Next Generation Engagement
Informing community engagement for Australia’s infrastructure sector
FULL REPORT: PILOT PHASE
DECEMBER 2017
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Executive Summary: Contributing to the Next Generation of community engagement

We are excited to present the top five research priorities of the Next Generation Engagement Project, Australia’s largest national study into community engagement in infrastructure to date.

This Research Report represents the expertise, experience and advice of over 80 organisations and more than 200 individuals working in community engagement, government, peak industry bodies, institutional investors, project planners and proponents, sector recruitment and civil society.

The seed of this project formed when we came together as a small group of community engagement practitioners and researchers who found ourselves asking a shared question:

How can we do community engagement better to deliver the infrastructure we need, more efficiently and with better outcomes for impacted communities?

The Next Generation Engagement Project pilot study (February to November 2017) took this question directly to industry. Through deep and challenging conversations with community engagement practitioners and our colleagues at universities across Australia and with the input of peak professional bodies internationally, we probed the gap between best practice community engagement and on-ground experiences. To do this, we began by presenting industry with a ‘Situation Analysis’ that posed a number of critical questions, such as:

> Why do we start with best practice strategies but end up shifting to ‘declare and defend’ mode during delivery?
> What are the costs and benefits of engagement at various points and how can best return on investment be achieved, for all parties?
> Are our existing methods of engagement sufficient for current and future generations?
> What are the metrics we should use to demonstrate the impact of social risk and community engagement on project schedule, budget and scope?
> How can we better share this data among projects to develop an industry-wide performance ‘baseline’ and reduce ‘consultation fatigue’ in communities?
> What is the earliest point at which engagement is likely to be most meaningful and most effective, for all parties concerned?

We found raging agreement that these are timely and critical questions to be addressed by research for the sector. Over the past nine months, our partners and participants helped us to test assumptions about current policy and practice, refine key questions and define five priority research themes.

**Method: Research co-design**

The ‘co-design’ method—where stakeholders work closely with researchers to design projects to ensure that the results are meaningful and useful to them—identified the five priority research themes introduced in this report. Co-design represents the research future of industry-government-civil society collaboration. The process applied shared industry experience and research perspectives as diverse as urban planning, economics, social and policy science, psychology and engineering, to arrive at an agreed understanding of the areas in which a robust, shared evidence base could drive improved decision-making and value creation.

The co-design process involved:

- a national survey of professionals working in infrastructure (n = 123)
- a national series of seven co-design workshops in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth (over 180 participants, over 80 organisations represented)
- delivery of a draft ‘Research Priorities Summary’ to partners
- follow-up workshops with partner organisations to feedback and shape the draft report (32 participants)
- presentation of draft findings at key industry events to seek feedback e.g. Engage2Act Unconference, IAP2, AIIPM (over 100 workshop participants).
- an open national commentary period on the draft report.

**The need for research to generate a shared evidence base**

During the course of the pilot phase, participants asserted that community engagement is essential to infrastructure delivery. They argued this should be a global priority. We heard this consistently at the National Workshop Series with participants from throughout Australia; at presentations and workshops at the Engage2Act UnConference, the AIIPM Conference, the Infrastructure Association of Queensland Summit, the IAP2 Australasia conference in Auckland; and from researchers at the EDHEC Infrastructure Institute, Singapore, and at the Second National Chinese Forum on Public-Private Partnerships, Beijing.

Research participants told us that they need a solid evidence base to better articulate the value of engagement,
social risk and social license; and that this evidence base needs to be widely understood and shared amongst industry. Participants focused on the importance of measurement and generation of metrics for clearly evaluating the value of engagement for project delivery and for the project environment.

We know that the demands of a highly intensive period of infrastructure delivery will require an increasing number of progressively skilled community engagement practitioners. Supporting the professionalisation of community engagement through identification of core skills and capabilities, career pathways and creation of tertiary qualifications was identified by participants as a critical need for the industry, nationally and globally.

Three cross-cutting themes
Participants also identified three cross-cutting trends shaping the next generation of community engagement:

- digitisation and social media
- cumulative impacts
- community well-being and resilience.

These cross-cutting themes affect all five of the priority research areas, in terms of:

- when and how communities are engaged on issues,
- the capacity and means for communities to participate directly in engagement
- shifts of engagement methods from face-to-face to online and the effects this has upon defining ‘affected communities’

Five priority research themes
Our findings suggest that there are five priority research themes vital to addressing the gap between best community engagement principles and on-ground practice. Each of these themes is tied to a vision for the next generation of community engagement:

1. **Value**: Community engagement becomes better understood and more valued by project proponents and policymakers, including its potential to contribute to community resilience and to realise broader project and community benefits.

2. **Measurement**: Better measures and understanding of socio-cultural risks are generated and employed alongside traditional risk measures, supporting sound investment decisions and more accurate contingency pricing.

3. **Timing & Approaches**: Community engagement approaches and timing align with project types and risks. Engagement commences from problem definition and informs business case and concept development.

4. **Professionalisation**: Community engagement becomes a better recognised profession, supported by tertiary and other qualifications and a rigorous evidence base to support decision making.

5. **Regulation & policy**: Regulation and policy to support best practice community engagement is efficient and facilitates the acceptance of community engagement into project selection, planning and delivery, to a similar degree as safety.

Find out more and stay in touch
The Next Generation Engagement Project is pleased to offer a suite of reports from the pilot phase to inform current policy and practice and the next phases of the research, these include:

- The full **Research Report** presented here, offers the findings in detail, including a review of the original situation analysis and project background, literature and document review, methods and full national survey findings.

- The **Research Priorities Summary** offers quick insights, distilling the key findings related to the five priority research themes. It outlines the central issues and research questions to be addressed through the project’s next phases, commencing in 2018. It highlights research project opportunities in a growing, international program of research.

- The **Expert commentary series** provides the freshest thinking on issues influencing the five priority research themes. Our experts from economics, architecture and urban
planning, psychology and engineering tackle issues of:

— **Impact of community engagement on sustainability outcomes**, Dr Dominique Hes, THRIVE Research Hub, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute and Melbourne School of Design, The University of Melbourne

— **Including social outcomes and risk in economic evaluations**, Dr Jodi York, Asia Pacific Social Impact Centre, The University of Melbourne

— **Community engagement in infrastructure: Fostering community resilience and well-being**, Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick, Centre for Positive Psychology, The University of Melbourne

— **Infrastructure planning is political: An urban planning perspective on engagement**, Dr Kate Raynor, Transforming Housing Project, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne

- **Industry opinion pieces, project updates and media coverage.**

All of these documents are available on the project website at: http://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/nextgenengagement.

**Next Steps: Towards an international research centre**

The challenges industry has identified in the pilot study are complex, globally relevant and costly. No single institution holds the capacity to address these challenges alone. The Next Generation Engagement Project’s vision is to secure the best Australian and international researchers to actively engage industry, government and civil society partners in a comprehensive research program.

From 2018, the Next Generation Engagement Project aims to establish an international research centre. Projects within the centre will address the five priority research themes outlined in this report and will provide evidence to inform policy and practice, such as:

- Improved infrastructure decision making, both in project selection and delivery, through a better understanding of engagement, social risk and social licence
- Improved investment attractiveness as improved social risk management reduces and prevents costly project delays and cancellations
- Validated models to manage or reduce social / non-technical risk
- Better use of local knowledge from the earliest stages of concept development to reduce social and technical risk
- Better understanding of the performance impact of different engagement timings and approaches, from as early as problem definition
- Improved efficiency of how the industry collects, shares and uses data, including historical data and previous consultations.

Our research team is keen to take questions, further discussions and welcome new partners and participants to the project’s next phases. We welcome you to get in touch with us via our website or email us at: nextgen-project@unimelb.edu.au.

Thank you to all of our project partners and to those who contributed to the first stage of our nation-wide conversation about what community engagement means for infrastructure project selection, planning and delivery, and what can be done to realise its potential.
Introduction

The Next Generation Engagement Project is the largest study into community engagement in infrastructure in Australia to date.

The project exists within a thriving context. Estimates place Australia's current infrastructure development at over $100 billion. The Commonwealth Government committed $70 billion to transport projects to 2020/21 alone in its most recent budget. Public-private partnerships are on the rise, driven partly by government’s desire to secure greater private sector involvement in project funding and delivery. Since the late 1980s, private sector interest in infrastructure construction has increased from less than half a percent of GDP to more than 1.5% in 2015.1 The scale and intensity of current project planning and development is grand and dynamic.

The prioritisation of infrastructure is driven largely by a level of population growth that is faster than our peer nations, including the United States, Canada and the UK.1 For Infrastructure Australia, this prioritisation is about ‘the user – the commuter waiting for the train, the family paying their electricity bill and the business looking to capitalise on overseas markets’.2 For Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, a focus on infrastructure growth represents commitments made to tax payers, work to support strong future economies and efforts to ensure Australia offers a world-leading quality of life.

Benefits of participation, costs of opposition

Within this booming infrastructure environment communities today have more capacity to gather and share information, communicate widely and interact directly with government, project financiers, planners and developers, than ever before. This situation means both that community members are better able to influence project design and development to best meet their needs and that communities are also better positioned to oppose projects.

For the infrastructure sector, increased community capacity to participate effectively in project development presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, positive public participation can improve project designs, promote broader support and deliver creative solutions.2 On the other hand, community opposition can be costly.3 For the past decade on the east coast of Australia alone, an estimated $20 billion in projects have been delayed, completed but not as originally intended, mothballed after completion or cancelled, due partly to community opposition. Examples like Melbourne’s recent East-West Link stand out here, and many others are well publicised.

Indeed, infrastructure delivery and community opposition is a regular subject of critical media commentary. It is also the focus of considerable industry discussion from peak national bodies, including Infrastructure Australia (IA), Infrastructure Partnerships Australia (IPA) and the Infrastructure Sustainability Council of Australia (ISCA), and among international agencies, including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Opposition is not only costly to the infrastructure sector, it is costly to communities. Many of those who oppose projects do so in their own time, as volunteers working on behalf of other locals. Studies in psychology show us that oppositional relationships take a toll, in terms of increased stress levels, possible time away from paid work, reduced resilience and a sense of things happening beyond one’s control.4 Poorly executed projects also often bear an environmental cost that can be experienced by communities via a loss of visual amenity, through lost land access or substantial changes to an environment they call home. The resulting ‘solistalgia’—a sense of distress induced by environmental change and a longing for the landscape that existed before—is very real.5

The stresses of community engagement in oppositional environments bear further costs for the individuals tasked with relating directly with communities on behalf of developers. Stories from the field indicate more openly hostile interactions with community members (especially via social media), longer hours managing crises, high staff turnover levels and, in certain instances, threats to physical security.6

Today’s projects need to consider the combined perspectives of project proponents, community members and community engagement professionals. This is complicated but crucial. The current climate around infrastructure represents the growing importance of community input into project selection and design, and suggests the centrality of strong engagement to successful project delivery.

A global challenge

Australia is not alone in its strong demand for infrastructure. World-wide, population growth is driving increasing requirements for new and upgraded energy, water, transport, housing and social infrastructure. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that $57 trillion is needed in global infrastructure investment to 2030 in order to keep pace with demand.7 This is even before addressing glaring gaps in asset maintenance.

Booming economies, like China, are heavily invested in infrastructure but certain researchers warn that delivery intensity cannot be a substitute for delivery quality, especially if long-term needs are to be met.8 The delivery of these infrastructure requirements stretches across countries, industries and issues as diverse as mining, oil
and gas, electricity generation and transmission, water and sewerage systems, architecture, construction and urban planning, engineering, and social welfare and affordability.

In China, for example, the landmark One Belt, One Road initiative represents US $1 trillion in infrastructure delivery. The Initiative will impact 63 percent of the world’s population and is 10 times the financial scale of the US Marshall Plan (in today’s dollar value). Governments are examining multilateral solutions to the infrastructure challenge, supported by multilateral institutions including the G20-funded Global Infrastructure Hub, the World Bank, International Development Bank and the International Finance Corporation.

Funding models are being adapted to meet the needs of this thriving sector. The Asian Development Bank recently reported that Asian nations are likely to see a considerable increase in the role of private funding and in listed and unlisted investment interests, with institutional investors on the rise.

Meeting global infrastructure delivery needs in a timely, efficient manner will demand extensive, meaningful and effective public participation, and there is an unprecedented opportunity for nations, companies and communities to learn from one-another as these projects are designed and delivered.

Regulation and policy to support engagement

Engagement is also progressively valued and required by governments who recognise that community buy-in is necessary not only to build and preserve political capital but to ensure project viability and sustainability. Various Australian government policies and regulations now support the inclusion of stakeholder concerns as a regular component of project scoping, planning and delivery. For example, such considerations are enshrined in requirements for social impact assessment within certain State’s and Territory’s environmental planning approval systems for major projects and specifically within the Business Case Development Framework for Queensland infrastructure agency, Building Queensland.

Policymakers play a key role in setting expectations around the extent of community engagement required by project proponents. The Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania have current, whole-of-government approaches to public participation. While each framework differs in application, they represent a growing recognition by governments of the centrality of engagement to successful policy and project delivery. For example, considerable attention has been devoted by State Governments in recent years to evaluating and improving the social components of EIAs or stand-alone social impact assessments (SIAs). In NSW in 2016-17, for instance, the State Government committed to a thorough review of processes concerning social impact assessments (SIAs). In Victoria, the Auditor General’s Office (VAGO) recently completed two audits related to public participation, one focused on government decision-making, including the example of Next Generation Engagement Project partner, the Level Crossing Removal Authority, and the other examining public participation at the local government level. The VAGO’s reports emphasise the importance of public participation, especially in light of ‘new public participation priorities and methodologies’, incorporating digital modes and co-design.

Intergovernmental agencies and transnational governance frameworks also encourage public participation and underscore the importance of strong community engagement. Initiatives including the IFC Social and Environmental Performance Standards and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide guidance to support engagement as a means to drive sustainability. Sustainability reporting guidelines, like the world-leading Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), incorporate attention to social aspects of organisations, including community engagement. Meanwhile, initiatives like the Equator Principles or the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) that require attention to human rights concerns, local conditions and mechanisms for raising and addressing grievances, are driving a focus on engagement in relation to project funding and investment.

Similarly, a core group of leading non-government associations, especially IAP2 (the International Association for Public Participation) and IAIA (the International Association for Impact Assessment) provide training, outreach and education to support engagement through proven methods, ethical guidance and sharing of experiences. The IAP2’s spectrum of public participation, detailing five levels of engagement is particularly well-known and influential. Emerging practitioner-led groups, such as Engage2Act, offer further opportunity for sharing and progressing community engagement practices. Professional organisations including the Australian Institute for Project Management (AIPM), the Infrastructure Sustainability Council of Australia (ISCA) and the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) offer further opportunity for the development of community engagement practice and are influential in the policy sphere.

Community engagement roles and positioning within organisations

Today’s community engagement practitioners base their practice in a range of principles and methods. Historically, community engagement practitioners have been drawn from media, communications, corporate affairs and public relations roles. Many practitioners have communications-related degrees as their educational background. Yet contemporary community engagement practitioners are rapidly establishing a professional field of their own, distinguished by a concentration on building relationships,
identifying and managing social risks, respecting and giving voice to the rights of stakeholders and cultivating trust. Global organisations, including IAP2 and IAIA, provide deep expertise and training to support practitioners’ engagement of stakeholders and communities. Groups like IAIA offer social scientific means of understanding impacts. The education and training programs of professional organisations like these have equipped thousands of individuals with the skills necessary to deliver successful engagement.

Although community engagement roles are expanding beyond traditional communications or public relations, opportunities for specialised qualifications or tertiary-level degrees in the field remain virtually non-existent. In Australia, the University of Queensland’s Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSRM) offers one of the very few postgraduate qualifications in the field, through its Masters of Community Relations (CommRels) program. The success of this degree in its first decade of operation suggests a solid appetite for such education, but offerings for practitioners working in fields other than mining and extractives appear limited. More generalised postgraduate qualifications in social impact are available through the University of Western Australia’s Centre for Social Impact and its sister Centre at the University of NSW.

While community engagement has yet to be widely, formally recognised as a profession, the surge in employment opportunities, shared methods, organisational memberships, the emergence of a spattering of postgraduate qualifications, and an identifiable cohort of colleagues suggests it is only a matter of time. Notions of best practice are widely researched, tested and shared, and many practitioners reported to us their commitment to developing the future of community engagement methods, policy, training and qualifications.

Perhaps due to their historical connection to communications or media units, community engagement holds a middle position within organisational hierarchies. Evidence from the field suggests that community engagement practitioners largely remain excluded from senior executive roles and, consequently, the boardroom. Stories of community engagement professionals in executive roles or promoted into organisational leadership remain outliers, with many practitioners reporting that their responsibility in terms of potential impacts on a project far outweighs their authority within their organisation. It is also common for on-ground community engagement to be subcontracted to a consultancy or delegated to the major contractor, suggesting that it is not seen as a vital role for investment by individual organisations. An alternative interpretation might be that community engagement is seen as a specialised expertise not held within organisations. The organisational status of community engagement practitioners is important, as it affects their ability to implement best practice, their perceived legitimacy, in comparison to other roles, and the capacity of the sector to attract new recruits who see a long-term future within their discipline.
Aims

The Next Generation Engagement Project takes these multifaceted opportunities and challenges as its starting point. It aims to reduce the gap between best practice community engagement principles and on-ground practice.

Through this project, we seek to do this in a holistic way, considering interdisciplinary perspectives and a variety of influences shaping the challenge. To date, many studies concerning community engagement tend to tackle one particular angle, such as methods, principles, quantification of social impacts, stakeholder management or social risk mitigation. Next Generation Engagement sees these and other core issues as intertwined and attempts to address them in a more comprehensive manner by applying a variety of research lenses to deliver a more complete picture.

At the same time, we do not aim to reinvent the wheel. The research draws upon a solid foundation of excellent community engagement methods and tools, many developed by peak bodies like IAP2. The task now is to join these up with selection, planning and delivery processes in a way that is meaningful across organisations, projects and jurisdictions.

To achieve this, the Next Generation Engagement Project aims to identify the most effective community engagement methods and tools and join them with project selection, planning and delivery in a way that is meaningful across organisations (in-reach) and is valued in planning and regulation (outreach).
About the pilot project: Methods overview

The Next Generation Engagement Project uses research co-design, a highly interactive method in which researchers, industry, government and civil society representatives work together to define priority research themes and questions and to shape research project design. Research co-design has been shown to offer greater policy and social impacts than traditional research approaches; brings together diverse groups to address shared issues; helps build participants’ capacity to address those issues; adopts an iterative approach to research (i.e. non-linear); sees participants as co-researchers; and democratises knowledge production while hopefully also producing research results that are more useful to those the research seeks to help.18

The pilot phase of the Next Generation Engagement Project used a variety of collaboration co-design methods to identify priority research areas for the sector. Beginning in 2018, the project team will work closely with partners to co-design and co-produce a number of research projects aimed at addressing the key challenges and opportunities in social risk management, engagement and social license – as defined by industry during the pilot phase.

Informal interviews

The approaches used in the co-design process were informed by data from preliminary interviews with a range of infrastructure industry professionals representing diverse interests and organisations.

National Survey

We undertook an online, national survey between March and May 2017 in which 123 practitioners shared their experiences. Participants were asked a variety of questions focused on their experiences of infrastructure project selection, planning and delivery, the success or otherwise of those projects and their opinions about the major factors affecting project delivery. Results of the National Survey are detailed later in this report.

Situation Analysis

We also undertook a comprehensive literature and document review to create a ‘Situation Analysis’, in addition to the national survey. This document provided the starting point for discussion in the National Workshop Series. The analysis presented the key issues and opportunities for the infrastructure sector, as distilled from the literature and presented participants with a number of potential research questions and assumptions. Participants were encouraged to be strongly critical of the Situation Analysis during the workshops. An overview of the information provided in the Situation Analysis appears below and the full Situation Analysis is available on the project website.

National practitioners workshop series

This early work led us to design a National Practitioners Workshop Series (workshop series), held between May and July 2017 in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Brisbane, with two workshops each in Melbourne and Sydney. Reflecting the iterative nature of research co-design, each workshop in our series built on the results of the preceding workshops. This meant that as the series progressed, each group contributed to the activities, incorporating the input of their colleagues from prior workshops, as distilled by our research team. This supported an iterative co-design process where participants were able to engage, critique and improve upon the ideas of previous workshops.

Research co-design activities in the workshop series included:

Defining foundations for research

• Testing assumptions: Participants were presented with a number of literature-based assumptions about community engagement practice and were asked to test, affirm or reject these assumptions, or offer new ones.

• Asking the best questions: Participants were presented with a number of literature-based research questions and asked to improve, change, remove or offer new or different questions.
Putting community engagement in context: Big picture

- Systems thinking to create influence diagrams: Participants received an abridged introduction to this method and worked individually and in pairs to identify the key factors and flows of influence affecting the quality of relationships between project proponents and communities. Our researchers analysed these diagrams to map a system of influences shaping contemporary community engagement.

Connecting timing and approaches: Detailed view

- Mapping community engagement against major project phases: Finally, participants were asked to consider how they work with colleagues from other disciplines in project delivery and to map the main helpers and hindrances to achieving best practice community engagement across the four major project phases: problem definition, planning, delivery and closeout.

The findings summarised in the following sections represent this co-design process. For more details on the research method, please see, Appendix B of this report.

RESEARCH PHASES

1. Phase one: National survey and desktop research (February to May 2017)
3. Phase three: Analysis, circulation of draft report for partner comment and open national consultation (August–October 2017)
4. Phase four: National consultation completed, final report completed, national roadshow at industry forums to share key results (October–December 2017)

2018: Major funding application to support the longer-term research program
Situation analysis: Overview

The Situation Analysis began with an introduction and background to the state of community engagement in Australia’s infrastructure sector, similar to the Introduction of this report. It then proceeded to interrogate the potential costs of lacking or poor community engagement, presented research assumptions and possible questions for research to address.

Costs to communities and projects

The Situation Analysis estimated that community opposition has contributed to the suspension, abandonment or mothballing of at least $20 billion in infrastructure projects across Australia’s East Coast alone within the past decade. Infrastructure delivery and community opposition is a regular subject of critical media commentary. It is also the focus of considerable industry discussion from peak national bodies, including Infrastructure Australia (IA) Infrastructure Partnerships Australia (IPA) and the Infrastructure Sustainability Council of Australia (ISCA), and among international agencies, including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

The costs for communities in opposition are also high but less simple to quantify. Many of those who oppose projects do so in their own time, as volunteers working on behalf of other locals. Studies in psychology show us that oppositional relationships take a toll, in terms of increased stress levels, possible time away from paid work, reduced resilience and a sense of things happening beyond one’s control. Projects also often bear an environmental cost and these can be genuinely felt by communities as a loss of visual amenity, through lost land access or substantial changes to an environment they call home. The resulting ‘solistalgia’—a sense of distress induced by environmental change and a longing for the landscape that existed before—is very real.

Structures and practice supporting infrastructure delivery

The Situation Analysis then went on to provide detail about the current status of Australia’s infrastructure, including current practice and structures.

The analysis found that Australia’s infrastructure sector benefits from a strong regulatory environment, solid investment and world-leading engineering. It is also the beneficiary of years of research, training and investment in community engagement. Once an ‘added extra’ or afterthought, community engagement is today a critical component of all project delivery.

Global organisations, including IAP2 and the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) provide deep expertise and training to support the engagement of stakeholders and communities. Groups like IAIA offer social scientific means of understanding impacts. The education and training programs of professional organisations like these have equipped thousands of individuals with the skills necessary to deliver successful engagement.

Research, like that of the Melbourne School of Government (MSoG) at The University of Melbourne, the University of Western Australia Business School’s Centre for Social Impact and Australian National University (ANU) Crawford School of Public Policy, provides further in-depth insights into such relevant topics as project governance, social risk, impact identification and measurement and deliberative democratic methods.

Various government policies and regulation support the inclusion of stakeholder concerns as a regular component of project scoping, planning and delivery. For example, such considerations are enshrined in requirements for social impact assessment within each State and Territory’s environmental planning approval system for major projects.

In the Situation Analysis we asserted that community engagement is vital to on-time, on-budget infrastructure delivery. We know the fairest and best ways that communities should be involved, in principle. We have plenty of examples of leading community engagement practice and lessons learned. But the gap between community engagement principles and on-ground engagement remains considerable.

A starting point for research co-design

All good research begins with a set of assumptions, the key lessons, findings and ideas that have come before it. The Situation Analysis took as its starting point that we have enough:

Research and practice-based evidence to support effective community engagement, including:

- Choice of methods and tools
- Underpinning principles and values
- A professionalised cohort of practitioners
- Guidance and support from practice-focused organisations
- Policy guidance
- Case studies to build learning
- Good cohesion and collaboration within the community engagement profession
- Agreement among practitioners as to what strong community engagement looks like.

We then argued that what the infrastructure now needs to address these issues included:

- An improved understanding of how projects are currently impacted by community opposition and social risk, particularly in terms of budget, schedule and scope.
- Better connection between selected engagement approaches and their effectiveness in managing social risk and reducing community opposition
- Better integration of community engagement with concept phase
project planning, particularly project selection and business case development

- Stronger linkages between community engagement and project schedules, scope and budget to demonstrate how engagement efforts affect project management
- Realization of community engagement as a profession (supported by greater opportunities for tertiary level qualifications in this field)
- Integration of community engagement into all aspects of infrastructure planning and delivery
- Shared (sector-wide) understanding of the benefits of community engagement and when it should occur
- In what situations (e.g. aligning the type of social risk identified with a particular engagement method)
- Knowledge about the critical junctures and levers which are either hindering application of best practice community engagement or which could improve community engagement effectiveness.

Initial questions posed in the Situation Analysis

Through the Situation Analysis we also posed a number of potential research questions (below) and asked participants to critique, change or add to these, or to create their own new questions:

- Governments attempt to plan responsibly with 30-year outlooks but how do we reach the younger generations who will be the landowners and community stakeholders when projects in current conceptual planning are executed?
- Why do we start with best practice strategies but end up shifting to ‘declare and defend’ mode during delivery?
- What are the costs and benefits of engagement at various points and how can best return on investment in engagement be achieved, for all parties?
- What are the metrics we should use to demonstrate the impact of social risk and community engagement on project schedule, budget and scope? How can we better share this data among projects to develop an industry-wide performance ‘baseline’ and reduce ‘research fatigue’ in communities?
- Are our current methods of engagement sufficient for current and future generations? Or is it time for new methods and tools, including more online engagement or ‘gamification’?
- How early should engagement commence and who should be engaged at each stage?
- What is the earliest point at which engagement is likely to be most meaningful and most effective, for all parties concerned?

Participants in the National Practitioner Workshop Series and through our online consultation were asked to apply their ‘critical curiosity’ to the assumptions, issues and questions presented in the Situation Analysis. We encouraged them to raise questions, to spark debate, to prompt ideas and create conversations.
Research limitations and opportunities

The Next Generation Engagement Project’s pilot phase reflects leading research co-design methods. The project also had a few limitations that are important to consider to strengthen future project phases.

Community input into research

Most importantly, the pilot phase focused on industry, government and civil society stakeholders. While the project offered opportunities for broader public participation via its online deliberative platform, available throughout the entire pilot phase (from Situation Analysis to public commentary on the draft Research Priorities Summary), the pilot phase did not contact the general public directly (i.e. via surveys or interviews).

The decision to begin the project through input from industry (as opposed to community) was taken only after considerable desktop research, a number of informal discussions with other researchers, industry, government and civil society representatives, and taking other research project work which does directly involve members of the public into account. This review suggested that the breadth and diversity of issues the Next Generation Engagement Project sought to address were more likely to be of immediate interest and use to those working in or professionally associated with community engagement, as a practice.

We were also concerned about consultation and research fatigue within Australian communities, particularly in an intensive period of infrastructure project delivery. Public participation in research projects relies on individuals and groups giving freely of their time and expertise. The value returned to communities rests upon the capacity of research to deliver valuable information, processes or recommendations directly back to participating stakeholders.

For this project and at this very early stage of research development, we felt that more value could be delivered to the public by involving community stakeholders in the next phases of the research, when questions and themes were better defined and the potential value of participation in the research could be more reliably articulated to community members.

Unsurprisingly, participants in the pilot phase focused on when, whether and how to best involved the general public in the research. The questions they raised about public involvement in the research echo more general questions for community engagement, such as:

- To what extent do members of the public understand the nature and processes of infrastructure planning and development? To what extent should they/do they need to in order to participate meaningfully?
- When is the best point to involve members of the public? When is it most meaningful and valuable to them? And how is that point determined?
- To what extent is it helpful to first define a broader ‘research picture’ and then involve community members in relevant components?
- Or, is the bigger picture lacking a critical element where it has not yet incorporated public perspectives (although the review of literature and prior reports provided a proxy means of distilling community views)?

Ultimately, due to the considerations above, we decided to start the investigation with those responsible for community engagement, to better understand the critical issues they identify as necessary to bridge community engagement principles and practice, and to better understand an emerging profession.

Thinking about the role of local government

The pilot phase of the research focused primarily at the State Government level but research participants in the National Workshop Series noted the growing role of local government in community engagement in infrastructure project selection, planning and delivery could have been better incorporated into the Situation Analysis and related assumptions.

Workshop participants pointed out that local governments have increasing responsibility for infrastructure policy and service obligations that run through the entire project lifecycle. Often, local governments engage broadly and have a direct community interface framework that supports local decision-making that, in certain instances, may be overridden by state-level decisions. While this model appears to be shifting slightly—at least in Melbourne where partnerships like that of the City of Port Phillip and the City of Melbourne with DEDJTR on the “Fishermen’s Bend Task Force” and other collaborations in urban renewal areas—demonstrate opportunities for more joined-up decision-making.

The necessity of local governments to meet their constituents’ service needs as an outcome of state government decisions is further reflected in VAGO’s audit on public participation by local governments, referenced earlier. 22 The centrality of public participation to local
governments also reflects the growing importance of ‘place making’, another component of community engagement under-researched in the pilot phase.

Local governments were also suggested as a helpful means of recruiting community participants for the next phases of the research and for activities such as the establishment of community reference groups or advisory boards to inform the research.

**Differentiating between public and private sector approaches**

Workshop participants also suggested that future projects under the Next Generation Engagement banner might benefit from splitting public and private sector approaches. This is an important point, especially in the Australian context in which a majority of major projects are government funded and also where public-private partnerships are increasing. The public-private dichotomy is also important to articulate because it represents a fairly recent shift in Australian infrastructure, with Queensland having shifted further towards private investment but then reverted. Participants at our Brisbane workshop, for example, noted that between 2003 and 2013 Queensland’s infrastructure was dominated by private sector funding, at an estimated 80:20 split. Since 2014, however, that split has shifted to approximately 50:50, according to participants.

Being clear in future research investigations about whether projects are public, private or PPPs would help to distinguish the different demand drivers for each. Participants suggested that these drivers, in particular, may confuse ‘project narratives’ and related identification of beneficiaries.

**Other limitations of the pilot phase**

Other limitations of the pilot phase included the concentration of survey respondents and workshop participants from community engagement, communications or related roles. While participants in all facets of the research ultimately represented a good spread of role diversity, the majority of participants were those involved directly in community engagement. This limitation reflects a challenge of community engagement, more broadly, in that practitioners are often ‘preaching to the converted’, with some of the issues about working across disciplines and influencing other professions made challenging to address through the very difficulty of actively engaging those other disciplines. The next phases of the research aim to draw in broader expertise and roles.
National survey: Findings

We began the Next Generation Engagement Project with a national survey in order to provide an experience-based starting point for the research co-design. Project partners ISCA, AIPM, Engage2Act, IAP2 and PRIA distributed the survey to their membership lists in an effort to achieve wide coverage. The key findings of the survey are presented in this section.

Who we spoke to

A total of 123 people took part in our national survey. Just over half (52%) were communications and stakeholder engagement managers, with other participants working as project consultants or advisors (18%), project managers (7%), or infrastructure body representatives (6%) (see, Figure 1). The Eastern seaboard dominated the locations practitioners had worked in, with 51% having worked in New South Wales and Victoria, and 46% in Queensland. However, nearly a fifth (18%) also had international experience, reflecting the diverse perspectives brought to the survey. This diversity is also demonstrated in the various sectors participants had worked across, which included road (67%), rail (66%) water (52%) and urban development renewal (46%). Other sectors are shown in the diagram below.

Project experiences

We asked participants in the survey to think of all the projects with which they had been involved and how those projects had turned out. Many of the projects were either completed on time and on budget (71%) or delayed but eventually completed (74%). Importantly, however, practitioners had experienced a range of outcomes, with 32% of projects completed but not used as originally intended, 16% completed but then mothballed, 29% delayed indefinitely and 31% cancelled altogether. When problems were experienced the most influential factor was stakeholder and community pressure, followed closely by regulatory and planning issues, and project funding. This provides important support for previous research that demonstrates that stakeholder and community opposition can play a significant role in project outcomes and incurred costs. Participants felt that these pressures played as great a role in project delays or cancellations as regulatory and funding issues, which may typically be given more attention.

Of all the projects participants had worked on, a delay in planning approval was most commonly experienced (69%), and technical delays (for example unforeseen geotechnical issues) were experienced most often on projects (37%). However, the delay that had the most impact on projects were those requested by the responsible Minister to resolve a stakeholder issue (38%), reinforcing the influence that stakeholder and community pressures can have on project outcomes.

We then asked participants to think about one project that they had worked on that had been delayed,
cancelled, mothballed, or completed but not as intended. The stakeholder pressures experienced by participants varied, suggesting that communities and stakeholders employ a variety of different approaches to make themselves heard. These strategies, shown in the chart at right, include political lobbying by community members (71.5%), complaints or petitions from community members (70.7%), negative mainstream and social media (66.7% and 61% respectively), as well as legal action (36%) and physical protest (36%) (see, Figure 2).

Other issues experienced on projects included lost time for communications and technical staff (63%), and loss of confidence from the shareholding Minister and department.

**Engagement strategies**

Although findings reinforce that stakeholder and community pressure can play a significant role on project outcomes, participants were still far more likely to engage with government prior to any independent assessment being completed (63%) than to engage with key user groups (50%) or even impacted communities or landholders (42% for both).

Just over 40% believed that their community engagement approach on the challenging project was bare minimum (10%) or only met legislative requirements (32%). The vast majority however felt that their approach was appropriate, as it either met corporate benchmarks which exceeded legislative requirements (40%) or represented best industry practice (18%).

The chart below provides some indication as to what practitioners feel are the challenges with community engagement. Broader organisational support, in terms of both understanding of community engagement and changes to internal organisational culture, is deemed to be more important than increased resources or the positioning of roles within organisational structures (see, Figure 3).

**Survey results summary**

Respecting that many of the participants were community engagement professionals, the survey nonetheless supports findings that stakeholder and community pressure can play a substantial role in project outcomes. Despite this, community and stakeholders were often engaged after government stakeholders. Many participants believe that their community engagement approach went beyond legislative requirements, but also that more internal support for community engagement would help to improve project outcomes.
Putting community engagement in context: System dynamics

**Systems thinking and group model building**

Through the National Practitioners’ Workshop series, we aimed to draw out the diverse perspectives in the room to better understand how industry professionals from a variety of backgrounds understand community engagement, its impacts and drivers.

During the workshops, practitioners were introduced to a ‘system dynamics’ process of group model building. The process first asks practitioners to develop a diagram showing the interconnected factors that they believe affect the successful application of community engagement, from their own professional and personal perspective.

The next step asks practitioners to explain their diagram to a ‘partner’ who comes from a very different background or perspective. In doing this, the pairs come to a fuller understanding of differing perspectives of the system of interest (here, community engagement in infrastructure). Finally, the pair creates a ‘blended’ diagram that reflects the new understanding of the system that they have arrived at together.

The process of group model building helps individuals and groups to identify the key drivers and motivations behind actions and beliefs. It encourages participants to question the taken-for-granted and to ask why things are the way they seem. Group model building questions our unconscious biases and helps to reveal the ways in which seemingly unrelated issues may, indeed, be influencing one-another as part of a big picture system.

The group model building undertaken throughout the National Practitioner Workshop series was done in an iterative way, with each prior workshop’s results being used to broaden the scope of the models developed in later workshops. The results of the system dynamics and group model building exercises are presented in this section.

**Key factors influencing community engagement**

The group model building process helps us to see the terrain of factors influencing the quality of community engagement in infrastructure selection, planning and delivery. We analysed the diagrams from all of the workshops to generate a big picture view of these factors (see, Figure 4). Major influences identified by workshop participants included (in no particular order):

- The diversity of views (pre)existing within a community
- Socio-economic status of involved communities
- Budget allocated for community engagement
- Heritage and environmental value of a project site
- The perceived impact on communities (from a variety of perspectives)

- Level of inclusion of community engagement across all project stages
- Reputation of the project proponent as ‘fair dealing’.

Several other key topics were highlighted by participants through the group model building, including the closely related issues of community trust and social license to operate (SLO). Practitioners were especially focused on identifying the factors that drive or block SLO. They named factors including: promises broken, willingness to go beyond compliance, community ability to hold government or industry to account and incorporation of community knowledge.

The large influence diagram (see, Figure 4) illustrates these broad issues.

![Diagram showing major factors influencing community engagement in infrastructure](image)

**Figure 4: Major factors influencing community engagement in infrastructure: Group model building. Source: National Practitioners’ Workshop Series**
Participants also offered insights into the relationship between the perceived value of community engagement within their organisations and the quality of community engagement they are able to deliver. Figure 5 reveals an important ‘feedback loop’ affecting the perceived value of community engagement.

The loop, labelled with a ‘B’ symbol, is what is known as a ‘balancing feedback loop’. Balancing feedback loops keep systems stable and maintain the status quo. Much like a thermostat in an air-conditioned room, as room temperature changes in one direction, the thermostat kicks in to bring the air temperature back to the desired level, keeping the temperature steady. Here, the effectiveness of community engagement is influenced by issues including budgetary resourcing, levels of opposition, costs of opposition, etc. The balancing feedback loop clearly shows that as opposition levels and costs increase, the perceived need for engagement also goes up, as do budgets/resources to support effective community engagement. Working through the loop in reverse, as fires are doused, however, budgets may be reduced and the perceived need declines until such time as opposition rears up again and the loop resets into action.

The group model building exercise also revealed the systems related to effective regulation to support best practice community engagement. Figure 6 shows that participants perceived effective regulation for community engagement as being a critical factor affecting many other aspects of the system. It is interesting to note that not a single factor was positioned as driving effective regulation for community engagement, but that the regulation itself is seen as a major driver of aspects including: community ability to hold governments and industry to account, transparency of decision-making, industry compliance, adequacy of budget to support legislated community engagement (here, often stakeholder engagement) activities, and policy stability/certainty. These factors in turn were seen as influencing community trust in ‘the system’.

**Systems thinking and group model building: Summary**

Overall, the systems thinking diagrams completed by the workshop participants provide a critical view of the ecosystem of community engagement in Australia’s infrastructure sector. Industry professionals clearly see the value of community engagement but note that it is too often positioned as an exercise to reduce costs incurred, as opposed to being a proactive engagement for purposes of cost avoidance, in the first instance. Participants strongly connect community engagement with social licence to operate and the trust necessary to effective relationships. But community engagement budget, organisational levels of commitment to community engagement and the regulatory environment may hinder implementation of best practice engagement.
Top five research priorities: Findings

Theme 1: Value

Research completed within the Value theme will advance the following aim:

**Community engagement becomes better understood and more valued by project proponents and policymakers, including its potential to contribute to community resilience and to realise broader project and community benefits.**

Defining the value of community engagement will require making social impacts more tangible. Or, as one participant suggested, ‘The Next Generation Engagement Project for me really means that the industry and the practice that we have can become more than an art and closer towards being a science. We’ll have some real data, some real evidence, to back up what we know as practitioners’.

**Perceptions of value:** Community engagement continues to lag disciplines such as engineering and finance in terms of its perceived value and consequent influence, despite being better integrated into project delivery now than ever before.

Findings demonstrate that community engagement faces a paradox in regards to this: Engagement is often scaled up to quell community opposition, an action that makes its value to a project explicit. Practitioners report that, were community engagement commenced earlier (i.e. prior to opposition solidifying) and better resourced or supported to pursue best practice, such events might not occur at all.

Perceptions about the need for community engagement appear driven by costs incurred due to community opposition. But engagement can also support cost avoidance, which is much harder to quantify and, therefore, value.

Working with stakeholders can also create value by identifying opportunities for innovation or benefits not immediately evident to the project team.

**‘Share the data’**: Practitioners largely believe that better integration and valuing of community engagement could be driven by quantifying the social, political and risk-management value delivered.

An evidence base is needed at an industry level and requires sharing of data and case information.

Participants noted that although a large volume of data related to social licence exists, there is a distinct lack of shared data showing how engagement affects project performance. This is due partly to information being treated as commercial in confidence and also due to the need for a single organisation to assist with collecting, collating, treating (i.e. de-identifying) and analysing that data. The potential for better, applied use of ‘big data’, including social media data, was also noted.

**Defining success**: As workshop participants commented, ‘success is rarely defined in terms of community outcomes’. Findings related to ‘defining success’ indicate the importance of understanding the social, political and institutional cultures that influence community engagement and project delivery, more broadly.

An evidence base of this kind is needed at an industry level and requires sharing of data and case information.

Defining the value of community engagement relies heavily on improved measurement, especially in relation to social risk and its pricing. This priority is captured in our second research theme, ‘Measurement’.

- How can the value of community engagement to project performance be better articulated? For example, to better explain its role in realising outcomes of intangible value, such as community resilience and goodwill?
- What evidence could shared data provide to support a shift in understanding about the value of community engagement? How might data-sharing be encouraged in a highly competitive environment and how might this reduce overhead costs?
- How can the return on investment in community engagement, especially in terms of costs avoided and value created? And how might this be incorporated into business case evaluation?
- How can social costs and benefits be better measured and incorporated into a context in which the majority of costs and benefits are quantified and tangible?
- To what extent does the politicisation of projects hinder best practice?
Theme 2: Measurement

This theme focuses particularly on the concept of social risk, with the following aim:

**Better measures and understanding of socio-cultural risks are generated and employed alongside traditional risk measures, supporting sound investment decisions and more accurate contingency pricing.**

Participants consistently emphasised that the value propositions and evidence bases used to support engagement-related activities need to be better developed, understood and accepted. One workshop group suggested that community engagement practitioners need to ‘talk the language they (e.g. engineers, project managers, financiers) talk’, while another group said that engagement practitioners should ‘use industry standards and methods (e.g. NPV) for evaluating community input’. Interestingly, most recommendations concerning measurement suggested that community engagement should adapt to existing methods, as opposed to encouraging other specialisations (e.g. engineering, finance) to adapt their own metrics and data to an engagement perspective.

Certain organisations are actively working to incorporate social risk assessment into concept development through early research and engagement. For example, project partner Building Queensland’s Business Case Development Framework requires broad engagement by proponents. Similarly, Melbourne Water has introduced a process for including community engagement research as part of its planning for major infrastructure projects. Such project-focused research helps people to understand the purpose of the project, identifies gaps in knowledge, and pinpoints causes for community concern and construction impacts. New research can capture the lessons from these initiatives, while offering enriched methods and models.

- **How can a more holistic picture of project or sector risk terrain be mapped?**
  For example, could global and national data on technical risk be incorporated into new social risk metrics? What comparative national or global studies could enhance this understanding?

- **What are the identifiable precursors of social risk and what measurable indicators could be developed to support improved identification of these risk factors?**
Key challenges and opportunities

Measuring social risk: ‘Non-technical’ or ‘social’ risk is today widely accepted as a central consideration in project selection, planning, design and delivery. Yet measures of social risk lag those of technical and financial risk. This may be partly because social factors are consistently tagged as ‘soft’ or intangible, and are consequently viewed as too hard to measure.

Arguments against quantification of certain, social issues, such as cultural connection to land or human rights, also hold great validity. Not all factors worthy of consideration can be boiled down to cost-benefit. But many social risks can be quantified and new technologies, access to ‘big data’ and growing interest in improving understanding of social risk hold great potential.

Social risk metrics are needed and will provide greater value through improved understanding of the risk terrain.

Bigger and better data: Today’s access to information is unprecedented. Harnessing big data, such as social media content, presents an exciting means of facilitating better informed engagement.

Early studies in controversial industries are demonstrating that issues-identification and attitudinal measures are possible through big data analysis.

Emerging technologies hold the potential for real time social licence and social risk measurement, allowing for more targeted, rapid response.

A combination of these types of data and technologies could support early intervention to reduce fire-fighting and assist more proactive engagement. Similarly, better sharing of data across projects would support better analysis of data.

Return on investment: Understanding the return on investment (RoI) in community engagement is directly related to earlier considerations raised about the practice’s value.

RoI and social return on investment (SRoI) address the systems dynamics identified through the research co-design, in which participants linked the quality of engagement to costs of community opposition.

Integrating research-derived RoI measures, including costs of conflict, social risk and value of social licence, with financial and technical risk measures could better identify the value of community engagement to projects and organisations.

Opportunities to link in with current international studies investigating financial RoI of infrastructure projects and investment risk criteria would support a more holistic understanding of the returns possible through best practice community engagement.

What can ‘big data’ tell us about community needs, concerns or attitudes to facilitate informed engagement and avoid ‘solutioneering’?

How could real time, mobile technology assist in better connecting communities to projects, or to measuring social risks, social licence or community well-being to facilitate stronger, more timely engagement?

How could improved or new community engagement measures help to track return on investment (RoI) across project types, scales and through the project lifecycle, from business case to closeout?

What are the actual costs of community engagement, relative to SRoI for dollars spent? What are the costs of poor or missing engagement, in terms of days delay or costs of conditioning? Conversely, what value is created when community engagement is well timed and well delivered?
Theme 3: Timing & approaches

The ‘Timing & approaches’ theme speaks to the when and why of engagement, with the aim of:

Aligning community engagement approaches and timing with project types and risks, supporting the incorporation of community engagement into business case assessment and contingency pricing.

Key challenges and opportunities

Risk profile/approach alignment:
Contributors to the research co-design represent some of Australia’s most knowledgeable leaders in the field of community engagement. They regularly apply this experience to determine the best ways to engage particular communities. Findings suggest that substantial value could be gained however, from combining a better understanding of social risk profiles with the toolbox of community engagement approaches to allow for evidence-based, strategic matching between the two (without becoming overly prescriptive). If risk profiles and engagement approaches could be better aligned, this knowledge could also inform engagement planning and improved assessment of whether certain approaches are likely to be successful in particular situations.

Early engagement: The timing of engagement on a project proved to be a contentious issue in the consultation, signalling that it is an ideal topic for research. On the one hand, participants argued that ‘too early can be problematic, a level of pre-work is required.’ Others in favour of early engagement, however, suggested that stakeholders should be part of the conversation ‘at the point of options analysis’ and that stakeholders were ‘not being involved early enough.’ It was noted that engagement practitioners rarely have a significant role in preliminary risk assessment or business case development and participants suggested this contributed to the lack of consideration of socio-political risk as part of project design. Questions about whether engaging too early would lead to greater community comfort or stoke concerns were also prominent when discussing the timing of engagement. Evidence-based advice could assist in determining when is the best stage to engage based on the social risk profile of a given project.

Lifecycle integration: Findings also suggest that community engagement needs to be better integrated throughout the project lifecycle. In certain instances, contributors suggested that late mobilisation or premature winding back of the engagement team from a project resulted in lost value and increased costs. Findings indicate that there is often a lack of program budget allocated to the problem definition and closeout phases, with the latter resulting in a lost opportunity for potential lessons learned to be captured and shared or lack of benefits realised. Participants suggested that evaluation of engagement can be a particularly helpful component of lifecycle integration, capturing ‘lessons learned aligned to best practice engagement methods.’ Lifecycle integration of community engagement into a project was also seen as a means of ‘closing the loop’ and helping to maintain a sense of community ownership and connectedness to a project. Or, as one workshop group put it, ‘We asked, you said, we did.’

What costs are incurred or value gained based on the timing of community engagement entry/exit into/from a project’s lifecycle?

When is the most appropriate moment for engagement to begin and through what measures can that entry-point be judged?

How could the tighter integration of community engagement into a project team facilitate earlier involvement? What would that look like?

To what extent does community engagement in the closeout phase contribute to long-term project success and a sense of community ownership?

To what extent are community engagement approaches trial and error, based on experience? To what extent might the choice of engagement approach become more systematised with better data?

How could new and better social risk metrics contribute to the choice of community engagement approaches for particular projects/situations?

Could better pairing of social risk profiles and engagement approaches lead to improved community outcomes, reduced project costs, or both?

How could earlier involvement of community engagement practitioners assist more thorough consideration of socio-political risk in problem definition? What value could be achieved or costs avoided through this?

How can community engagement be better integrated throughout the entire project lifecycle, including allowing appropriate time and resourcing for evaluation?
Theme 4: Professionalisation

The research co-design revealed strong support for professionalisation of community engagement as a career. Work related to this theme will offer evidence, curriculum development, education and investigate pathways to achieve:

Recognition of community engagement as a legitimate profession, supported by tertiary and other qualifications and a rigorous evidence base to support decision making.

Workshop participants identified several factors as necessary to achieving the ‘recognition of community engagement as a specialised, valued profession,’ including: clarity of career pathways, need for pay equality with other industry professions, need for recognised qualifications, and the perception of community engagement as a feminised occupation. Using systems thinking, participants in this exercise suggested that professionalisation of community engagement could contribute directly to greater industry commitment to engagement and, consequently, to more adequate budgeting and resourcing to support best practice.

Key challenges and opportunities

Formalising a profession: Participants varied in their assessment of whether community engagement currently has a professionalised cohort of practitioners. Findings indicate that this situation requires attention but also appears to be improving, partly due to the evolution of tools such as the IAP2 Quality Assurance Standard. The formalisation of community engagement as a profession was generally seen as crucial to the legitimisation of the profession and deeper integration of engagement into organisational structures and cultures, including facilitating a greater number of engagement practitioners to enter executive and senior executive leadership roles in the same manner as their engineering, finance and project management counterparts.

Qualifications: A call for tertiary qualifications in community engagement arose repeatedly throughout the workshops, focused primarily on postgraduate-level course offerings. There is a strong opportunity for the Next Generation Engagement Project to leverage the connections established between universities and peak industry bodies, such as IAP2, to support curriculum design and course development at leading institutions. Research secondments, through which MA or PhD candidates could gain further experience, were also seen as a chance to contribute to the professionalisation of the discipline. Leading professional bodies, including our partners IAP2, the Public Relations Institute of Australia and Engage2Act, are actively seeking opportunities to develop curriculum and create educational opportunities to support this aim.

To what degree are engagement professionals progressing into more generalised, executive leadership roles? What are the main factors influencing this situation (e.g. perceptions, qualifications, skills gaps)?

What would an explicit skill set for community engagement professionals look like and where would it best fit within existing tertiary programs/concentrations?

What, if any, education models exist globally that could be adopted/adapted? And what gaps in educational offerings can be filled?

How could interim offerings, including custom education, new or existing training (e.g. IAP2 or IAIA programs), certification courses (e.g. like that of AICD) or short, non-degree university courses, help to fill gaps or meet the needs of those with more advanced practice/experience?

How does the organisational position of engagement staff, and the organisational culture surrounding engagement, impact both project performance and the perceptions of engagement as a discipline?

To what extent could tertiary qualifications in community engagement contribute to greater legitimacy and influence of engagement-focused roles within individual organisations? Within industry more broadly?

Enhancing legitimacy: Qualifications are an important means of building the legitimacy of community engagement as a profession. But research tells us that qualifications are only one piece of this puzzle. Power, capacity to ‘gate-keep’, collective activity for the public good, a shared professional culture, existence of professional/practitioner groups, and exclusionary power have all been demonstrated as equally important components of professionalisation. Consideration of these other aspects of professionalisation will be critical to advancing the standing and influence of community engagement.

What are the educational and organisational pathways to improving the understanding and integration of community engagement into the practice of other disciplines, including engineering and planning?
Theme 5: Regulation & policy

Research completed within this theme will contribute to:

Regulation and policy that is efficient and supports the integration of best practice community engagement into project selection, planning and delivery, to a similar degree as safety.

Findings from the Next Generation National Infrastructure Survey demonstrated that ‘regulatory and planning issues’ are seen as the second-most influential contributor to project delays, mothballing or cancellations, closely following ‘stakeholder and community pressure’. Workshop participants saw these issues as closely intertwined and cited policy uncertainty and election cycles as critical factors in triggering ‘declare and defend’ mode.

Key challenges and opportunities

Policy uncertainty: Both the National Infrastructure Survey and National Practitioner Workshops confirmed that policy uncertainty is seen as a major inhibitor to successful project delivery and to attracting private sector investment (See figure on page 15).

‘Public policy reversals and the enforceability of contractual claims’ were also recently identified by the Singapore-based EDHEC Infrastructure Institute as being a main inhibitor to institutional investment in infrastructure, globally.26 Workshop participants reported that policy instability can affect engagement quality.

Policy differences across jurisdictions further complicate this issue. As one workshop group wrote, ‘Each project seems to have differing policies – there is a need for a national policy.’

Project politicisation: Participants acknowledged that politicians are under increasing pressure due to the 24-hour news cycle, the changing stakeholder environment and the increasingly reactive nature of electorates. While politicisation is part of the reality of public infrastructure delivery, politicisation can detract from community engagement practitioners’ ability to focus on and deliver best practice.

As one group of workshop participants suggested, community engagement practitioners are subject to pressures misaligned with the timing and relationship-formation vital to strong engagement, ‘because politics focuses on announcements and the next election and ‘we don’t have the data to show if the value of engagement outweighs the political risks.’

Furthermore, projects are often announced without consultation or a business case. Participants closely linked issues of project politicisation and policy uncertainty with project timing, identifying a range of challenges related to this as early as the ‘Problem Definition’ phase, including: ‘lack of bipartisan support of strategies and long-term bipartisan commitment to strategies’, ‘Minister’s office and project owner fearing the hard conversations,’ and this stage being driven by ‘political and technical imperatives.’

What would effective regulation to drive best practice community engagement for infrastructure delivery look like?

What can we learn from successful policy and regulation models nationally and internationally to support effective engagement?

How could regulation and policy be adapted to better deal with the cumulative impacts being experienced by communities and associated consultation fatigue?

What are the key social and policy drivers necessary to foster policy stability for infrastructure delivery?

To what extent could the timing, approach or extent of community engagement act as a counter to challenges stemming from project politicisation?

What are the critical levers for reducing policy backflips and encouraging greater consistency across jurisdictions, especially in light of increasingly complex national projects?

Benchmarking via compliance: Aims of going ‘beyond compliance’ are de rigueur for most projects today. Our early findings suggest, however, that community engagement would benefit from stronger regulatory or policy structures to support best practice. As workshop participants suggested, ‘Strategic planning and policy settings, including governance, resourcing and budgets, [could help to] set an accepted understanding of effective engagement.’

Strong arguments, including from the VAGO,27 have been made to suggest that engagement-focused regulation and policy structures can help to embed best practice engagement, until such time as it is accepted as the way business is done. Or, in the words of one workshop group, ‘[There are] no legislation “must-dos”, i.e. like safety and environment, only EIS consultation requirements,’ making the need for better policy guidance critical.

“...community engagement practitioners are subject to pressures misaligned with the timing and relationship-formation vital to strong engagement, ‘because politics focuses on announcements and the next election, rather than genuine engagement.”
Three cross-cutting themes

The research further identified three cross-cutting themes that affect all five of the priority research areas, in terms of:
• when and how communities are engaged on issues,
• the capacity and means for communities to participate directly in engagement
• shifts of engagement methods from face-to-face to online and the effects this has upon defining ‘affected communities’
• the felt results of a period of intensive infrastructure, in which a project-by-project approach to engagement may not reflect communities’ experiences
• increasing understanding of the centrality of community well-being and resilience to capacities for coping with change, supporting or opposing projects and the longer-term effects of project delivery on communities
• issues of intergenerational impact and project sustainability and capacity to address the needs of future generations.

Digitisation and social media
Feedback from research participants clearly demonstrates that digitisation and the spread of social media are substantially impacting and changing community engagement and the ways in which community engagement professionals undertake their roles. Participants noted that community members are better connected across broad geographic areas, have more direct access to policymakers and decision-makers than ever before, are able to rapidly share opinions and form coalitions, and may use online resources to reinforce or join up on-ground protest or opposition. Several community engagement practitioners asserted that community members are more ‘brutal’ in their online communications, making their jobs more challenging and more stressful. Participants also consistently told us that project proponents generally lag community members in terms of social media savviness and use.

Community well-being and resilience
As part of the Expert Commentary Series for the Next Generation Engagement Project, we asked a leading psychologist to consider the implications of community engagement in infrastructure for community well-being and resilience. This literature-based report clearly demonstrates that community engagement has a central role to play in both preserving and fostering community well-being and resilience throughout the infrastructure planning and delivery processes. Research participants also made clear that resilience is becoming a major concern in the communities in which they are engaged, especially in Australia’s rural and regional areas. This seemed particularly pertinent where communities were experiencing multiple project delivery simultaneously or where back-to-back projects were occurring.

Cumulative impacts
The current intensity of infrastructure project delivery (of all types) in Australia leads to our third cross-cutting theme: cumulative impacts. These are impacts felt where projects are being delivered simultaneously or where communities may be experiencing ‘layering’ of projects over time. In these situations, a project-by-project approach to community engagement may be necessary for regulatory requirements, but it is unlikely to meet community needs. Workshop participants told us how community engagement struggles to truly adopt a community perspective where there is an artificial focus on one project, as opposed to taking the holistic view of a community’s overarching infrastructure delivery experience. Practices such as cumulative impact assessment, greater coordination between projects and project timing and better sharing of impact assessment and community engagement data all offer means of addressing these concerns.
Next steps for Next Generation Engagement

Having worked with industry to identify the key knowledge gaps, challenges and opportunities, the Next Generation Engagement Project is now primed to pursue a research agenda that responds to the infrastructure sector’s priority concerns around engagement, social risk management and social license.

Our aim for the next 3-5 year phase of the project is to establish a world-leading, transdisciplinary research program to inform the success of the next generation of community engagement. This will require dedicated industry and research partners willing to share their experiences and support research funding, including competitive grant applications. Partners will benefit from:

- continuing to inform the research agenda to keep it responsive to their needs
- having the opportunity for deep learning about their organisations as case examples
- accessing comparative, international data
- priority access to research findings and advice.

Delivering responsive, impactful research

The next research phases will use ‘co-design’, a research process where the planners, developers and users of infrastructure collaborate closely with academics to deliver research that:

- **Addresses** priority issues, as defined by those experiencing them, not by researchers from the outside looking in (e.g. the co-designed research agenda summarised in this report)
- **Recognises** infrastructure sector practitioners and community members as experts, with academics facilitating deeper insights into that expertise
- **Delivers** meaningful and useful research outputs that can inform improved community engagement and successful project delivery.

Building a global picture

The next phases of the Next Generation Engagement Project also aim to internationalise this work. Our aim is to include international, comparative cases that identify best practice community engagement globally and enrich findings by building research collaborations with organisations like the EDHEC Infrastructure Institute, Singapore, and Tsinghua University, China.

Secure your position in the next phase of work

If your organisation would like a role in solving industry’s stickiest engagement problems, talk to our team today. Partnership opportunities are available across one or all of the priority research themes.

Bringing communities into the discussion

Having worked with industry to identify challenges, opportunities and knowledge gaps, a critical next step for the research is to ask similar questions of communities. Specifically, future research aims to incorporate community perspectives on:

- When communities feel they should be involved in the conversation.
- How communities wish to be engaged and whether there are identifiable factors that provide insights about preferred engagement methods.
- Politicisation of infrastructure selection, planning and delivery processes and how this impacts the engagement cycle.
- Identifying the benefits of infrastructure proposals and ways to maximise community benefits.
Research project opportunities

We have identified a range of high impact research opportunities within each of the five key research themes. Talk to the team about your organisation’s project ideas and how to get involved in this groundbreaking work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Professionalisation</th>
<th>Timing &amp; approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Industry-wide comparison of community engagement timing and approaches of projects delivered on time and on budget against those that were delayed, mothballed, completed but not as intended, or cancelled</td>
<td>• Historical case studies (national and international) to quantify and model precursors of social risk and generate generic project risk profiles</td>
<td>• National and international surveys of community engagement professionals to determine the state of the practice and baseline human resources data, leveraging membership of groups, including IAP2 and IAIA</td>
<td>• National survey targeting project directors and managers to clarify the timing, resourcing levels, organisational values and policy environments supporting projects with strong community engagement and the outcomes and value achieved</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Comparative international case studies demonstrating the timing, processes and approaches supporting achievement of optimal community benefits and project value</td>
<td>• Comparative, interdisciplinary study to benchmark project value/costs against technical (i.e. financial risk) and non-technical risk (i.e. social, political)</td>
<td>• Anonymised, in-depth interviews with project directors and managers to capture current perspectives on whether and how community engagement contributes to reduced costs, improved project value and project outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creation of a de-identified case study database, shared throughout industry</td>
<td>• Development of social risk registers and processes, including technology development</td>
<td>• Comparative international study of timing of community engagement by project scale and type to identify ‘tipping points’ at which engagement may best forestall community opposition or generate value</td>
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<td>• Various thematic projects drawing on national and international cases to investigate the contribution of infrastructure to critical issues including, transitions to low carbon economies and intergenerational project viability</td>
<td>• Study to identify the costs of conflict and project opposition, similar to work previously completed in the mining, oil and gas sector</td>
<td>• Study to combine social risk modelling with case data to recommend the best community engagement approaches to use in communities with particular risk profiles</td>
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Regulation & policy

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<th>Regulation &amp; policy</th>
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<td>• Comparative cases focused on different delivery models (e.g. DIY, PPP, public, private)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Regulatory mapping to identify tensions, contradictions and overlaps contributing to red tape inefficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Comparative international cases to produce regulatory and policy models that support efficient and successful project delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-depth study into implications of policy instability for project success</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A: Participating organisations

The Next Generation Engagement Project would like to acknowledge the intellectual contribution of participants from the following organisations:

(Through the NSW Government)
- Infrastructure NSW
- NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet
- NSW Department of Environment and Planning
- Urban Growth NSW
- Transport for NSW
- Roads and Maritime Services (RMS)
- Parramatta Light Rail
- Cultural Infrastructure Project Management Office
- NSW Department of Education

Queensland Government:
- Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning
- Translink

Victorian Government:
- Places Victoria
- Victorian School Building Authority

Western Australian Government:
- Department of Planning
- Department of State Development
- Landcorp
- WA Transport
- Western Australia Mines and Petroleum
- Western Australia Country Health Service
- The World Bank
- Shell
- CPB Contractors
- John Holland
- WSP
- GHD
- Arcadis
- Transurban
- AECOM
- Phillips Group
- Townley Environment Services
- Mills Wilson
- Elton Consulting
- The Comms Team
- Articulous
- Struber
- Ogilvy
- Community Relations Australia
- Leisa Prowse Consulting
- Plancom
- Linchpin Environmental
- Fenton Communications
- Bastion S&Go
- Sociometry

Next Generation Engagement Project Research Team

Dr Sara Bice, Research Director
Colette Einfeld, Chief Investigator
Dr Kate Neely, Chief Investigator
Kirsty O’Connell, Industry Director

With research assistance from: Martin Bortz, Joanna Hanley and Susan Wright.
Appendix B: Research Methods

The research co-design method used by the Next Generation Engagement project has been developed by researchers in the Research Translation Program at the Melbourne School of Government (MSoG), the University of Melbourne, between 2015 and 2017. The approach is based on research into the fields of research co-design and co-production, evidence-based policy, ‘transdisciplinary research’ and non-traditional research impact and evaluation, including social and policy impact.

The ‘transdisciplinary’ research at the heart of this project has two main principles. First, transdisciplinary research is externally-demand driven (i.e. from stakeholders outside of the university). Secondly, researchers and professionals from very diverse disciplines are involved from the earliest research stages, working so closely together as to transform one-another’s disciplines (or at least with the hope or intention of doing so).

Research co-design: Bringing diverse disciplines and perspectives together
Research is often seen to be an activity that is led by experts in specific university disciplines using theory-based methods. The co-design processes for research require a more collaborative approach that recognises the expertise that all participants bring to the table. The Next Generation Engagement Project leadership team includes industry specialists working alongside researchers with diverse disciplinary expertise. With a long-term intention to ensure that any research would meet the needs of industry, we applied a range of methods of interaction (below) in order to interrogate the explicit and implicit knowledge held by participants. These methods have allowed us to understand the existing knowledge base and to ensure that participants were (and will be) able to contribute in ways that are suitable for them. Thus, we deliberately created events that facilitated stakeholders working together across organisational and disciplinary boundaries and then analysed the outcomes of these interactions. The specific methods used included:

**Industry Survey**
Consistent with our co-design approach, the National Survey was developed by the Next Generation Engagement Project in collaboration with ISCA. The survey was distributed to Next Generation Engagement Project partners’ mailing lists and advertised via newsletters and through our partners’ networks, including: ISCA, AIPM, Engage2Act, IAP2 and PRIA. The survey was open between 28th April and 23rd May 2017. Data was analysed at the University of Melbourne using SPSS v24.

**System Dynamics-based Group Model Building**
The Research Translation team at the Melbourne School of Government has been developing and trialling a system dynamics-based group model building process. The process is designed to bring together experts from differing disciplines and organisations to create an influence diagram, or map, of shared understandings about the way that problems work. One of the most significant parts of the process is the challenge of creating shared meaning between participants with very different disciplinary or organisational backgrounds. The use of system dynamics-based group model building encourages participants to make their assumptions about the problem space explicit, and in doing so allows for them to be questioned and for evidence for or against different assumptions to be explored. In this way ‘thought collectives’ are challenged and pathways to unintended impacts and policy resistance can be examined. The resulting influence diagrams have been combined and analysed with a view to understanding the significant feedback loops and leverage points where change can be induced.

**Longitudinal Process Directed Enquiry**
The research team developed this method to ascertain the processual knowledge of participants. It involved the presentation of an idealised, ordered infrastructure process that was then open for comment from participants – in particular, participants were asked to consider the role of community engagement professionals at each project stage and how their work is facilitated or obstructed at the stages identified. The large data set that resulted from this process was analysed for common and recurring themes.

**Open Ended Enquiry**
Open ended enquiry, based on the Situation Analysis and expert commentary series created the space for participants from across the industry spectrum to consider, challenge and comment on the positions put forward by the research team and any alternative positions that were brought to the fore through the various face-to-face and online mediated opportunities. This type of enquiry allows for less directed investigation and can provide participants with scope to re-imagine, extend or otherwise present non-hegemonic answers to the questions posed. Participant commentary came via informal interviews, face-to-face event participation, phone calls and emails direct to researchers, and via online comment in the web-based deliberation tool and project blog. This information was then used as the basis to explore the findings from the previous analyses.

**Feedback and Challenge**
Similarly to the open ended enquiry, the feedback and challenge aspect provided space for participants to ensure that their views, however mainstream or otherwise, have been represented in ways that they find satisfactory. Feedback and challenge opportunities were presented throughout all project phases, including via the Situation Analysis, partner commentary on the first draft of the Research Priorities Summary, a six-week public national comment period on the second draft of the Research Priorities Summary and via question and answer sessions and facilitated activities at industry events and relevant conferences.
Endnotes


6 Anecdotal statements made at the 2017 IAP2 Australasia conference closing plenary on the state of public participation. Melbourne: 28-29 October.


13 Ibid, 8.

14 The Equator Principles homepage can be accessed via http://www.equator-principles.com/ and the UNPRI homepage can be accessed via https://www.unpri.org/.


17 Harvey, B. (2017). The methodological trap: In reply to Kemp and Owen. The extractive industries and society, 4(1), 1-5.


23 See, for example, Franks et. al., 2014.


Our partners

Government and industry partners:

Infrastructure agency partners:

Industry association partners:

Research partners:

Founding partners:

Ideas, questions or want to join the next phases?
Get in touch with our project team:
nextgen-project@unimelb.edu.au