



A Guide To Working In Partnership

Introduction

Whilst the term partnership has become something of a buzzword whose real meaning is often lost through misuse, there is a growing recognition in many organisations that working in partnership can produce significant added benefit. One critical outcome is the benefit to partnership members, but ideally in any partnership there will be other beneficiaries in the form of stakeholders, customers or, in the case of NVQ partnerships, candidates.

Many of the NVQ partnerships featured in this pack will have evolved because they have worked with others to achieve commonly agreed objectives and they have succeeded because the partnership has served both members and candidates well. Working together to share information, expertise, resources or costs, or to reach new markets and expand business may be sound principles for forming partnerships but a focus on the candidate and outcomes is a vital ingredient. Also the collaborative approach requires a new way of

working, with structures, processes and activities designed for each unique context.

The partnership model and key question checklist that follow are intended to provide potential and existing NVQ partnerships with the opportunity to develop or improve the structure, processes and activities involved with working in partnership.

The partnership model proposed is cyclical in process and recognises the dynamic, evolving nature of effective partnerships and that the pace of development and progress through each stage will be different for each partnership. It recognises too that the six stages of the model will be revisited as the partnerships progress from initial formation to implementation and ongoing development.

Stage 1 Identify need

Partnerships are formed for many reasons. Catalysts may include the policy and practice requirements of external

stakeholders. The government-led drive for national occupational standards and the development of NVQs were, in themselves examples of the influence of external stakeholders upon policy and practice development. Government policy and funding in particular is a significant driver for some sectors which may not otherwise have embraced the assessment system of NVQs so readily. Internal stakeholder needs may be identified for a variety of reasons. Strategic planning targets, quality assurance requirements and funding may well be primary considerations. For some organisations and groups the demand from individual staff wishing to access vocational training and qualifications may be the motivating factor.

Crucially, the initial reason for adopting a partnership approach needs to be recognised and articulated. Some organisations that are small in size, with limited resources or simply are new to the NVQ system may find the partnership process initially daunting. Careful analysis of

A Partnership Model



the benefits and costs will help determine which approach is appropriate. Other organisations with sufficient resources may identify new skills, expertise and/or markets that can be accessed through partnership.

In each case an analysis of the potential costs and benefits based on external, internal and individual stakeholder need provides the motivation for individual organisations to engage with the partnership process.

Understanding and articulating the needs of individual members within the partnership is the first critical step in ensuring clarity of purpose. It provides also an initial checklist of indicators to review ongoing partnership effectiveness and individual members satisfaction.

Stage 2 Explore interest and capacity to commit

In order to explore interest in the partnership some consideration needs to be given as to what NVQs, candidates and sectors are to be the focus of the partnership. Initial discussion on the range and level of NVQ awards to be offered, including assessor and verifier awards, may expand or inhibit partnership membership. While individual members may be recruited across sectors, statutory, voluntary, community and public, their commonality lies in the appropriateness of the vocational award for their work-based setting. The partnership will initially and over time develop clear criteria for the kinds of organisations that they might partner.

Promotional events provide an opportunity for potential members to explore the suitability of a particular partnership and their willingness to commit to it. It is necessary for individual member organisations also to understand commitment requirements to engage effectively with the partnership.

Best practice would suggest that each partnership would have its own negotiated agreement stating minimum requirements for involvement, enabling potential members to assess their capacity and willingness to commit. Experience of previous partnerships would suggest that key issues that may impact on the capacity of individual organisations to commit to the partnership include the involvement of senior managers and resource requirements.

Issues of inequality among potential members also need to be acknowledged. Leadership by one or more members may well have initiated the partnership formation and organisation of promotional events. However, successful partnerships appreciate the contributions of potential members that can range from previous experience of NVQ development to having the candidate numbers to make the partnership viable.

Stage 3 **Agree plan and set objectives**

The primary aim of this stage is to achieve early clarification and consensus on the primary purpose of the partnership and to develop specific priorities for initial joint action.

The process of negotiating and agreeing realistic objectives at this early stage often achieves a number of results. The key output is a series of agreed targets for short to medium planning purposes. However other outputs may include agreement on mechanisms for the decision-making process and the roles of various members, including a management or steering group.

While an effective partnership structure needs to be designed for long term collaborative working it may be more pragmatic at this stage to adopt a short-term structure that will facilitate action.

Target setting to meet short to medium planning has to be placed within the context of the individual partnership and its

membership. Key considerations include:

- Available expertise to facilitate initial strategic and operational planning among partnership members.
- Individual and partnership expertise in NVQ programme development, training and assessment.
- Awarding body requirements, including the achievement of approved centre status.
- Potential candidate numbers.
- Assessor and verifier requirements including the ratio to candidate numbers.
- Available resources, including administrative support, funding, the willingness of individuals and sub-groups to take on responsibility to progress tasks.
- Timescale, including development pace if linked to funding and monitoring requirements.
- Individual and organisational expertise and commitment to collaborative working and agreed partnership practice and principles.

Successful completion of this stage ensures that an interim structure has been put in place that reflects the aims, values, capacity and cultural context of the organisations involved in the partnership.

An operating plan can now be developed, setting clear targets, timescale and success criteria.

Resources, including membership expertise, can be identified and utilised for maximum effectiveness and efficiency.

As indicated earlier the partnership model proposed is dynamic and evolving. The issues of structure, strategic and operational planning and resources are considerations the partnership will need to address on a regular and ongoing basis.

The stages that follow provide a series of monitoring and review mechanisms to inform those considerations.

Stage 4 **Design and implement structure and process**

The design and implementation of structure should, for effective partnerships, be seen as a process rather than an event. It has been suggested in the initial formation phase that any structure is interim in order to facilitate progress in planning and action.

Revisiting structural and planning issues may occur for a variety of reasons. The existing structure may no longer be appropriate due to growth potential, a need identified to undertake incorporation or charitable status, or alternative arrangements required for candidates if the partnership or partner members are unable to fulfil NVQ awarding body requirements.

While structures at any phase need not be complex, a number of key mechanisms need to be in place at all stages of development to meet operational requirements and the sustainability of the partnership.

In the first instance a skilled and committed management or steering group holding regular, effective meetings is essential to monitor progress and inform ongoing development. Experience suggests that the involvement of representatives able to influence and inform decision-making in their own organisations facilitates progress and action.

The creation of smaller working clusters that include representatives from outside the steering or management group enables mutual feedback from candidates, assessors, internal verifiers and individual organisational representatives. These may encompass formally designated groups such as the internal verifiers' meetings or time-limited groups involved in organising further promotional events or designing recording systems for use by all partnership members.

Mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that the feedback from the smaller groups is addressed at partnership management meetings. This may involve a brief written report from the various working groups or, ideally, in conjunction with a verbal report from a management board representative participating in the working group. Resources for the administration and servicing of the management board or steering group and the smaller working groups must be negotiated and agreed among members.

There are many benefits in developing smaller working groups within the partnership structure. They provide a crucial mechanism to

build pathways to ensure the involvement of all partnership beneficiaries, organisations, groups and individuals in mutual feedback and representation of interests.

Ongoing training and capacity-building needs are identified for all communities of interest. For those involved in partnership management there is feedback on the strengths and limitations of the strategic planning and operational implementation issues. Encouraging the participation of others outside the management board shares partnership membership tasks beyond one person in an organisation. It indicates a commitment to an inclusive process where all partnership beneficiaries, candidates, assessors, verifiers and organisational representatives are motivated and involved in influencing partnership development.



Stage 5 Develop comprehensive monitoring and review systems

The sustainability and ongoing development of the partnership structure, tasks and process relies upon comprehensive monitoring and review systems. It is essential that such monitoring and review systems are prioritised at the initial planning stage and developed on an ongoing basis to meet the needs of all partnership stakeholders.

Initially the partnership may focus on establishing those systems essential to management planning and for fulfilling mandatory requirements set by awarding

bodies, funding authorities or others. These can include:

- Information related to equality monitoring, disability, ethnicity etc.
- Budgetary information for partner members and/or funders.
- Auditing required under company and charitable law, if appropriate.
- Awarding body record-keeping requirements for individual candidate registration and assessment purposes.
- Partnership information, ratio of assessors/verifiers, evidence of responses to quality assurance issues etc.
- Progress towards targets set, key milestones achieved, NVQs awarded, assessors and verifiers available, growth of membership etc.
- Partnership stakeholders' levels of satisfaction including individual candidates, member organisations and external verifiers representing the awarding body, and funders, if appropriate.

However, previous experience recognises that there are three dimensions that contribute to partnership success - **results**, **process** and **relationships**.

Monitoring systems therefore need to include indicators not only that relate to strategic outputs but also identify indicators

and tools that encompass the ways in which underlying process and relationships within the partnership may be reviewed and assessed.

Some partnerships, particularly those within the social economy sector, are adopting systems of social auditing which listens to and takes account of what key stakeholders have to say about what has been done and what they would like to do to improve future 'social performance'.

Areas of 'social performance' for monitoring purposes may include:

- Respect and trust between different interests.
- Clear and open process.
- Shared vision, working principles and values.
- Development of compatible ways of working.
- Effective communication.
- Use of language, styles of working, venues etc that are inclusive and encouraging to all partnership beneficiaries.
- Collaborative decision-making with a commitment to achieving consensus.
- Cost outweighing benefits.
- Issues of power imbalance addressed to mutual satisfaction.

- Capacity-building to increase skills, knowledge understanding and ability of individuals and partner members to engage fully within the partnership.

Having agreed the range of indicators that fulfils monitoring requirements it is necessary to decide appropriate measurement tools. Financial records and other statistical methods will produce the necessary quantitative data. Individual and partner member surveys and case studies such as those presented in this pack are possible mechanisms that will elicit more qualitative information. However, there is a need to develop more creative tools that enable stakeholder voices to be heard in a less didactic way while maintaining information-gathering systems.

Best practice suggests that any monitoring and review systems are designed early in the partnership life. The information gathered at regular intervals can be used for planning purposes, to assess partnership outputs and social performance and, over time, to assess longer-term partnership outcomes.

Stage 6 Recognise achievements and limitations

Time and regular opportunities need to be provided to review operational targets and to plan future developments.

Successful implementation of the previous stages should result in a variety of information sources being available to identify the issues that

both strengthen and limit partnership achievements.

Each partnership will have its own limiting factors. Experience suggests a range of issues shared among a number of partnerships:

- Standardisation and quality assurance concerns with the partnership overall and individual member organisations.
- Unequal levels of commitment/power/decision-making/resources.
- Hidden agendas.
- Lack of clear purpose and structure.
- Unresolved differences among members.

Responses to address issues affecting the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the partnership may include training provision, time limited working groups, promotion and publicity initiatives and the use of external expertise, if required.

Finally, it is crucial that the same time and opportunities is devoted to acknowledging and promoting partnership success. This may involve celebratory events such as award ceremonies to acknowledge candidate achievements or formal promotional activities to increase membership or seek funding. There is also a case to be made for informal celebrations among partner members to acknowledge the work and commitment required to achieve partnership success.

Key Question Checklist

1. What are the needs that have led to the partnership formation?

- Have any external stakeholders' policies influenced the forming of the partnership?
- What internal stakeholder issues have emerged that have led to a partnership approach? e.g. quality assurance requirements; resource needs; funding; organisational development; strategic planning.
- Has the partnership developed in response to individual, group or sector, skill or qualification requirements?

2. What is the level of interest and the capacity of individual members to commit to the partnership?

- What efforts have been made to inform and promote the partnership among potential members?
- What are the facilitating and hindering factors that might affect the capacity of individual members to commit to the partnership? e.g. the involvement of senior managers; available support resources; the need to promote equality; increasing or diminishing candidate numbers.
- Is there clarity and agreement among its members on the partnership's primary purpose and aim?
- Is there commitment to ongoing provision for capacity-building, linked to monitoring and review?

- Have the roles and responsibilities of each partner been set out?

3. Have realistic objectives been set and a plan for action agreed?

- What initial structures have been put in place to facilitate operational planning and management?
- Is there an operating plan that sets out the arrangements for delivery with objectives, timescale and success criteria?
- Does the plan consider the prospect of growth and closure?

- Have realistic objectives been set, with key targets? e.g.
 - potential candidate numbers
 - awarding body approval
 - candidate/assessor/verifier ratios
 - duration and timescale of programme
 - available physical and financial resources
 - individual and member expertise in partnership working.

4. Have appropriate structures and processes been designed to fulfill the plan and support the partnership?

- Is there a management team representative of all stakeholders and is it equipped with the necessary skills, authority and resources?
- Do clear pathways exist for individual candidates, member organisations and external

stakeholders to inform partnership management?

- Are mechanisms in place to sustain and develop the partnership?

5. How will the partnership be evaluated?

- What comprehensive monitoring and review systems are in place for information gathering?
- What are the indicators and feedback that the partnership is effective, efficient and equitable for individuals and the partnership as a whole?
- Do the indicators recognise results, process and relationships as dimensions of success?

- How, when, who gathers this information?

6. Are achievements & limitations recognised?

- How are limiting factors addressed within the partnership and member agencies? Issues arising might include:
 - record-keeping
 - standardisation and quality concerns
 - unequal levels of commitment/power/decision-making/resources
 - growth and sustainability.
- What mechanisms are in place to plan future development and review strategic targets?
- What informal and formal events are planned to celebrate and promote partnership achievements?



www.qca.org.uk/di

www.qca.org.uk/ni



Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
2nd Floor, Glendinning House, 6 Murray Street, Belfast, BT1 6DN
Tel: 028 9033 0706 Fax: 028 9023 1621 E-mail: info@qca.org.uk
website: www.qca.org.uk/ni

