

Choosing ethical partners: one institution's efforts to engage in ethical partnerships

Michaela Baker

Macquarie University

The WIL literature discusses the importance of engaging with partners in an ethical way (Orrell, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Smith et al, 2009). However, how higher education institutions *choose* ethical partners is an area that is neglected. It might be argued that much institutional concern is about finding enough partners to meet student demand. However, it is also necessary to ensure that partners align with the mission and vision of learning through participation, as well as those of the higher education institution. This is necessary to make sure the partners we choose to work with do not prompt ethical queries or issues which could be damaging to both student and institution. This paper examines the partnerships literature and how other organisations make choices about ethical products or organisations. These case studies demonstrate that the choice of an ethical partner has at least two dimensions: what constitutes an ethical partner and how to determine whether or not a potential partner is ethical. The development and implementation of policies and procedures to facilitate decisions is required. In this paper I present a case study of how we are developing a framework to guide the formation of 'ethically aligned' relationships with partners.

Keywords: Ethics; ethical partners; policy development and implementation

Background

In 2008, Macquarie University introduced, as part of curriculum renewal, the Participation and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative. This initiative embeds units in the Macquarie University curriculum that involve community-engaged learning that is mutually beneficial to the student, the University and the organisation in which student participation activities take place. Intrinsic to the PACE initiative is the development of mutually beneficial relationships by Macquarie University with a range of partners. Partners must conform to the University's ethical standards and the activities undertaken must align with the PACE initiative's overall aim of promoting the well-being of people and the planet. Thus we must make sure the partners we choose do not prompt ethical queries.

This paper has 4 aims:

1. To examine the existing literature about partnerships in the context of ethics
2. To examine how other organisations make choices (or advocate making choices) about ethical organisations
3. To suggest how we might align our screening processes with Macquarie's Ethics Statement
4. To outline what we are doing at Macquarie to safeguard ethical alignment with partners.

The literature on partnerships

The literature about learning through participation (LTP)¹ discusses ethics in various forms (Peterson et al., 2007; Crabtree et al., 2008; Tryon et al., 2008) and the importance of engaging with partners or community stakeholders in an ethical way (Orrell, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Smith et al, 2009). However, how institutions might go about *choosing* ethical partners is an area that is relatively neglected. Indeed, it might be argued that much, if not most, institutional concern is about how to find enough partners and placements to cater to student demand. However, it is also necessary to ensure that partners align with the mission and vision of LTP, as well as those of the institution. This is necessary to make sure the partners we choose do not prompt ethical queries or issues which could be damaging to both student and institution. The question of alignment with the ethical principles of the higher education institution is difficult, and requires clarification of both what those values are, and what would constitute alignment with them. In addition, it requires the development of procedures and policies to guide those who choose partners in their decision-making.

¹ The term LTP covers all models of participation, including, but not exclusive to, WIL, work-based learning, cooperative education, service-learning, etc (Winchester-Seeto & Mackaway, 2011).

The majority of the literature about ethical partnerships in LTP focuses on ethical interactions between institutions and their partner organisations (for example, Weston et. al., 2009; Flicker et. al., 2007). The initial choice of ethical partners has not yet been covered in great depth, though some authors do point to the need for a closer analysis. This is motivated by the new opportunities and challenges that arise, particularly given the ‘increased emphasis on community partnerships’ (Silka & Renault-Caragianes, 2006, p. 171) in higher education. However, the literature on research collaborations as a form of community engagement does contain some information from which inferences can be drawn regarding the choice of ethical partners and the initial ethical issues surrounding partnerships.

In discussing the ethics of research partnerships between universities and communities, Silka and Renault-Caragianes (2006) state that issues regarding the ethics of decision-making in research partnerships ‘arise at every stage’ (p. 171) of the research process. They argue that an ongoing collaborative process throughout the research project is essential for a truly ethical partnership, and that partners must commit to reaching mutual decisions about every stage of the research process, from design and implementation to the distribution of results. They also point to the fact that one-sided collaboration often leads to a ‘paucity of benefits’ (p. 173) being derived from the research. It can be inferred from this that for an ethical partnership, partners must be equally committed to a truly collaborative process before a partnership is agreed upon. (See also Brugge & Hynes, 2005; Brugge & Kole, 2005).

Brugge and Kole (2005) state that there was a general sentiment amongst participants in community-engaged research that ethical partners must demonstrate respect and a commitment to building a relationship within the community. Honesty, equity and clear communication were also important to the participants’ perception of a partner as being.

It is also clear that partner organisations must be aligned in their ethical principles, as demonstrated by Agyeman and Bryan’s (2005) case study of a partnership between the Mystic River Watershed Association and Tufts University, which had the goal of working within surrounding communities to promote understanding of issues of environmental justice pertinent to the Mystic River watershed. This required mutual agreement upon ethical principles of environmental justice, and could not have been possible had either party been found to adhere to ethical principles contrary to its goal of addressing environmental justice. It can be inferred that when aiming to set up a mutually beneficial partnership, there was an imperative to seek out potential partners who adhere to similar ethical principles.

Other organisations’ approaches

To better understand how to develop ‘ethically aligned’ relationships with partners, information was sought from a range of organisations on how they address this issue, along with evidence from organisations who promote ‘ethical’ choices/products. Data was gathered, from these organisations: The St James Ethic Centre and the ‘Responsible Business Practice’ project; The Australian Institute for Corporate Responsibility; the Ethical Consumer Guide; Hunter Hall Investment Management Limited; and, Australian Ethical Investment and Superannuation as well as The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Common themes

Three common themes emerged:

1. *Ethics policies/Values statements/Principles* – The organisations reviewed provide statements about their commitment to ethically responsible behaviour/partnerships and the provision of ethical services/products via documents such as an ethics policy, a values statement or a set of principles. These documents outline at a high level the key ethics principles and values that underpin and guide the structures, procedures, decision making, etc. within the organisation.
2. *Transparency* – Organisations provide examples of what they consider to be ‘ethical’ as well as ‘non-ethical’ products/activities/partners, countries. Some organisations, such as Hunter Hall Investment Management Limited, also concede that the perception of whether activities/products are ethical can be subject to revision as circumstances change and state in their Ethical Investment Policy they ‘will seek to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions about the ethicality of an activity yet will be flexible so as to adapt to change’ (p.2).
3. *Acknowledgement of complexity* – There is a general sense that these organisations recognise the issue of ethics as complex and there is no single answer to every ethical question.

Case study: Hunter Hall Investment Management Limited

Hunter Hall Investment Management Limited (hereafter Hunter Hall) is Australia's largest dedicated ethical investment manager. They aim to create wealth for investors over time through careful and responsible investment in undervalued companies.

According to the company's Ethical Investment Policy (the Policy) the organisation avoids investing in businesses that are involved in activities that do harm to people, animals or the environment. They utilise their two page, easy to read, Policy document to communicate this value along with the high level processes they follow to support their ethical approach to investment.

The Policy reflects a cautious approach to word choice, e.g. 'Hunter Hall is committed to the *concept* of...'; 'seeks to avoid...'; 'in its *opinion*'; 'aims to provide'; and, includes caveats such as 'investors should be aware...'; and, 'Hunter Hall will seek to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions about the ethicality of an activity...'. The careful wording of their Policy may be indicative of three things: the complexity and 'grey' that can surround the issue of ethics; acknowledgement that a Policy document functions as a guide and not a 'rule book'; and, that risk or risk management is an inherent aspect of ethics.

Beyond the high level statement about avoiding investment in businesses that do harm to people, animals or the environment, the Policy provides insight into the approach used by this company to guide investment decision making. Hunter Hall applies both a negative and positive screening 'criteria' to their process. The negative screening criteria (Ethical Investment Policy, p.1) does not name specific companies to avoid, rather it identifies types of companies, namely those that derive operating revenue from direct and material involvement in activities that do harm to people, animals or the environment, e.g. the manufacture or sale of weapons, tobacco manufacture, animal testing for cosmetics and unremediated destruction of the environment.

Hunter Hall accept there are times when the screening process is not straightforward and decisions may be 'borderline' or 'unclear' (Ethical Investment Policy, p.1). In these instances company Directors 'retain the right to exercise their collective judgement and will take the merits of the investment into account' (Ethical Investment Policy, p.1). A similar approach could be applied to potentially 'ethically contentious' PACE partnerships, whereby the PACE Advisory Committee, or another group, review proposed 'borderline' partnerships and make final decisions.

Macquarie University's Ethics Statement

Through the examination of the case studies above, it becomes clearer that the choice of an ethical partner (organisation, product) has at least two main dimensions:

1. *What* constitutes (in a given context, for a given organisation) an ethical partner and
2. *How* to go about determining whether or not a potential partner counts as an ethical partner given the answer to 1.

In answering the first of these questions, preliminary discussions in the PACE Ethics Subcommittee concluded that the most sensible approach would be to align what constitutes an ethical partner with Macquarie University's Ethics Statement. The Statement is framed in terms of the idea of acting with integrity, which is defined in the document as being 'consciously informed by a framework of core values and principles that are given consistent, practical effect'. Among the values outlined in the Statement are:

- Respecting the intrinsic dignity of all persons
- Neither initiating nor colluding in harmful acts.

In addition to these values, the PACE Criteria state that Participation units should align with the overall aim of the PACE initiative to 'promote the well-being of people and the planet'.

These values provide a good starting point for defining an ethical partner. We might begin by negatively defining an ethical partner as one which does not violate any of these principles. In addition to this, the University has a policy of not engaging in any activities or partnerships involving the tobacco industry, so any organisations that are part of that industry may be immediately eliminated as potential partners.

That said, these values are fairly broad (as maybe befits an overarching statement) and may not necessarily offer sufficient guidance as to exactly what may constitute a violation of the principles outlined. There is a clear role for professional judgement in individual cases. However, in order for that judgement to be exercised, adequate resourcing, support and assurances are required. This is particularly important given the potential for negative

publicity for the University should a partnership be entered into with an organisation that turns out not to be a properly ethical partner.

Procedural issues

If ethical alignment with partners is taken seriously, there are a number of implications for institutions offering WIL. Screening a potential partner to see whether or not they conform to the requirements for being an ethical partner is one of a large number of steps that staff must go through before a partnership agreement can be signed. These steps include contacting prospective partners, getting legal approval via the signing of partnership agreements, delineating student projects, generation of activity agreements, and securing Work Health and Safety approval for the activity. Given the large number of processes involved in securing an agreement with a partner, streamlining each of these as much as possible is desirable.

There are a number of concerns about the process of screening a prospective partner to see whether they qualify as ethical. The first of these is how to get the information required. Whilst it may be (relatively) straightforward to gather information about companies that have a high profile and large online presence, the same cannot be said of e.g. small community organisations. Given the number of students and potential partner organisations, as well as the quick turnaround times required to ensure that students can begin their placements on time, the problem of finding information is further compounded. Adding to this concern is also the question of how much we can legitimately be expected to know about any given organisation. Whilst breaches of ethics may be reported in the media and thus publicly available, it is quite frequently the case that they are not, or that past breaches only come to light at a much later stage.

The second concern is how certain pieces of available information should be evaluated. For example, a convenor was approached by organisation that had, in the past, had issues relating to poor practices in co-ordinating foster care. These issues were reported in the media, and so the information about them was available. However, the organisation in question had put in place measures to address the issues and the situation had subsequently been improved. In this case, the unit convenor was happy for the placement to proceed.

A third concern is regarding at what level the alignment with the University's ethical principles should be evaluated. For example, would an organisational psychology placement at a mining company conflict with PACE's stated aims of 'improving the well-being of people and planet'? This raises issues about the relation between the partner and their industry or values and the placement activity (which may itself align with the University's values).

Additionally, even if a partner has been found to align with the University's ethical principles, students may themselves feel that a partner or activity does not align with their own values. A process for resolving this is also needed.

Where to from here?

A policy and procedure to guide staff in their decision-making about partnerships, and to provide a transparent justification for these decisions to the University and to organisations, is currently being drafted. These documents will, like other Macquarie policies and procedures, be publicly available on the University's website. To support decision-making, a staff consultative group is to be convened. This group will be the first port of call for staff who have questions about whether or not an organisation would constitute an ethical partner. A ready reference guide (based upon a guide that has been developed about research ethics in PACE) will be developed to provide staff with easy access to information relevant to their decisions. This could potentially serve as a starting point for other institutions to develop their own processes around ethical partnerships. We are also implementing ways of flagging the ethical status of organisations in our internal partnership management database, to facilitate more streamlined processing, as well as investigating the possibility of including a clause about ethics in the partnership agreement.

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