

# Supporting Business-School Connections

*Discussion Paper of the Business-School Connections Roundtable*

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Background

In 2009 the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, established a Business-School Connections Roundtable to:

*'oversee the development of a practical strategy to ensure all schools can benefit from a business connection, with the aims of:*

- *improving educational outcomes*
- *harnessing business as a partner in education*
- *increasing successful partnerships.'*

The Roundtable comprises members from nine organisations from the business, education and community sectors. While we bring a wide range of experience and expertise in business-school connections, we recognise that to fulfil our task effectively, we need wide and genuine consultation with the many stakeholders who are directly involved in, or have an interest in, relationships between schools and business, including:

- schools of all sizes, at all levels, across all jurisdictions and systems, and across the geographic variety of Australia
- businesses of all sizes, in all sectors, and across locations – both those that have experience of connections with schools, and those that do not
- organisations that assist schools and businesses to form and maintain partnerships
- the various people within school communities (and the organisations that represent them), including parents, teachers, school leaders, and most importantly, students themselves
- education authorities in all jurisdictions and systems
- researchers within this space.

This discussion paper is the first step in the consultations between the Roundtable and this broader community. It summarises the current context in which schools and businesses enter into relationships, the benefits of these relationships, and why they are attracting so much attention. It then describes the challenges and issues which school-business relationships face, drawing on new Australian research that was commissioned specifically to inform the Roundtable's work.

The discussion paper also poses questions on which we are specifically seeking input. The final section of this paper outlines how you can provide input on these questions, or other matters that you believe are relevant to our work.

## 1.2 Underlying principles

It is early days in the work of the Roundtable. Nevertheless, we believe the following principles are fundamental to our task:

- all schools and businesses should have the opportunity to form relationships that can contribute to enhanced educational outcomes for students – no matter where they are located, and how large or small they may be
- it is important to recognise that not all will want or need to do so
- there are many forms and levels of school-business relationships that are valid and valuable.

From these, we have developed specific principles to guide our work:

- the overarching purpose of our work is to contribute to the achievement of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians<sup>1</sup>
- our work will aim to add value to existing and planned initiatives in school-business relationships, without disrupting them
- it will focus on principles to support these initiatives and relationships, not on procedures to restrict them
- schools, businesses and the community often have fears about school-business relationships, and these need to be recognised and addressed.

### 1.3 A note on terminology

In this paper we use the overarching term ‘school-business relationships’. This reflects our belief that schools can benefit both from ‘school-business partnerships’, which tend to have more formal aspects (eg highly integrated joint ventures with formal agreements), and from less formal connections with businesses. We use the term ‘partners’ to refer to the school and business participants in these relationships.

## 2. Why the current focus on school-business relationships?

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### 2.1 Policy background

As the world has become more complex, community expectations of education have become higher. At the same time, there has been a general recognition that schools are no longer able to meet these expectations on their own. This has led to an increasing focus on schools developing partnerships with the broader community – including parents, community organisations, businesses, and other education institutions. This can be seen in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which places *developing stronger partnerships* first in its eight areas of commitment:

*Partnerships between students, parents, carers and families, the broader community, business, schools and other education and training providers bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement. Partnerships engender support for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and can provide opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, participate in civic life and develop a sense of responsible citizenship.*

*Australian governments commit to working with all school sectors to ensure that schools engage young Australians, parents, carers, families, other education and training providers, business and the broader community to support students’ progress through schooling, and to provide them with rich learning, personal development and citizenship opportunities.*

Some businesses have a long history of contributing to education, and it has become more common in recent years, particularly in response to the school-to-work agenda. Motivations for businesses range from very broad – eg corporate social responsibility;

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<sup>1</sup> Developed in 2008 by State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education in collaboration with the Catholic and independent school sectors. The declaration established two goals: “Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence”; and “All young Australians become successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens”.

improving education standards; broadening student horizons – to more specific – eg sustaining the future of an industry; addressing issues within the local community – to those more directly related to the business itself – eg improving reputation; exposure to potential recruits; engaging staff in the community.

## 2.2 What are the benefits?

For school-business relationships to flourish and receive support from all stakeholders, it is important that the benefits are identifiable, communicated, and accepted as appropriate. Where benefits are not clearly articulated, stakeholders within schools and businesses may be reluctant to contribute their time, people, energy and resources. Where benefits are not clearly communicated beyond those directly involved, or where they are perceived to be inappropriate, educators, parents, and the broader community may not be supportive of the relationships.

The Roundtable believes that the ultimate beneficiary of all school-business relationships must be students. This may be through direct outcomes for students, or through benefits to a school that indirectly contribute to improved outcomes for the students. The nature of the benefits will vary depending on the nature and focus of the specific relationship.

The Australian research undertaken to inform our work identified a wide range of benefits in each category. Direct benefits for students included enhanced career aspirations; work readiness; skills development in areas such as literacy, numeracy, ICT, science; improved engagement, attendance, academic results and transition to work or further education; opportunities for casual employment or recruitment following school; and personal benefits such as positive relationships with mentors.

Benefits for schools included enhanced profile and reputation; increased resources (financial, technology, etc) or access to external resources (eg scientific equipment); improved skills in areas such as leadership, management and marketing; professional development opportunities for teachers; higher staff morale; increased relevance of curriculum; improved student engagement and retention; and reductions in behaviour management issues.

The benefit most commonly reported by businesses was the opportunity to contribute to the development of young people, followed by enhanced reputation. Other benefits to business cited in the literature include an awareness of challenges facing schools; intrinsic rewards and boosts in staff morale; enhanced community profile and standing; financial impact (both through stronger support, and by contributing to the economic health of the community) and staff recruitment – helping companies to attract and retain the best employees through demonstrating social responsibility.

In the Australian research, both schools and businesses that reported not having ‘significant’ relationships tended to be sceptical about the benefits that could be derived. Some schools were concerned that the investment of time and resources required to form a relationship would take staff away from other more valuable, or required, activities - *“We have enough trouble keeping on top of everything we have to do now and this seems like just one more damn thing to keep teaching staff away from the children”*. Some businesses shared similar concerns – *“Volunteered so much in the past, all our time, our cost, our efforts, little return apart from warm and fuzzy and hope. Hard to draw a business line of benefit of being so involved.”*

There is also a recurring debate in the community about whether businesses should be allowed into school settings, and whether they should be promoting their companies, products or brands. This is discussed further in section 3.1 below.

The Australian research also identified the potential for school-business relationships to deliver benefits to the broader community, beyond the school itself. In some relationships between schools and mining/energy businesses in remote communities, the businesses were working with a school, training providers and other organisations to achieve outcomes that were not necessarily directly beneficial to either organisation, such as establishing environment projects, or developing pathways to employment in industries not related to the business of the mining company (eg aged care; wildlife officers). A contributing factor to these outcomes seemed to be the combination of a strong school-to-work focus and a desire to demonstrate corporate social responsibility.

### **3. Challenges / Issues**

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This section describes some of the key challenges that face school-business relationships, and poses some questions that stakeholders might wish to respond to.

#### **3.1 Ensuring that benefits to business are appropriate**

In any relationship, if one partner is receiving no benefits, the relationship is unlikely to be maintained. While educational outcomes for students (and therefore benefits to schools) must be a key focus of school-business relationships, it is important that business partners also derive some benefit.

In the past, some in the education sector and broader community have raised concerns about the ways in which businesses may benefit. Criticisms have sometimes cited international examples of school-business relationships in which direct commercial benefits to the business partner seem to have had a higher priority than educational outcomes – for example, through requiring students to watch advertising of the business partner's products in order for their schools to access sponsored resources.

The literature review undertaken on behalf of the Roundtable suggests that examples of this type are extreme, and do not represent the majority of school-business relationships internationally. The survey conducted in Australia found that opportunities for promotion were regarded by both partners as secondary benefits for businesses. Approximately seven in ten schools reported businesses benefiting from signage or mentions in school newsletters, while only four in ten reported businesses benefiting from exposure of products or brands. Schools felt that the most common benefit derived by their business partners was the opportunity to interact with potential recruits. The benefits most commonly cited by business were even broader - the opportunity to contribute to the development of young people, and to enhance the reputation of the business by engaging in community capacity building.

Among the subset of 'significant relationships' in the survey, only one third of schools and businesses in the survey reported product placement or branding. It was neither a driving force nor an area of tension. The consultations highlighted that among highly effective relationships, there was limited, if any, exposure to brands and promotional activity. If it occurs at all, it is seen as a by-product.

The research concludes, based on the Australian survey and international experience, that the benefits of school-business relationships outweigh the negatives. However, it also

identifies guidelines that various organisations have developed to protect schools from excessive commercialism. For example, guidelines from the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) include the following criteria:

- *Programs of corporate involvement meet an identified educational purpose, not a commercial motive.*
- *Ethical standards (developed by the BCTF) that protect the welfare of students and the integrity of the learning environment are agreed to and followed by all parties.*
- *Sponsored teaching resources and materials are evaluated for bias before they are used, and teachers retain discretion in the use of the materials; sponsored and donated materials are held to the same standards used for the selection and purchase of curricular materials.*
- *Corporate involvement does not require students to observe, listen to, or read advertising. Sponsor recognition and corporate logos, for identification rather than commercial purposes, are kept to a minimum.*
- *Partnership agreements are reached after full discussion among participating school staff, parent representatives, and the prospective partner, and any agreements are open as public information.*
- *All partnership agreements are systematically evaluated.<sup>2</sup>*

The Roundtable could develop an Australian set of guiding principles for school-business relationships, which would help both schools and businesses navigate around potential pitfalls, and ensure that the relationships they form meet educational standards and community expectations. Such principles could be developed and distributed as a stand-alone document, which schools and businesses could access if they found them useful. Alternatively, they could be embedded in overarching educational structures through the endorsement of the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEEDYA).

**Questions:**

- *Would an Australian set of guiding principles for school-business relationships similar to those of the BCTF add value? If so, what extra items should be included in? Should any be modified or deleted?*
- *Is there benefit in such guiding principles being endorsed by education ministers through the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs?*
- *Is there benefit in the guiding principles being endorsed by a peak organisation on behalf of business? What organisation should this be?*

### **3.2 Recognising the broad potential of school-business relationships**

At the school level and within the broader educational policy context, school-business relationships have historically been seen as contributing to students making successful school-to-work transitions. This is the most natural area within which schools and

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<sup>2</sup> (British Columbia Teachers Federation, <http://bctf.ca/parents.aspx?id=3560>)

businesses establish relationships, and the area that is most recognised and supported by government policies and programs.

At the policy level, this can be seen in the action plan for the overarching policy framework for education - the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. While the Declaration explicitly includes business within the commitment to *building stronger partnerships*, the agreed strategies in the action plan do not<sup>3</sup>. The two mentions of business – one within system-based partnerships “*to support students’ progress through schooling and enhance future opportunities*”<sup>4</sup>, and one under the commitment to *supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions*,<sup>5</sup> continue the trend for school-business relationships to only be considered in the context of school-to-work transitions, and for their potential to contribute to other areas to be overlooked.

It can also be seen in the four National Partnerships between the Australian, State and Territory Governments that relate to schooling. Only the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions includes a significant focus on the contribution of school-business relationships (including a new network of School Business Community Partnership Brokers – discussed further in section 3.5.3). While the key outputs under the National Partnership on Low Socio-economic Status School Communities include “*external partnerships with parents, other schools, businesses and communities and provision of access to extended services*”, the indicative action is again focused on school-to-work transitions: “*partnerships with businesses, such as through the Australian Business and Community Network, to broaden the horizons of students, support educators and provide employment links with businesses and business organisations*”. The National Partnerships on Literacy and Numeracy and Improving Teacher Quality make no mention of the potential contribution of business.

Another national education priority is the Closing the Gap agenda, under which governments have been working to develop fundamental reforms to address Indigenous disadvantage. The potential contribution of partnerships with business to this agenda is recognised in the guidelines for the overarching funding program<sup>6</sup>, with explicit references in relation to the expansion of intensive literacy and numeracy programs, the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program and the Indigenous Youth Mobility Program.

At the ground level, the Australian survey of school-business relationships found that ‘transition from school to work and developing employability skills of students’ was indeed the most common area of focus, with 98% of the survey schools with secondary students reporting activity in this area. However, the survey also found that many school-business relationships were addressing other areas of the broad education reform agenda. Over three quarters of schools reported that their activities with business addressed:

- ‘enhancing school leadership and staff development’ – including professional development for staff; expert advice at senior level from business; and mentoring and coaching
- ‘enhancing student engagement with industry/business’ – including professional development for teachers in specific subjects; and expertise to support curriculum design and delivery

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<sup>3</sup> The strategies focus on school-based partnerships with indigenous communities; local community groups and other agencies; teachers and school leaders; other schools; and families.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/MCEETYA\\_Four\\_Year\\_Plan\\_\(2009-2012\).pdf](http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/MCEETYA_Four_Year_Plan_(2009-2012).pdf), pp5-6.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/MCEETYA\\_Four\\_Year\\_Plan\\_\(2009-2012\).pdf](http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/MCEETYA_Four_Year_Plan_(2009-2012).pdf), p12.

<sup>6</sup> Indigenous Education Targeted Assistance Program 2009-2010

- ‘supporting student aspirations and achievement (including students at risk and students in disadvantaged areas)’ – including leadership and life skills development; and literacy and numeracy programs.

This suggests that there is significant untapped potential for school-business relationships to contribute to the reform agenda in literacy and numeracy, teacher quality, and low SES schooling, and to the Closing the Gap agenda.

To fulfil this potential, school-business relationships need to be explicitly discussed in action plans, implementation plans and so on, and examples of school-business relationships in the different areas of reform need to be promoted. This will encourage broader thinking by both schools and businesses, and lead to a much greater contribution of business to these agendas. Without this, it is likely that partnership activities developed to address literacy and numeracy, teacher quality, the needs of schools in low SES communities and the Closing the Gap agenda will continue to focus almost exclusively on parents, families and local communities, and miss the opportunity to engage the skills and resources of business.

*Questions:*

- *What could policy makers and program designers do to encourage and support school-business relationships in areas beyond school-to-work transitions and employability skills? How do we showcase successful examples as a model for others?*
- *How could schools and businesses be encouraged to develop more relationships that directly contribute to the target areas under the national education reform and Closing the Gap agendas?*

### 3.3 Achieving sustainability

‘Sustainability’ is often set out as a desirable feature of school-business relationships. However, three quarters of the significant school-business relationships in the Australian survey had existed for four years or less. This raises the question of whether the end of a particular relationship should be regarded as a ‘failure’. Is ‘sustainability’ a realistic goal? How should it be defined? How can it be achieved?

The survey highlights two common reasons for relationships ending. The first is the ending of a project-based relationship when the project has been completed. This is often seen as natural and appropriate, although the research suggests that longer-term relationships often develop from one-off projects. This may be because it is easier to get support to establish a relationship when it is seen as time-limited and project-focused, rather than an open-ended commitment. Through the course of the project the partners may develop a strong sense of common purpose, shared values, and commitment, and want to develop new areas of collaboration. The research suggests that relationships often broaden from an initial focus on school-to-work transitions and employability skills to other areas, such as professional development for teachers and school leaders.

To increase more project-based relationships to evolve into deeper partnerships, the Roundtable could develop materials that encourage the partners to review the outcomes of the project, to reflect on the process and the benefits each has gained, and to consider what else they could work on. Similarly, support that encourages the partners to incorporate good relationship practices from the beginning is likely to enhance the

experience and the outcomes, and again increase the chance that the partners will want to go on to bigger and better things.

The other common reason for school-business relationships ending is staff turnover – both among the drivers who are actively involved in a relationship, and those who support or champion it within the broader organisation. When key staff change, personal relationships are lost, priorities and commitment levels can change, and the relationship between the school and business is often threatened.

While good relationships do plan for staff turnover and try to minimise its impact, it is impossible to avoid completely the impact of the different personalities, priorities and personal interests that new people bring. If the school-business relationship is seen by either organisation as an add-on activity that depended on one or two drivers or champions, then it is vulnerable to these factors. If, however, school-business relationships are regarded as a normal and expected strategy for achieving core business outcomes – ie if there is a *culture of school-business relationships* – then the impact is likely to be much less. Even if a new school teacher, for example, is not interested in continuing a particular relationship, the culture of the school would encourage, expect and assist them to form new relationships.

This suggests that ‘sustainability’ should be seen in terms of the relationship culture of the organisation, rather than a particular relationship. For this to be sustainable in the longer term, school-business relationships need to be embedded in and supported by the policies, programs, planning and reporting processes and operational requirements within which schools operate. They need to be clearly and consistently built in as a strategy for achieving the core outcomes of education. Without this, it is likely that stakeholders within education authorities, and within individual schools, will see school-business relationships as a separate and additional activity that compete with core education activities.

A school with a sustainable culture of school-business relationships would exhibit the following characteristics:

- school-business relationships are seen as a strategy for achieving core education outcomes, and are clearly focused on this
- staff at all levels are expected and supported to engage in school-business relationships to achieve the education outcomes for which they are responsible
- the skills needed to establish and maintain relationships are recognised as specific and valuable, and staff are supported to develop them
- relationship management is recognised as core activity, and time and resources are provided
- relationships are managed in accordance with a clearly articulated set of guiding principles (*as discussed in section 3.1*)
- the portfolio of relationships across the school is seen as dynamic, to be added to and subtracted from as needed to achieve core education outcomes.

Similar characteristics would apply to a business with a sustainable culture of school-business relationships.

The role of school leadership, and particularly school principals, is critical to supporting a sustainable culture of school-business relationships. Principals need both the skills and the scope to embed a relationship culture within their schools. Principals Australia is exploring this issue as part of its current work to develop *National Professional Standards for Accomplished Principals*.

Including school-business relationships as part of the training program for new teachers would also help to promote a sustainable culture in the schools they join. This could be done, for example, by giving student teachers the opportunity to undertake a placement with a business that is actively involved in schools, or with an organisation that assists schools and business to form partnerships.

Incorporating the characteristics of a sustainable culture can lead to interesting developments in school-business relationships. For example, a business may decide that staff volunteering to paint classrooms, while providing good team-building benefits for the business, might be less valuable to the school than the same staff volunteering their specific skills in financial management, marketing, legal advice and so on. Or a business that began a major initiative under its own corporate identity might decide to open it up to other business partners in order to scale-up the initiative to improve sustainability, or enable the business to move on to other things at a later stage.

*Questions:*

- *What are the other elements of a sustainable culture of school-business relationships?*
- *How can schools and business be encouraged and supported to develop a relationships culture?*
- *What initiatives could be implemented at a systems level to support a sustainable culture of school-business relationships?*

### **3.4 Maximising the chances of success**

The research undertaken for the Roundtable explored success factors from the literature on school-community-business partnerships, and from the experiences of the business and schools in the survey. Schools in significant school-business relationships that they regarded as successful identified the following factors as important to this success:

- a clear vision of what the relationship wants to achieve, and how to achieve it (89%)
- good communication between the partners (81%)
- specific and achievable goals that all stakeholders understand and support (74%)
- strong relationship culture among the stakeholders (72%)
- shared sense of ownership of the relationship (68%)
- strong leadership and management (68%)
- clear understanding of partner roles (57%)
- a school that is well connected to the community, other educators and business (57%)
- strong promotion of the relationship in the school and business (51%).

Interestingly, while schools that were *not* involved in significant school-business relationships often identified access to funding as a barrier to their involvement, only four in ten of those that *were* involved in successful significant relationships identified 'sufficient funding' as an important factor in their success.

The factors identified by the schools are consistent with those identified by the businesses in the survey. Other factors identified in the broader literature on effective partnerships include:

- flexibility to evolve, and to respond to unanticipated challenges
- well designed projects – adding value, appropriate to available resources and organisational size
- inclusiveness
- compatibility of the values and approaches of the partners
- creating value and benefit
- capacity and capability – including time commitment, and appropriate professional development for teachers
- governance and communication
- identity and recognition management
- accountability and risk management
- program measurement and evaluation.

The Roundtable could help existing and new school-business relationships to maximise their chances of success by promoting awareness of these success factors and encouraging partners to incorporate them into their school-business relationships. This could be done in collaboration with other networks that are identifying and promoting good practice in school-business relationships, such as the School Business Community Partnership Brokers, the Australian Business and Community Network and Schools First.

*Questions:*

- *Are there other factors that are important to the success of school-business relationships?*
- *How can current and new school-business relationships be encouraged to incorporate these success factors?*

### 3.5 Overcoming barriers

#### 3.5.1 For schools

The Australian survey identified a range of barriers to schools forming relationships with business, including:

- issues within the school, such as staff turnover; staff feeling they already have too many demands; difficulty of fitting more activities into an already crowded timetable
- perceptions that it is difficult to find willing business partners, because they are already feeling under pressure, or there is a limited pool of local businesses
- perceptions that the school is not attractive to business – eg small rural schools reporting that *“businesses regard our school as too small and the community not wealthy enough to provide much scope for advancing their business goals within such a relationship”*
- perceived or actual restrictions from education authorities – eg *“I am not sure whether in the public system this is actually allowed in primary schools”*
- lack of awareness of the potential for school-business relationships in areas beyond school-to-work transitions
- scepticism about the potential benefits to schools in relation to their investment of time and resources

- lack of skills or confidence – eg knowing where to start, how to develop ideas, how to identify benefits to business.

Some schools were comfortable having a range of relationships with businesses, but were uncomfortable about developing a *significant* relationship due to concern about the risk of becoming (or being perceived as) too close to one business.

In areas where there is a limited pool of local businesses, schools can end up competing with each other to build relationships. This can be confusing for business, and reduce the opportunities for students. Encouraging schools to work together in clusters and across sectors, or finding ways for schools to build relationships with businesses outside their geographic area, would help to increase the number of students benefiting from school-business relationships.

Schools in communities that did not include major businesses faced particular challenges in finding partners. While this often applied to rural and remote schools, it was not always the case. Schools in some remote communities were *better* able to form significant school-business relationships because they were near major companies in the mining, energy and related sectors. These companies were often motivated by corporate social responsibility policies, local skill shortages and/or community issues to develop relationships with local schools. In contrast, metropolitan schools in ‘dormitory suburbs’ could struggle to find partners because there were no major businesses located near them.

Interestingly, the research found that overall, the global financial crisis had not been a barrier to establishing or maintaining school-business relationships. Most had continued despite the downturn, although some schools reported less funding available from specific industries. Others reported difficulty getting businesses to participate in industry awareness and careers events, as they were reluctant to be seen promoting their industry at the same time as they were making workers redundant.

There is no single solution that will overcome all these barriers. Some of the concepts already discussed will address some of them. Brokering organisations, such as the network of School Community Business Partnership Brokers recently established by the Australian Government, can also help to address issues related to skills, knowledge and confidence and assist schools and businesses to develop effective partnering arrangements. Case studies that illustrate a wide variety of relationships in different contexts, including how they were formed, the original motivations of the participants, and the benefits they have derived, may also be useful.

*Questions:*

- *Are there other significant barriers to the participation of schools in school-business relationships?*
- *What else could be done to overcome these barriers?*

### 3.5.2 For businesses

Businesses in the Australian research reported many of the same barriers to their participation in relationships with schools – staff turnover; availability of time and resources; conflict with other responsibilities; and concerns about the impact on the

productivity of the business. Businesses that were willing to become involved in relationships with schools identified other challenges, such as ineffective coordination at the school level, and policy directives from education authorities that appeared to be unsupportive of such relationships. Broker organisations helped to overcome some of these barriers by providing a single point of contact during the formation of school-business relationships, particularly in school-to-work activities.

A business that approaches a school with a firm view of what the school needs, and what the business can offer, may find it difficult to establish a relationship with that school. Businesses that spend time engaging with the school and community first, to understand the local needs and priorities, are likely to be more successful. Similarly, schools that develop an understanding of business needs and priorities are likely to be more successful in establishing relationships. Broker organisations can also help to build mutual understanding.

Large businesses that want to operate across multiple schools and jurisdictions report that the variation in the policy and operational contexts makes larger-scale initiatives much more complex and costly. This can be a significant barrier to 'scaling up' successful local school-business relationships.

Other barriers can arise from the nature of the business itself. For example, staff in larger businesses may find it difficult to gain support for becoming involved in school-business relationships in their local level, or may be unsure about how to go about it. In the larger businesses in the Australian research, this was often overcome by corporate social responsibility policies that provided central support for such initiatives, and allowed local ideas to get off the ground. While small to medium businesses may be more agile in this sense, they may have less capacity to become involved in 'non-core' activities, or tend to be more focused on immediate outcomes.

Interestingly (and consistent with the responses from schools), the businesses in the Australian survey reported that the global financial crisis had had little to no impact on the nature and extent of their school-business relationships. In a few cases, they were being more cautious about commitments, or delaying plans, but there was no evidence that they were withdrawing from relationships altogether.

A further disincentive to financial contributions from businesses and charitable foundations is the current taxation legislation, under which donations to schools are only tax-deductible if they are for building funds, library funds or scholarships. Donations for general education expenses or educational programs are not tax deductible. This also prevents charitable foundations from donating money to activities that are within the scope of the foundations, but carried out by organisations that do not qualify for deductible gift recipient (DGR) status. It would be beneficial to broaden the tax rules to allow businesses to donate money - either directly or through a charitable organisation working with businesses and schools - to other activities of direct benefit to schools and students.

The final report from the *Australia's Future Tax System* review recommended the establishment of a national charities commission whose tasks would include streamlining the not for profit tax concessions (including the application process for gift deductibility).

Questions:

- *What else could be done to overcome the barriers identified above?*

- *Are there other significant barriers to the participation of businesses in school-business relationships? How could they be addressed?*
- *How can large businesses support the development of school-business relationships at the local level?*
- *What would encourage more small to medium businesses to develop school-business relationships?*

### 3.5.3 For broker organisations

Historically, organisations brokering relationships between schools and businesses have tended to focus on supporting student transitions from school to work through activities such as facilitating structured workplace learning and work experience opportunities. This has been partly driven by the infrastructure established by governments, such as the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation (which became the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation), and the later network of Local Community Partnerships (2006-2009).

The Australian research identified a range of other organisations whose core role includes facilitating school-business relationships. Some focus on engaging a particular segment of the business sector, while others focus on establishing relationships to benefit specific groups of students. Others encourage the development of school-business relationships through awards schemes, or school-based competitions that require collaboration with industry.

A new initiative is the national network of School Business Community Partnership Brokers, established by the Australian Government in 2010. The Partnership Brokers initiative is part of the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, and might therefore appear to be again focused on the school-to-work area. In practice, however, the program recognises that the issues that impact negatively on attainment and transition levels are often much broader, and begin much earlier in schooling. Partnership Brokers are therefore being encouraged to think much more broadly, and to develop strategic partnerships at all levels of schooling that address whatever issues contribute to lower attainment and transition levels in their regions.

#### *Questions:*

- *Are there particular barriers that broker organisations face in facilitating and enabling school-business relationships?*
- *What could be done to overcome these barriers?*

### 3.5.4 Specific challenges facing school-business relationships focused on school-to-work

All secondary schools in the Australia survey reported school-business relationship activities in the area of school-to-work transitions and employability skills, including work experience and careers activities. While this high prevalence might suggest that such relationships are relatively easy to establish and maintain, the consultations and survey responses also identified a number of challenges specific to them.

For schools, a particular concern was the sense that they were caught in the middle of conflicting expectations from business and the community. Businesses wanted education to focus on producing students who were 'work-ready', while the community wanted a broader education focused on maximising student potential. This created a conflict over the balance between vocational and non-vocational activities.

The major concern for industry representative bodies was the variable quality and assessment in VET in Schools programs, which was partly related to whether schools saw this as core provision or an add-on activity. In the latter case, there was also more difficulty in arranging timetables so that work placements were at times convenient to both industry and schools.

The range of vocational programs offered by a particular school may also be driven more by internal school factors, such as cost effectiveness or teacher skills or interests, rather than by local skill shortages, industry needs, and post-school employment opportunities. This could reduce the opportunities for local school-business relationships, as the areas the school was interested in might be perceived as not relevant by local businesses.

While the Roundtable is concerned with school-to-work impediments and the impact on effective business-school relationships, the specific provision of Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS), the delivery and assessment of nationally recognised training, and associated quality assurance processes are outside the scope of this discussion paper

*Questions:*

- *Are there other challenges particular to school-business relationships that are focused on school-to-work?*
- *What could be done to address these challenges?*

### **3.6 Making appropriate use of technology**

As technology becomes ever more integrated into business, education, and the lives of students, it is likely to become an increasingly common way for businesses to contribute to schools. Businesses already donate equipment to schools, and provide professional development to help teachers use technology to enhance their teaching. The communication opportunities that technology can provide also offer a way to overcome proximity barriers for schools and students that are in remote communities or otherwise isolated.

However, technology also brings its own challenges. Community concerns over student safety in the 'virtual' world, informed by their own experience and the inevitable media coverage when things go wrong, must be recognised and addressed. The perception that students are more vulnerable online may reduce the willingness of parents and teachers to take advantage of opportunities such as businesses providing online mentoring of students. Transparency, clear communication and appropriate safeguards will be vital to ensuring the safe use and acceptance of technology-based school-business relationships.

The Roundtable could contribute to this by documenting case studies of good use of technology in a variety of school-business relationships. The guiding principles discussed in section 3.1 should also specifically address safe use of technology through reference to existing protocols or guidelines.

*Questions:*

- *What are some of the opportunities for use of technology in school-business relationships?*
- *Are there specific risks related to technology in school-business relationships, beyond those already covered by existing guidelines on the use of technology in schools?*

### **3.7 Measuring the outcomes of school-business relationships**

Most forms of investment must demonstrate an outcome in order to receive ongoing support. Business partners often have to justify the return on their investments to their managers, boards, or shareholders. Education partners also often have to demonstrate to their management, and the community in general, that the time and energy being invested into school-business relationships is producing outcomes for students.

The Australian survey found that around 45% of the schools and 35% of the businesses in the study had evaluated their relationship in some way. The methods used depended on the nature of the relationship, and included surveys of stakeholders; monitoring of participation rates, expenditure, or hours of activity; and tracking of student destination outcomes. The process and outcomes of the evaluation were not always documented, but when they were, this seemed to be associated with a greater longevity of the relationship. This seemed not to be causal, but to reflect a greater commitment to the relationship.

Evaluating the outcomes of a school-business relationship can make it easier to gain support for continuing the relationship, both from stakeholders within the school and business partners, and the broader community. It can also help to identify areas where existing activities could be improved, or new activities could be developed.

However, it is important to be realistic about the performance measures that are to be used. There are many factors that affect the educational outcomes for students, and it is likely to be difficult to measure changes in these outcomes that are directly attributable to a particular school-business relationship. Measures that focus on more immediate impacts, such as the numbers of students who report greater interest in science subjects as a result of science-focused relationship, are likely to be more realistic, and more useful.

To assist school and businesses in this area, it may be appropriate to develop a simple guide that provides advice on how to evaluate a school-business relationship. This work could include some case studies of evaluations in different types of school-business relationships to show how this can work in a variety of contexts.

*Questions:*

- *What do you think it is most important to measure?*
- *Would a 'Guide to Evaluating School-Business Relationships' be a useful addition to current resources? If so, what content would you like it to cover? What other resources currently exist to support the monitoring and evaluation of school-business relationships?*

## 4. Elements of a Practical Strategy

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The Roundtable has been tasked to develop “a practical strategy to ensure all schools can benefit from a business connection, with the aims of improving educational outcomes; harnessing business as a partner in education; and increasing successful partnerships”. This section outlines some preliminary thinking about what our response to this task might include.

### 4.1 Specific tools and broader strategies

The discussion in part 3 suggests that the strategy should include specific tools aimed at those directly involved in school-business relationships. Broader strategies aimed at making the environment for school-business relationships more supportive and proactive would also help to overcome some of the systemic issues.

Tools that might help schools, businesses and partnership brokers include:

- guiding principles for school-business relationships to ensure that they meet educational standards and community expectations
- case studies to capture and share good practice from a wide variety of school-business relationships across the education reform agenda, and in different contexts
- a guide to evaluating school-business relationships.

The latter could be broadened to give guidance to schools and businesses on other issues such as assessing the ‘fit’ with a potential partner; determining ‘fitness for purpose’; understanding different cultures; developing clear expectations; managing risks; and so on. While some of the content would be the same, separate guides might be needed to address the different perspectives, starting points, and communication needs of schools and businesses.

Strategies that would improve the environment for school-business relationships include:

- promoting the broader potential of school-business relationships – for example by explicitly including ‘partnerships with business’ as potential strategies in implementation plans under all areas of the education reform agenda
- encouraging more business to regard relationships with schools as contributing to their core business
- reducing barriers to larger-scale school-business relationships – for example by providing a single point of entry for information on working with schools across all jurisdictions
- addressing taxation barriers to donations to education.

*Questions:*

- *What tools would be useful to support school-business relationships?*

- *What strategies would improve the environment for school-business relationships?*

## 4.2 A national framework?

A national framework can be an effective way to get agreement and support for a policy direction from stakeholders at the highest levels. A framework for school-business relationships could incorporate:

- the guiding principles described in section 4.1
- a commitment to promoting school-business relationships across all relevant areas
- a mechanism for sharing information and good practice.

It would seem logical that a framework on school-business relationships should be endorsed by both education and business. On the education side, the most obvious body is the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood and Youth Affairs (MCEEDYA). The Council comprises all Ministers of Education, and can make commitments that are binding on education departments and government schools.

On the business side, the most appropriate body is less clear. While there are peak business organisations (BCA, AiG, ACCI), their endorsement of a framework on school-business relationships would not imply the same type of commitment.

*Questions:*

- *Do you think there is a benefit in having a national framework on school-business relationships? Why / why not?*
- *If so, who do you think the framework should be endorsed by?*

## 4.3 Thinking big

While there are some larger-scale school-business relationships in Australia, they are relatively few. Most current initiatives to promote school-business relationships focus on developing partnerships between individual schools and businesses.

One of the ideas behind the creation of the Business-School Connections Roundtable was to engage major corporations in thinking creatively about possibilities for larger-scale school-business relationships. Could a group of businesses in a geographic region partner with a cohort of schools, or an education authority? What about businesses across a particular industry? Or businesses interested in a particular education issue? Or could a major corporation partner with an education authority? What might these partnerships do? What would they look like? What would be the barriers?

While there are examples from overseas of major school-business relationships, these are often specific to the education system in that country. The Roundtable is therefore interested in the ideas of stakeholders about opportunities for larger-scale school-business relationships suitable for the Australian environment.

*Questions:*

- *What are the opportunities for larger-scale school-business relationships in Australia?*

- *Are there regional or systemic issues in education that would benefit from partnership with business?*
- *Are there existing successful school-business relationships that could be scaled up?*

## 5. Where to from here?

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### 5.1 Providing feedback

The Roundtable is very keen to receive feedback from all stakeholder groups on the issues raised in this discussion paper, and any other matters that are relevant to our work.

We encourage stakeholders to structure their submissions around the specific questions raised in this paper, and have provided a template that can be downloaded from [www.deewr.gov.au/BSCRountable](http://www.deewr.gov.au/BSCRountable).

Submissions should be emailed to the support team for the Roundtable at [BusinessSchoolConnections@deewr.gov.au](mailto:BusinessSchoolConnections@deewr.gov.au) by Friday 24 September 2010.

The Roundtable will also be conducting stakeholder consultations around the country. While the consultations will generally be structured around the issues raised in the discussion paper, particular sessions may focus on a subset of issues that are more relevant to the stakeholders at the session, or on which we need more input.

Information about the consultations, including dates and locations, will be available at [www.deewr.gov.au/BSCRountable](http://www.deewr.gov.au/BSCRountable).

### 5.2 What happens after that

The Roundtable will draw on the consultations, submissions, and other input to develop a final report to the Minister for Education that recommends:

*“a practical strategy to ensure all schools can benefit from a business connection, with the aims of:*

- *improving educational outcomes*
- *harnessing business as a partner in education*
- *increasing successful partnerships.”*

Our final report will be presented to the Minister for Education by 25 February 2011.