often would we be seen to be visiting? What would be the purpose of those visits? And I know it sounds very nice to say, 'Oh well, we'll let each person negotiate that with their schools.' That's fine but sometimes the outcomes are not so equitable.

In addition, the teachers were expected to open up their practice for scrutiny through the action research and critical reflection process. In short, for most participants choosing to become involved was something of a risk.

Smyth, McInerney, Hattam & Lawson (1999) found that risk taking was prevalent in the schools they judged to be critical learning communities. There is no doubt that those participants who became involved in the Innovative Links Project were prepared to take risks. It has been suggested that there are connections between educators' willingness to take risks and the extent to which they feel able to cope with the pressures of daily work (Day, 1999) and have the support of colleagues (Irwin, 1996; Potter, 1999). This may mean that those who became involved were those who felt they were managing their professional commitments, whereas those who were struggling because they were new to the school, or because they had an unreasonable workload, or had any other stressful situation in their personal or professional lives, felt unable to commit to anything that would place them under further stress. It may also mean that the fact that the project was a collaborative endeavour enabled some to feel that they could live with any risk posed by participation. According to Blase and Anderson (1995), the extent to which teachers feel supported by the principal is another factor that encourages risk taking. As leaders specifically invited some teachers and academics to become involved, it is likely that participants interpreted being targetted as a measure of support.

Research has also found that feelings of self-efficacy, defined by Pajeres (1997, p. 3) as 'self-perceptions of capability' enhance the potential for risk taking because 'people with a strong sense of personal competence in a domain approach difficult tasks in that domain as challenges to be mastered rather than as dangers to be avoided' (p. 7). Some participants had previous experience in working in collaborative research projects, or in action research, which may have contributed to stronger feelings of self-efficacy making them more willing to risk participation. Whatever their reasons, it was clear that those who became involved had a sufficient level of trust in people and processes (Hargreaves, 1994) to make the level of risk appear acceptable.

### **Participants' Motivation In Becoming Involved**

The research revealed that in deciding to become involved in the project participants were motivated by:

- personal needs; and
- commitment to organisational and/or partnership goals.

## **Personal Needs**

Although some participants were seconded to the project, it is clear that many were motivated by a strong personal commitment to educational improvement. In Table 1 it can be seen that teachers were motivated by a commitment to improving aspects of classroom practice (43.7% - to a great extent). For 40.3% of respondents there was also some degree of personal interest related to the identified focus for work reform and, for 28.2% of respondents, their interest in the identified focus for work reform was linked to other professional development experiences such as study or involvement in other projects.

The academics, too, were motivated by a commitment to educational improvement, but in areas that were somewhat different to those that interested the teachers. Not surprisingly, considering the team had largely been selected on the basis of their work in the area of 'Teacher Development', they were interested in developing their knowledge of this topic:

It was consistent with a lot of work I was doing in teacher development. It gave me an opportunity to know more about the national scene [ recent initiatives for teacher professional development supported by the Federal Government] which was just starting to roll on ... so it was congruent with my professional interests. It was a chance to learn a bit about an area I didn't know.

I also found the Links Project fitted my interest in ongoing professional development of teachers.

Some of the academics reported that they saw the action research component of the project as a chance to contribute to educational change and apply theory to practice.

It's obviously the case, too, that if you want to test your ideas about the ways things might proceed in either secondary or primary education, it's good to try to implement them with like-minded colleagues.

If you really want to effect change you've really got to have people who are part of that change ... being intimately involved in it.

The data did not suggest that academics were looking to reform specific practices in their own work, but that, like academics world wide, they were aware of the increasing pressure for teacher educators to be able to show that they are up to date with current practice in schools (Cusworth & Whiting, 1993). In interview they indicated that they saw the project as a means of further developing their understandings of aspects such as school improvement, secondary education, school-based curriculum development, social justice, action research, school organisation and management, school culture and different levels of schooling.

Not surprisingly, considering the isolated nature of many teachers' working lives (Hargreaves, 1992), the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues provided by the project was a source of motivation for many. The opportunity to work with colleagues in their school was an incentive for nearly half the teachers (46.8% - to a great extent), while the potential

benefits arising from the school/university partnership was a factor for the majority (25% - to a great extent; 41.7% - to some extent). Nearly half were interested in working with university colleagues (20.8% - to a great extent; 26.4% - to some extent).

It is also interesting to note that, even though school/university partnerships were a new experience for most, it can be seen in Table 2 that non-involvement for the majority of respondents was not due to anxiety about the prospect of working with university colleagues (78.9% - not at all) or doubts about the benefits of school university partnership (89.5% - not at all). These findings are contrary to the often-stated position in the literature that teachers are reluctant to work with academics because of previous negative experiences (Ladwig, 1991; Smedley, 2001; Zeichner, 1994) or because they feel that academics promote the theoretical over the practical (Day, 1999; Feldman, 1993; Turner Field, Hoffman & Cohen, 1999). Nor were most respondents skeptical about the motives of those who did become involved in the Innovative Links work reform (89.5% - not at all).

The academics, too, were attracted to the opportunity to work closely with known and respected colleagues in the academic team. One said, 'While we were trying to establish the new Masters course I saw it as an opportunity to work together, so I think that was the main reason.' They also valued the opportunity to develop stronger links between schools and the university. In one academic's view this was particularly important in the light of recent history:

I still have some concerns about the severing over many years of the link between teachers colleges, as they used to be, and schools and I have a fear that increasingly as we're a university, we are moving away from our professional base. So I thought that the Links Project offered an opportunity to actually make that link and strengthen it and pull us closer together, which I think is essential.

Overall, it can be seen that the academics and teachers who became involved in the project did so, in the main, because they had personal/professional needs that happened to coincide with aspects of the project. They confirmed a key constructivist learning principle that 'pre-existing beliefs and personal needs' are factors in learners' willingness to engage in learning (Fung, 2000, p. 153).

### ***Commitment to Organisational and/or Partnership Goals***

Hargreaves (1994) warned that approaching professional development purely as individual development is problematic:

Putting an emphasis on the teacher as a person assists teachers in processes of self-understanding which are grounded in their life and work. ... But when moral frameworks are missing, or senses of context are weak, approaching teacher development predominantly or exclusively as a process of self-development has serious limitations. (p.74)

He maintained that within organisations there needs to be a shared commitment to improving the lives of students if significant change is to occur. It can be seen in Table 1 that the strongest source of motivation for teachers was an interest in improving aspects of the wider school environment for teaching and learning (49.3% - to a great extent). One teacher explained how her own interest in collaborative learning intersected with the school's focus on peer support for students:

I was really interested in how do I work collaboratively with children, and then to work with a colleague collaboratively and then I was on the committee and collaboration seemed to be the way to go there and getting teachers to work together and supporting each other. It just seemed to me that it was all very relevant to what I was doing at the time.

Guskey (1995) maintained that professional development that addresses both individual and organisational needs has the greatest chance of achieving positive educational change.

The shared commitment to reform was particularly strong in the schools that selected a focus for reform that was part of a broader reform agenda incorporated in the school's overall vision for long-term development. The impact of a united vision in one school can be seen in this teacher's comment:

When we saw one of the other categories was critically reflective teaching practice we saw it as a real opportunity to build on our Middle Years work and get into the idea of professional review much more solidly, which is quite a key part of our implementation plan. And the idea of being critically conscious and the idea of education for justice is a key part of our ... Vision Statement as well.

This finding was common across the project in all states (Southern Cross Roundtable Portrayal Evaluation Team, 1996). Studies of successful school change have identified a unified vision as one of the most critical conditions (Day, 2000; Peters, Dobbins & Johnson, 1996). However, the research showed that there were some teachers in each school who reported they were not interested in the identified focus for reform. Presumably, they had not been captivated by the vision that fired the enthusiasm of those who were leading the reform process.

Most of the academics were not involved in the vision development process in schools, or in identifying the schools' foci of reform within existing organisational goals, so they did not share the teachers' commitment to specific school goals. However, they were committed to the broader goal of promoting educational reform through acting as a critical friend to teachers and supporting them to evaluate and improve their practice. They do not appear to have been motivated by a desire for educational reform within their own teacher education department at the university, but some joined the project because they thought it was in line with the university wide goal of improving academic status through consultancy and publication. Unfortunately, they did not take the time to identify shared goals for their own learning as an academic team, or for initiating improvement in their practice. They were too busy responding to the immediate pressure to establish the project and support the schools to start their reform agendas. This meant that they had neither goals nor an agenda for their own learning as a team. Feldman (1993) cited this as a common problem in school/university collaboration.

### **Opportunities To Interpret The National Expectations At The Local Level**

The analysis of the data showed that there was considerable variation in the opportunities for, and nature of, local interpretations of the expectations. These variations were related to:

- the extent to which processes used to negotiate expectations were democratic.

## ***Negotiation Processes***

In much of the advice written about collaborative projects emphasis is placed on shared ownership of the project agenda through a democratic process of negotiated expectations (Maxwell, 2001; Potter, 1999). According to Potter (1999):

Effective collaboration requires shared management as opposed to the hierarchical organisation alluded to already. This means shared management from the beginning of the project and unless this happens, the size and pace of tasks cannot be agreed upon and individuals are constantly renegotiating their own responsibilities, often feeling that one section of the research community has greater control over the collaboration. (p. 20)

This project was framed by an extensive set of expectations of teachers and academics that were devised by the National Teaching and Learning Consortium and circulated to participants in the initial proposal. Academic and teacher participants were not involved in negotiating these expectations but it was assumed that they would have the opportunity to interpret them at the local level. In particular it was assumed that participants would be involved in negotiating what would be the school's focus for educational reform (within the specified national priorities), who would be involved, the ways processes would be incorporated and the role to be played by their academic associate. It was the freedom to negotiate these aspects that was later heralded as an unprecedented 'privileging' of school's agendas:

Affiliated academic associates are committed to working with schools on a school's research and reform agenda ... [and] give precedence to the research questions generated within the school setting, rather than within the academic environment. (Grundy, 1996, p. 12)

The national expectations of the project were not available when the academics agreed to become academic associates for the University of South Australia Roundtable. Once initial information about the project arrived the academic team used the stated expectations for academic associates to frame some suggestions for schools about what the role might entail.

We want to stress that ownership of the research will rest firmly with your school, and any participation of the academic associate(s) will be negotiated with you, but academics may support in a variety of ways such as involvement in or support of the research process, acting as a 'critical friend' for discussion of research, and helping to access current research and theory and other schools or teachers working in a similar area of concern. (Letter to schools from Convener of Roundtable, 16/6/94)

However, in the rush to select schools, distribute funding and organise the first Roundtable meeting, the academic team did not enter into any discussion resulting in shared agreement of how the national expectations for 'academic associates' should be interpreted. Instead, each academic was left to work this out in conjunction with the needs of the school to which he/she had been allocated. This lack of attention to developing a shared understanding of the role meant that for some academics the predominant feeling at the time was one of confusion about what was expected.

The academics also took responsibility for interpreting the national expectations for the University of South Australia Roundtable. In doing so, they changed them very little and in

fact derived the criteria for the selection of associate schools directly from the national expectations. Through this process, the academic team set the agenda for the partnership from the very beginning. Their control of the partnership agenda continued throughout the first year of the project as they took responsibility for planning, organising and facilitating the Roundtable meetings. These were used as opportunities to include professional development components that were intended to elaborate particular national expectations and help participants develop the related knowledge and skills. One or more of the academic team took responsibility for the input and activities for each of these sessions, except for some input by a teacher in the session on Social Justice. This meant that the interpretations of expectations in regard to social justice, action research, critical reflection and reflective writing presented to those who attended Roundtable meetings were framed by each academic's personal interpretations, and the literature that had influenced these interpretations. For instance, in introducing participants to critical reflection, the academics' interpretation was influenced by Smyth's (1989) definition that it 'incorporates reflection that focuses on the way schooling contributes (or does not as the case may be) to the creation of a less oppressive, more just, humane and dignified society' (p. 4).

The pressure for school participants to write about their research also came mostly from the academic members of the Roundtable. At the second Roundtable meeting academic associates introduced participants to the use of reflective journals as a tool for promoting critical reflection. School representatives also were asked to bring written reports of their progress to most Roundtable meetings, as can be seen in the request below:

Could school representatives please come prepared to give a 5 - 10 minute progress report, using the proforma provided? It would be appreciated if they could bring 20 copies for distribution at the meeting. (Excerpt from letter by Roundtable Convener to schools, 10/5/96)

Towards the end of the first year of funding, the academics and the Roundtable representative from the Education Department presented a proposal at a Roundtable meeting that each school, in conjunction with their academic associate, would write a 'case study' about their research in the first year to be published in a book. At the end of the second year, the academics once again proposed a further round of publications:

Can you please come along ready to talk about what (content and form) your school would like to publish at the end of this year. Some suggested guidelines have been circulated by the publication sub-committee but there is plenty of room for negotiation to suit individual school needs and interests. (Excerpt from letter from Roundtable Conveners to Roundtable representatives, 10/10/96)

The impetus for producing a publication did not arise from pressure at the national level, but rather from the academics' shared belief that publication was an important means of demonstrating accountability. Although school representatives at Roundtable meetings acquiesced to the pressure to produce publications, it was with some reluctance. The differing perspectives of academics and teachers on the need for publication evident in this situation are an example of their different prioritising of the practical and theoretical (Day, 1999; Turner Field *et al.*, 1999).



The control of Roundtables by academics was found to be widespread across the Innovative Links Project as a whole. In their interim evaluation of the project, Yeatman and Sachs (1995) found that, even in Roundtables where a steering committee representing academics and teachers was set up to oversee the running of the project, 'the *de facto* if not *de jure* governance for the ongoing workings of Roundtables had fallen on the shoulders of the Roundtable convener, an academic' (p. 19).

At the school level, project leaders and the school's academic associate largely determined how the expectations were interpreted and most teachers appear to have had little say in this process. The questionnaire conducted with the wider group of schools did not address the ways schools interpreted the national expectations in the initial stages. However, given the fact that many teachers were not consulted about the decision for their school to become involved in the project, it is reasonable to suppose that many teachers did not have the opportunity to be involved in the interpretation of expectations at the local level. Comments such as the following support such a supposition:

Staff not directly involved with the university staff seem to get only half the information i.e. what to do, but not the theory or research behind it, nor the expected outcomes of it.

From interview data and project documentation, such as the schools' applications to join the project and reports of progress given at Roundtable meetings, it was possible to discern variation in the ways schools appear to have interpreted project expectations in terms of their foci for reform, the level of involvement of staff, the requirements for written reflection and reporting, the use of action research and the role to be played by the academic associate.

The focus for reform in most schools had only an indirect relationship to an expectation of improved learning outcomes for students. In three schools the focus was first and foremost on developing staff, while in another it was on improving student participation and in the fifth it was on changing structures and teaching practices. However, all schools had the expectation that the reforms to be trialled would impact positively on student learning at some future point. It is widely recognized in the literature that the key to improving student learning outcomes is through supporting teachers to learn and change (Hargreaves, 1992; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

Only small groups of people in each school were expected to be extensively involved in the project and with the academic associates. However, in all schools there was an expectation that the whole staff would participate in some professional development activities related to the reform focus, and that they would be kept informed about the work of the heavily involved participants. In one school it was also expected that all staff would meet regularly in 'learning conversation teams'.

Only in two schools was there a specific focus on professional reading for the heavily involved participants, and in those two schools and one other there was an expectation of some written reflection and/or reporting by the heavily involved group. In all schools there was an expectation that an action research approach and a focus on critical reflection would be implemented, but only by the heavily involved groups, at least in the initial stages.

In all schools, the academic associate was expected to play the role of 'critical friend' to those heavily involved in the reform initiatives, although there was undoubtedly variation in the ways this role was interpreted in each school. There was variation in the extent to which

academic associates were expected to lead groups, interact with the whole staff, provide reading material, facilitate reflective writing and support or participate in action research.

Overall, the research showed that only those with leadership responsibilities in the project, primarily the academics, the school-based research coordinators and some school leaders, were provided with sufficient information to be able to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the expectations. These key players took responsibility for communicating expectations to other participants and interpreting them for the local context. This meant that the majority of participants became familiar only with those aspects of the expectations that were prioritised by those with the greatest access to knowledge, and were also reliant on their interpretations.

### CONCLUSION

The discussion of the findings in relation to the initiation phase of the project has highlighted a number of personal, structural and cultural conditions that supported or hindered the achievement of the expectations for this phase. These conditions are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3**

#### **Influential Conditions in the Initiation Phase of the Innovative Links Project**

	<b>Personal Conditions</b>	<b>Cultural Conditions</b>	<b>Structural Conditions</b>
<b>Initiation Phase</b>	Personal needs  Propensity for risk-taking	Commitment to organisational and/or partnership goals	Consultation processes  Selection processes  Time for processing and planning  Negotiation processes

The research found that these conditions were not in evidence in a supportive way for many participants. The consequences of participants' struggles in the face of non supportive personal, structural and cultural conditions were limited achievement of the project expectations and costs for some participants in the form of anxiety, increased pressure on time, and missed opportunities for learning. The findings of this research suggest that the negative outcomes of research and development partnerships may be reduced if more attention is paid to creating personal, structural and cultural conditions that are more supportive of participants' engagement in the important processes of the initiation phase. Therefore, in conclusion, it is recommended that:

1. Where possible, designers of partnership projects should negotiate expectations with participants. In cases where this is not possible because of short timelines for

- accessing funding, expectations should be broad enough to allow for renegotiation once the participants become involved.
2. Selection and consultation processes should be designed that enable all staff in organisations to be provided with adequate information and democratically involved in the decisions about whether to join a partnership, its focus and who should be involved.
  3. In the initiation phase of a partnership, participants should be provided with the time and opportunity to make their priorities explicit in order to find common ground and negotiate mutually beneficial goals and to 'unpack' their views of learning, teaching, research and reform to determine to what extent a consensus view exists or can be developed.
  4. Communication structures should be developed that enable access to information and decision making by the wider staff in schools and universities throughout the lives of partnerships. Special attention must be paid to informing and involving new staff and to providing avenues for the expression and reconciliation of doubts, concerns and dissent.
  5. The traditional roles assumed by teachers and academics when working together must be problematised and renegotiated in ways that enable an equitable sharing of influence on the directions of the partnership: 'The emphasis is upon active and participatory leadership in school improvement work, rather than topdown delegation' (Harris, 2000, p. 4). In addition, those who have formal leadership roles in schools and universities need to be committed to the partnership and provide practical and moral support for those who participate. They must take a leading role in ensuring that research and development is consistent with a clear vision that 'needs to be shared and regularly reconfirmed as the process of change takes place' (Harris, 2000, p. 5).
  6. The emotional dimensions of learning, educational reform and partnerships should be anticipated, acknowledged and addressed in all phases. The importance of positive emotional involvement should be acknowledged by making a genuine attempt to motivate and engage the commitment of as many staff as possible in decisions to initiate and implement a research and development partnership. Participants also need to be forewarned that involvement may make uncomfortable emotional demands and provided with information about what form those demands might take, and the ways that they will be supported to capitalise on positive emotions and manage negative ones.
  7. When negotiating expectations for school/university research and development partnerships, equal emphasis should be placed on the learning of teachers and academics. As part of this process participants need the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise as learners, educators and researchers, and to clarify what they think they can contribute to each other's learning and how this might occur.

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