



# What is collaboration?

## FACT SHEET 1

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Collaborative practice is now central to the way we work, deliver services and produce innovations. Collaboration generally refers to individuals or organisations 'working together' to address problems and deliver outcomes that are not easily or effectively achieved by working alone. Collaborative relationships are attractive to organisations because the synergies realised by combining effort and expertise produce benefits greater than those achieved through individual effort. The superior benefits created by combined effort are known as collaborative advantage.

Key drivers for a collaborative approach include:

- reduction of duplication and overlap
- accessing limited resources and expanding opportunities
- increasing efficiency and effectiveness
- organisational legitimacy
- resolving intractable social problems (wicked problems) and completing complex projects

Collaboration is part of a continuum of joint working relationships that are defined by:

- the intensity of the relationship
- communication flows and distribution of power between the participants
- length of relationship
- level of risk and reward.

The Advancing Collaboration Practice program has been established to support ARACY's work building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia. The program builds stakeholder capabilities to establish and manage long-term joint working relationships and collaborative efforts. **For more information please contact ARACY on 08 9476 7800**

The continuum shown in Table 1 reviews the various characteristics of cooperation, coordination and collaboration. Collaboration has distinct characteristics that differentiate it from cooperation and coordination<sup>1</sup>.

Exploring the features of the 3Cs—cooperation, coordination and collaboration—highlights their different purposes, the level of integration between participants and the contributions required of participants in the relationship. This also provides a clearer understanding of what collaboration is and when it should and should not be used<sup>2</sup>.

**Cooperation:** In cooperative endeavours the focus is primarily on sharing information and expertise. In this type of relationship participants are loosely connected so their contribution to the relationship is low. Each participant remains completely independent from the others. There are only minor changes in how each participant does business, but they have the advantage of learning from others and being able to modify the way they work. Cooperation is characterised by low

- 1 Himmelman, A.T. 2002. Collaboration for a Change: Definitions, decision-making roles, and collaboration process guide, Himmelman Consulting, Minneapolis; Konrad, E. 1996. A Multidimensional framework for conceptualising human service integration initiatives, in J. Marquart & E. Konrad (eds). *Evaluating Initiatives to Integrate Human Services: A Publication of the American Evaluation Association* Number 69, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- 2 Keast, R. Brown, K. and Mandell, M. 2007. Getting the right mix: Unpacking integration meanings and strategies, *International Public Management Journal* 10(1): 9–33.

levels of risk and reward since it emphasises reaching agreement to adjust specific actions rather than making changes to the organisation's operations.

**Coordination** is based on a greater sense of interdependence between organisations. In coordinated approaches, the parties realise the need to work together to meet a set goal. This process requires participants to tightly align resources and effort. Although involved in set joint policies and programs, organisations retain control over their own operations. Coordination requires a higher level of contribution and commitment as well as stronger relationships between participants. These stronger relationships are often based on prior relationships and experiences between participants.

**Collaboration** is characterised by strong and highly interdependent relationships. Participants realise that to achieve outcomes they have to agree to radically alter the way that they think, behave and operate. Collaboration is not about making adjustments at the periphery; it is about systems change and as such participants are involved in a high-risk, high-stakes and volatile environment that can produce results significantly different from those originally intended. This requires a high level of trust and extensive dialogue between participants, however it can be highly rewarding for those willing to take the risks. For a

collaboration to work there can no longer be 'business as usual'. Collaboration demands participants forge new relationships and learn new ways of dealing with each other.

Each of these relationships has merit and usefulness. They should be viewed as complementary ways of achieving integration and joint working modes.

The challenge for practitioners is to match the type of joint working relationship with the identified purpose or required outcome of their project or program. If the goal is sharing information or expertise and adjusting actions, cooperative effort should be sufficient. Alternatively, if alignment of resources and activities is needed to achieve joint actions, then coordination becomes the appropriate mode. In this way, both cooperation and coordination are essentially about operating as normal but more efficiently. However, if working as usual is no longer sufficient, or the problem is so intractable that total systems change and innovation is required, collaboration is necessary.

Despite its many advantages collaboration is not a panacea to all social problems. It is one of a suite of possible strategies to enable individuals and organisations to work together more effectively. However, when implemented wisely, collaborations can be very powerful and effective mechanisms for social change.

**Table 1: Relationship continuum: characteristics of the 3Cs**

COOPERATION	COORDINATION	COLLABORATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loose connections, low trust</li> <li>• Tacit information sharing</li> <li>• Ad hoc communication flows</li> <li>• Independent goals</li> <li>• Adapting to each other or accommodating others actions and goals</li> <li>• Power remains with organisations</li> <li>• Resources remain with organisation</li> <li>• Commitment and accountability to own organisation</li> <li>• Relational timeframe short</li> <li>• Low risk/low reward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium connections, work-based trust</li> <li>• Structured communication flows, formalised project-based information sharing</li> <li>• Joint policies, programs and aligned resources</li> <li>• Semi-interdependent goals</li> <li>• Power remains with parent organisations</li> <li>• Commitment and accountability to parent organisation and project</li> <li>• Relational timeframe medium-based on prior projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dense interdependent connections, high trust</li> <li>• Frequent communication</li> <li>• Tactical information sharing</li> <li>• System change</li> <li>• Pooled, collective resources</li> <li>• Negotiated shared goals</li> <li>• Power is shared between organisations</li> <li>• Commitment and accountability to network first and community and parent organisation</li> <li>• Relational timeframe—long term (3 years)</li> <li>• High risk/high reward</li> </ul>

# Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ARACY is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people. Despite Australia being a wealthy, developed country, many aspects of the health and wellbeing of our young people have been declining. ARACY was formed to reverse these trends, by preventing and addressing the major problems affecting our children and young people. ARACY tackles these complex issues through building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. We share knowledge and foster evidence-based solutions.

## About the authors of this fact sheet

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