Jobs 4 Kids: Networking and Learning for Youth within one Regional Economy in Victoria, Australia

Paper submitted to the International Conference on Networks, Learning and Entrepreneurship held in Waterford, Ireland, December 7-8 2011.

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Abstract

In this paper I present some of the insights generated by ethnographic longitudinal research into regional learning networks focused on education, training and employment for youth that were instituted by the State government of Victoria, Australia from 2001 onwards. The research, funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Project, was completed by a team of researchers at Deakin University working in partnership with one of the networks: the Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network (SGR LLEN).

In this paper I will undertake a number of tasks. Given the remoteness of the research context I will provide a — necessarily limited — overview of both the geographical and policy context before outlining what a Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) is, and does. I then move to outline the establishment of an Employer Reference Group (ERG) as a key strategy of the SGR LLEN[i]. The paper closes with a synopsis of the research findings in regard to the possibilities within, and limitations around, a policy focus on networking and collaboration.

Keywords: youth, employment, Australia, learning, networks

The research and its context

In March 2003 a research team based in the then Faculty of Education at Deakin University in Geelong and working in partnership with a community network were awarded Australian Research Council funding for a three year Linkage project to undertake a case study of the network. The research project included two separate but interwoven components. Both were concerned with exploring the notion of networks being taken up as a post-compulsory[ii] education policy response to increasing risk for young people in transition from education to employment in the globalized economy. The first component involved a series of interviews and observations to explore stakeholders' — including but not limited to schools and young people

— understandings of risk and networking. The second component involved a case study of the formation and operation of the network. This component would be undertaken using a range of qualitative methods: participant observation in and around the network for two years, recurring interviews with key stakeholders during that time, and documentary analysis. This component of the research explored the extent to which a governmentally instituted network was able to function as a learning community capable of fostering systemic change in post-compulsory education and training in the Geelong region.

The Geelong region includes a range of locales: urban, rural, semi-rural, country towns and coastal living (Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network Inc 2010). Given the physical landscape with the expansive Port Phillip bay to the north and Bass Strait — the body of ocean that separates Victoria from the southernmost state of Tasmania — to the south the Geelong region nestles beyond the flat, brown marshlands in a natural and highly identifiable enclave, many of its boundaries being defined by nature itself.

Geelong is, after Melbourne, the second most populous city in the state of Victoria, Australia. In policy discourse Geelong city is a regional centre, home to just under 222,000 residents (City of Greater Geelong 2011). However, residents see themselves as urban dwellers with a long and proud history that reaches back to the early 19th Century when Geelong emerged as a major industrial centre (City of Greater Geelong 2011). Within the broader Geelong region, the population profile differs markedly by sub-location. The resident population of the region is heavily concentrated in the City of Greater Geelong urban area. Social disadvantage persists in some suburbs of Geelong city (Vinson 2004) and this has brought the area scrutiny and intervention by State government (Department for Victorian Communities 2003). However, the city of Geelong itself demonstrates strong economic polarization: against, and within, areas of disadvantage are marbled pockets of affluence, leafy suburbs that are home to a number of prestigious private schools.

Over the past decade the region has at times been imagined as a potential ‘powerhouse’ of the state given projected levels of population, economic and employment growth beyond the state average (Farago 2003, City of Greater Geelong 2011). In 2006 the region had a 6.88billion AUD gross regional product economy that was in transition, under pressure from labour-abundant nations and in the process of refocusing its assets to meet the local effects of

globalization. While overall the region was prosperous and dealing effectively with the transition from a mainly manufacturing environment to a diverse range of industries and occupations, 36% of economic output and 11% of direct jobs were considered to be at risk (Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network Inc 2010).

These shifts have had a profound influence on opportunities for youth in transition to full-time employment. Fully 77% of the manufacturing jobs lost in the five years to 2001 were those that previously provided an entry point to secure work for youth (Strategic Economic Solutions 2003). In 2010, the unemployment rate throughout the Region was averaged at 3.6% (Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network Inc 2010) yet the unemployment rate amongst young people, Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders, and within particular geographic locations was considerably higher and a major concern in a region which prided itself on 'looking after its own'.

In responding to both the transition of the economy to continue to meet the globalized context and the concerns around youth unemployment the role of education and training was identified as pivotal by policy analysts. The Geelong region was acknowledged to be strong in terms of the breadth of education and training provision (in both providers and the range of programme options on offer) but weak in terms of the enduring conservatism within the education and training sector and the concentration of much provision in the urban areas around the City of Greater Geelong. A pivotal challenge was the need to build meaningful relationships between industry and education and training (Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network Inc 2010: 38). It is here that the networking agenda came to the fore and the establishment of Local Learning and Employment Networks occurred.

Networking as a policy response for youth 'at risk'

Over recent decades and in common with many Western nations, Australian governments, both State and Federal, have increasingly move from programme to network-based approaches in responding to the multi-faceted effects of globalization. According to Latham (2001), then leader of the Australian Federal Labor Party, in the great ideological struggle of the 20th Century between capitalism and communism, mainstream politics lost sight of a discourse to deal with social issues. Latham argued for a communitarian, so-called Third Way political agenda, one that Rose (1999) argues is explicitly grounded in certain values. For instance, New Labour's policies

in the United Kingdom promoted four values: equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community (cited Rose 1999: 470). Rose argues that, while equal work and opportunity are familiar elements for left-of-centre politics, responsibility and community are distinctive. They invoke ideals of partnership, community, civic responsibility and mutuality, amongst other things (Rose 1999: 474). Indeed for Latham (2001), the key elements of Third Way communitarianism were lifelong learning, social partnerships and service devolution.

While there is a certain implicit appeal to this policy discourse, communitarian discourses have been subject to critique. Often this critique centres on the idealisation of community (Bauman 2001). For Bauman, in an insecure world the professional classes have seceded into secure communities and it is from these spaces that notions of community, and the moral vocabulary that accompanies them, emerge in an abstracted way. Communities beyond the gates are characterised by lack and deemed to be in need of capacity building that will result in the production of certain preferred ways of being. This capacity building is not the responsibility of a monolithic state but rather is the responsibility of a number of non-government agencies working under the stewardship of the so-called 'enabling state' and toward a diversity of ends (Botsman and Latham 2001). The critique here is that a governmental concern with capacity building for both individuals and communities 'at-risk' reflects a history of liberal governmentalities in which certain, resoundingly negative, 'assumptions about the mind of the masses have been central to their regulation' (Walkerdine 1997: 15).

Whether or not such assumptions were apparent in the policy surrounding the establishment of Local Learning and Employment Networks is beyond the focus of this paper. However, notions of community capacity building were unquestionably present in Victoria in this, and a number of other initiatives (Department of Premier & Cabinet 2001, 2005). In 1999, the Australian Labor party gained power in the State election in Victoria with the electorate signalling a wariness of the former government's policies of economic rationalism. There was a sense that many regional areas had been neglected, and social structures damaged, under such policies (Connors 2000). Labor, at both State and Federal level, was committed to fostering greater social cohesion and identified the education and training policy domain as central to the realisation of that commitment (Keating and Robinson 2003, Department of Premier & Cabinet 2001, Eldridge 2001, Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs 1999). Enhanced outcomes for youth at risk in transition from education to employment would come

subsequent to community capacity building, a role that would fall to LLEN. It is to an overview of their establishment that I now turn.

Local Learning and Employment Networks

In 2001, subsequent to a Ministerial Review into Post-compulsory Education and Training Pathways (Kirby 2000) the State government began a process of implementing a blanket of 31 planning networks that would ultimately cover all of the state. The Ministerial Review had focused on the pathways of young Victorians in transition from education to employment in the globalized context and had found that their transitions were 'uncertain, unequal and poorly signposted, the transition process ha[d] become more complex and unpredictable' (Kirby 2000: 7). It was argued in what became known as the Kirby Report (Kirby 2000) that youth faced persistent and severe difficulties unknown to previous generations.

In a phased process, Local Learning and Employment Networks were implemented by State government as recommended in the Kirby Report. This phased process recognised differences in regional 'preparedness' with the initial focus placed on regions such as Geelong that could demonstrate existing strong networks. While consideration was given to the view that some form of network might evolve organically (Keating and Robinson 2003) it was not accepted that this would ensure the benefits of networking would be available across the State. The Geelong Region LLEN that participated in this research was one of the first-phase LLEN.

LLEN were established as Incorporated Associations, a status that was proposed to enhance their ability to collaborate beyond the boundaries that constrain innovation in government-administered structures of post-compulsory education, training and employment. They were governed by an elected and representative Committee of Management and administered by a small staff. Importantly, LLEN were *not* to be service providers[iii]. Rather, LLEN would network-the-networks, bringing together the expertise and experience of local education providers, industry, community organisations, individuals and government. As a result of their local decisions, collaboration and community building efforts, opportunities for youth — with an initial focus on those aged 15-19 — would be enhanced. Each LLEN was initially funded by government at AUD400,000[iv] for three years and, while accountable to the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC) — also established subsequent to the Ministerial Review — was managed by the Department of Education, Employment and Training[v].

From the outset the involvement of industry in LLEN was considered crucial to their success. Kirby (2000: 7) had noted that one of the factors in young people falling 'through the cracks' of the education and training system was the weak linkages between the components of the education and training system, community support and industry. The role of LLEN would be to leverage collaborative networks that already existed by adopting a local co-operative approach to planning that would renew and strengthen communities, minimize duplication and wasteful competition, and acknowledge community and industry shared responsibility and ownership of post-compulsory education and training (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission 2002). In Geelong, the central involvement of the Chamber of Commerce as the auspicing agency for the LLEN bid had been commended by the Department from the outset. Once established, the Department had reminded all LLEN of the need to ensure broad industry representation on their Committees of Management. In its initial stages this representation in Geelong largely occurred through the active involvement of the Chair of the Geelong Chamber of Commerce who was the initial, and long-standing, Chair of SGR LLEN. In subsequent LLEN Committee of Management elections the Executive Officer of the Geelong Area Consultative Committee (GACC)[vi] also joined the Committee of Management.

In 2003 the LLEN commissioned Geelong Business Network (GBN) [vii] to research and recommend ways in which the LLEN could move to an active partnership between the education and training sector and local industry. In large part this recognized that, while effective vocational education and training was of vital importance in ensuring young people were equipped with skills for their transition to independence and ongoing learning, there is an equally vital need for employers to make a commitment to, and be supported in, employing youth. As a result of this review (Geelong Business Network 2004), the major drive to broaden industry involvement for SGR LLEN commenced: the establishment of the SGR LLEN Employer Reference Group (ERG). Geelong was the first, and for a long time the only, LLEN to establish such a body and it has been pivotal in the drive to secure local jobs for local kids.

Establishing an Employer Reference Group

The purpose of the ERG was to ensure that education and training in SGR LLEN region addressed the realities of the workplace, both currently and into the future, in ways that would optimize the employability skills of young people in the region (Geelong Business Network

2004). There was a dual rationale for its establishment: the Geelong area was one of both high youth unemployment *and* major skills shortages (Smart Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network 2007). The ERG would act as an advisory group to the LLEN Committee of Management. Under a direction of its Chair and Deputy Chair the group would have two roles: firstly to enable employers from a broad cross-section of industry within the region to input to the on-going development and implementation of education and training; secondly to help relay information from the education sector into industry on education opportunities and issues.

Shortly after the inaugural meeting of the ERG, LLEN staff met with the elected Chair of the ERG (who held a senior management role at a major telecommunications company) to discuss how best to recruit employers for an active role with the LLEN. Each of the LLEN staff outlined their respective roles and the challenges they were encountering in connecting with employers. For instance, as a result of the surge of vocational education policy there had been a massive increase in the numbers of students experiencing structured workplace learning within their school experience. However, the demand for opportunities was well in excess of the supply. More employers needed to be recruited but even when they were able to be recruited a fundamental problem existed in reconciling 'business time' with the periods, days and semesters of 'school time'.

Meanwhile, from a school perspective, teachers were under pressure to respond to the diverse needs of the increasing numbers of students remaining in school: the priority for teachers was to work with their senior students and ensure their success in the long-standing, university entrance focused Victorian senior school certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). This was the outcome that parents, and society, still demanded of schools. Yet this focus was at the price of any priority being placed on those students who opted for the newer, innovative and increasingly popular, Victorian Certificate in Applied Learning (VCAL). From the perspective of the LLEN the resolution to these issues would lie in a move from ad hoc work placement and industry visits to establish long-term relationships between schools, students and employers that met their respective strategic needs.

The response of the ERG Chair was to suggest that the network should 'reverse engineer' its work into something employers could quite simply connect to through use of their own discourse

including a formal business plan. For him, in communicating with industry what would matter was 'the call to action': the LLEN was focused on jobs for local kids, particularly those who came from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or who were at greatest risk of disengaging from education with all the social consequences that would accrue in regard to future labour market participation (Beck 1992).

Initially the focus of the ERG was to provide input into the ongoing development and implementation of post-compulsory education and training in the Geelong region. However, by the second half of 2004 the Group was challenging the LLEN: having provided input they wanted to know what was going to be done with their input to improve opportunities for young people. During 2004 the LLEN had begun to explore the idea of 'Jobs for Kids' (J4K) to confront the youth unemployment figure in the region through the development of a suite of programs for education and industry including the potential for a one-stop shop for youth employment services along with a youth employment media campaign (O'Dowd 2004).

The resulting report and programme recommendations did not stand up to the scrutiny the ERG were able to exert. Ultimately the campaign was reformatted on the basis of interdependence with a *commitment to youth* as its organizing concept. This placed the focus firmly on partnership and a series of interconnected dimensions that would link existing post-compulsory initiatives at all levels of government with the work of the LLEN and all its Working Parties and the commitment of industry. This campaign would be framed in the discourse of industry: a 2005-2007 Business Plan with six strategic priority areas articulated.

The six strategic priorities for the period were, firstly, to build strong partnerships between industry and the education and training sector to meet local employment and skills needs; the already established 'Adopt a School' initiative was included in this priority. The second priority was to expand the range of school to work pathways available within the region; initiatives here included streamlining the range of structured workplace learning opportunities already underway as well as integrating these learning opportunities with student's school curriculum. Thirdly, there was a priority focused on improving employability skills and job awareness of Geelong youth, including attention to removing a gendered division of labour. The fourth priority was to update teachers' awareness of the needs of industry. This included industry placements for teachers; it also included opportunities for employers to be 'Principal for a Day'. Fifthly, there

was a priority to raise parents' awareness of the value and range of vocational pathways leading to jobs for their children; here the initiatives included industry tours for parents and students and careers sample programs for parents and their children. The final strategic priority was to raise the profile of vocational and applied learning pathways in the region; the initiatives under this priority area included a media campaign for J4K, an Employer Recognition Program promoting the achievements of students in workplace learning programs, regional Training Awards and so on. In all the J4K campaign contained over thirty interrelated initiatives to actively involve industry in the work of SGR LLEN.

The ERG J4K campaign was centred on the development of a multi-strand strategy presented in the discourse of business. However this, alone, would not suffice to remove the barriers to a substantive networked effort to support young people in becoming a part of the skilled workforce of tomorrow's Geelong. Employers needed assistance in building networks with their communities to ensure they could access the support they may need to working for and with disadvantaged youth. Parents, key advisors to and supporters of their children in matters of education, training and employment, needed increased awareness of the meaning of 'career' in the 21st Century. Teachers needed pre and in-service training that enabled them to develop effective education and training initiatives that would prepare young people for the post-industrial workplace. As such, the importance of an integrated strategy that drew on the capacity of all stakeholders in education, training and employment was underscored. It was one thing to launch a J4K campaign and quite another to make it work in practice. A number of comments are required here.

Implications for practice

Firstly, the leadership of the ERG has been pivotal at all stages. The post-compulsory education, training and employment sector that is the strategic imperative for SGR LLEN is constructed through the boundary work of exceptional individuals into whose hands the network has been 'able to focus its volume of social capital . . . power incommensurate with the agent's personal contribution' (Bourdieu 1986: 251). The various Chairs of the ERG were boundary agents forging a connection and flows of communication across boundaries; acting as both an advocate and an adaptor between industry and education as a new post-compulsory education, training *and employment* sector has been forming. As influential and visible players who saw involvement in

the work of LLEN as central to achievement of their organisational strategies, they were able to contribute significantly to the social capital of the sector.

Secondly, the J4K campaign was supported by key stakeholders including the Department of Education Regional Office, the Regional Industry Career Adviser, the Local Community Partnership agency, the local Technical and Further Education Institute, the Geelong Educators Network, Deakin University, Group Training Companies and the alliance of the region's local governments. This range, and level, of stakeholder was necessary to ensure the network had the bridging and linking networks (Granovetter 1973) required to make substantive change. They also contributed resources to facilitate action research and change-oriented projects aligned with the campaign.

Finally with the evolution of the J4K campaign it became imperative to find mechanisms to reconnect 'real employers' — the small employer just getting on with trying to make a living — with the SGR LLEN approach of making 'multiplicities': lines of intensity which would draw on, build and meet the genuine desire of local employers to provide local jobs for local youth. In part this has involved what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would refer to as one of 'alogical consistency': the LLEN would promote its work by *not* promoting itself. Thus in 2005 the glossy Annual Report of previous years was replaced with a photocopied version and the money saved on such 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984) was invested in a range of activities for industry. These activities did not focus on educating the community about the LLEN as an entity but, rather, focused on the J4K campaign, how employers were benefitting from it and how to become involved in it. The overall intent of these activities would be to generate a greater understanding of the shift to a new post-compulsory sector that integrated education, training and employment and a level of confidence in how such a sector could contribute to 'jobs for kids'.

Sustainable learning networks?

> Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for examples, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance. (Castells 2000, pp.501-2)

I wish to use the remainder of this paper to engage with the notion of sustainable learning networks. In the years since their establishment LLEN have been extensively reviewed on behalf of government (KPMG 2008, Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission

2005, 2003, 2002), those reviews have been sufficiently strong that, ten years on, LLEN are a central, government-funded player in the post-compulsory arena. LLEN were implemented from 2001 on the basis of a three-year contract, subsequent to this initial three-year funding the intention was that were to be self-sustaining. This status could occur in one of two ways: LLEN would have secured a source of non-government funding or they would indeed have created structural change and, as organizations charged with networking-the-networks, they would no longer need to exist. In other words, the partnerships they had established would sustain. Our research did not support this latter option as an appropriate aspiration. We concur with Kaplan (2003): partnerships do not *need* to sustain; it is the project that is the basis of the partnership that must sustain. So what does sustainability mean in the context of a learning network?

In the research that underpinned this paper the central question posed concerned the extent to which a government-instituted network could function as a learning community capable of forging systemic change. From the outset, this LLEN declared it would be 'an opportunity for the community to act' rather than 'an entity that would act on behalf of the community'. This approach differed from that adopted by many other LLEN who opted for a more traditional, structured operation, investing in staffing and/or capital items and, at times, acting as a service provider. For example, SGR LLEN did not have either a high profile office front or a branded vehicle that were a feature of some. Instead, a small shared office with minimal staffing supported a Working Party structure which allowed members from a diverse range of agencies and organisations to become involved in the opportunity to debate, design and experiment with how to achieve shared objectives.

Throughout their existence, all LLEN have worked with continually reducing government funds and this has been a source of both challenge and opportunity. LLEN never assumed the power of funding that Kirby had suggested in his Review (Kirby 2000). While some LLEN argued that this had been to their detriment and had eroded their authority (Seddon et al. 2005) the consensus within SGR LLEN was that they were richer for it: the LLEN connects one entity with another and in the process enables *existing* resources to flow. In their first years the project funding held by SGR made life 'difficult' as the motivations to engage with the LLEN were murky. On the one hand it made some draw away from the LLEN believing — as the LLEN itself experienced in receiving government funds (Kamp 2009) — that 'if you fund our project you will therefore interfere in what is done with those funds.' On the other hand some community members were

motivated to become involved 'because you have funds, not because we believe we have to work together for the good of young people.' Yet given the severe limitations on funding, LLEN were left with their resource primarily being their ability to bring community stakeholders together to explore, experiment and collaborate in strategic ways.

> The question is, 'Do we really need more resources or do we need people to think through using the resources better?' Because I work hard, but all those people that I work with all work as hard as I do because we are all equally committed. At the end of the day, I hope these meetings that we're having on the post-compulsory sector are going to see . . . a single strategic plan for the post-compulsory education training and employment sector in this region. Not an ACFE plan, not a LLEN plan, not a DE&T plan, a post-compulsory education training and employment sector strategic plan that all of us will deliver. (Anne-Marie, Executive Officer, 2005)

However, a caveat is required here: such a perception presumes a level of existing economic capital in the network sufficient to seed projects, as well as a level of social capital sufficient to risk working collaboratively. This is a bold assumption given the continuing rationalization of government funding in the context of the global financial crisis and unchanged accountability measures.

For SGR LLEN the commitment to a knowledge-building approach that drives a learning agenda within the network has remained consistent and this has been argued to be not about the availability of funding but rather about mindset. In earlier work (Kamp 2006, 2009) I have suggested that all network members must be able to imagine new ways of working to meet the intention of sustainability woven through the Victorian government policy. Community capacity building puts a particular focus on the knowledge creation of a *learning* network rather than the knowledge management of a learning *network.* Yet, while SGR LLEN staff might argue that action learning is about mindset, this assertion leaves unresolved the question of capacity. Most of the 'action research' that I observed during the course of my participant observation would be categorised as practical action research which left contextual constraints unproblematized; some could not be categorised as action research at all. In earlier sections of this paper, I made reference to the critique of capacity building agendas and the 'othering' they risk. Such a risk would demand an interest in how to foster action research that rests within an emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interest (Habermas 1972). The ultimate removal of any discretionary funding for LLEN did foster an inability to, firstly, invest in either professional development for LLEN members including employers around action research itself and, secondly, to promote

through publication and dissemination the learning occurring within the network. Each of these is inherently problematic. They weakened the 'triangle' of action, research and training (Lewin 1946: 42), they also played with the possibility that, unsupported, networks charged with innovation and systemic change would fall back into using knowledge based in past practice (Stokes and Tyler 2001).

Our society is dominated by flows and there are material supports of such flows, such as information and communication technologies, that help move things around (Castells 2000/1996). Some LLEN members suggested the inability of SGR LLEN to maximise flow reflected on-going problems in manipulating information and communications technologies which resulted in a lost opportunity to move accurate information on the LLEN and the knowledge it was building into the community. From the start VLESC had understood that the knowledge transfer was only the initial stage of what LLEN were expected to achieve; their key achievements would rest on the 'linchpin' of the community building that came from creating of learning communities and knowledge creation (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission 2002: , p.ii). Community building is a means of developing social capital but the extent of this social capital is dependent not only on a network of connections with a volume of capital but also on ability to effectively mobilize those connections. It is difficult to question the conclusion that there was a lost opportunity in this the failure to manipulate the SGR LLEN website given effective social capital *demands* the exchange of ideas and information (Coleman 1988). In large part, this failure to manipulate the possibilities of technology reflected a lack of IT skills and a lack of funds with which to buy-in such skills. As such, it is also difficult to question the conclusion that this was an area where the potential of the ERG to provide capacity was not released.

In a context of performativity, as Blackmore (2004: 22) argues, a policy that implements and funds networks is only one part of the machinic activity, quality assurance and performance indicators are the pedals of the machine; audit, review, evaluations and so on are the tools that calibrate the machine. In the absence of change to these 'pedals and tools' the development of social capital was undermined through limiting the opportunities for LLEN members to build the norms and trust required for a whole-of-government whole-of-community post-compulsory education training and employment sector. One of the major restraints for SGR LLEN, and all other LLEN, was the inability for the Department to perceive itself within the LLEN. In

pursuing systemic change it was vital that LLEN contain not only the bonding ties that already existed in this 'tight' community, and the bridging ties that brought new players—most significantly industry—into the network, but also the linking ties that would bring in government itself (Granovetter 1973). This was imperative for a number of reasons. It would ensure that government, as part of the LLEN, was also accountable to the network for those dimensions *only* it could contribute, for instance resolving inconsistencies in out-dated funding models for educational provision premised on a programme rather than network basis. It would also enable government to work with community in finding a new language for governance and accountability that recognised the rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) nature of networks at work and valued the kinds of 'underground' initiatives that could not be 'counted' but provided fertile soil for the programme approaches that were proving effective.

Multiplicities, such as networks are, are distinct in the way they continue: always starting in the middle rather than moving from beginning to end as a whole might.

> To continue a multiplicity is to move into a zone that is not logically predetermined, but rather 'invents by differentiating'. That is why duration supposes a form of time that no longer works through succession or permanence, but rather as an open whole, constantly 'differentiating' and starting up again from peculiar points. (Rajchman 2000: 59)

Thus the issue is not how many members a LLEN has, nor how structured it becomes, or whether its partnerships sustain, but rather its ability to continue to experiment in the face of new challenges and, in the process, to maintain the desire of an evolving group of members to work collaboratively for youth.

Conclusion

In this paper I have provided something of an introduction to one attempt by government to use networking as an institutional response to the increased challenges faced by youth in transition from education towards employment in the globalized context. At the beginning of this paper, I noted Mark Latham's (2001) assertions that lifelong learning, social partnerships and service devolution are key elements of a communitarian approach to social policy. Each of these elements was already present, to some degree, in the Geelong region even before LLEN were implemented. Yet this tight community that 'looked after its own' had not been able to address concerns around the risks of early school leaving and youth unemployment.

Local Learning and Employment Networks were an attempt to build bonded, bridged and linked post-compulsory education and training networks that would improve opportunities for young people. This has often demanded a provocative stance in a context where new ways of thinking about, and doing things, can be met with community suspicion; where government, as part of the network, can run the risk of not only defaulting to habitual approaches to accountability but can even elevate those approaches given the lack of direct control that can be exercised outside of Departmental structures. LLEN did not 'live in a rational, linear world' however 'formal thinking' about planning, which was used for control and accountability both within LLEN and between LLEN and the Department 'implie[d] that they do' (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission 2002: 15). This failure to learn a new discourse for accountability in government-funded networks has lessened the potential of the networks to achieve all that was promised of them. Learning — by employers, young people, parents, teachers and, most particularly, public servants — is perhaps the most fundamental challenge in forming sustainable networks[viii].

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[i] For a full overview of SGR LLEN projects at the time of the research see Kamp (2006).

[ii] At the time of the research compulsory education in Victoria ended at age 16, usually at completion of Year 10. Most students continued to post-compulsory education, continuing to Years 11 and 12. The senior school qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), is completed in four units over these two full-time years. From 1 January 2010 the compulsory education age was raised to age 17.

[iii] To some degree, either by government direction or by local decision, this avoidance of a service role became muddied for some LLEN. However, for SGR LLEN, there was a ongoing commitment to avoid any role in service provision.

[iv] From 2005 this figure would decrease to AUD267,000.

[v] During the course of this research the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training was restructured. Subsequent to 2003 it was referred to as the Department of Education & Training before becoming the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. My use of the term 'the Department' refers to any iteration.

[vi] The Geelong Area Consultative Committee is one of 56 community based organisations across Australia funded by the Federal government. Area Consultative Committees work in partnership with the Federal government's Department of Transport and Regional Services to identify opportunities, priorities and development strategies for their regions thereby promoting employment and training opportunities, growth of the business sector and regional development.

[vii] The Geelong Business Network (GBN), a community based and supported organisation that was established in 1985 by the City of Greater Geelong, is also active. It acts as a broker of business networks for small to medium enterprises to promote cooperation, partnerships, alliances and joint commercial action. GBN staff had been closely involved with the LLEN since inception and in 2004 the benefits of working network – to – network lead to a strengthening of this connection.

[viii] I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their thought-provoking comments on an earlier draft of this paper.