



**MELBOURNE
SCHOOL OF
GOVERNMENT**



Next Generation Engagement
**Informing community
engagement for Australia's
infrastructure sector**

RESEARCH PRIORITIES SUMMARY: PHASE 1

SEPTEMBER 2017

Contributing to the Next Generation of community engagement

We are excited to present the top five research priorities of the Next Generation Engagement project as defined by industry leaders. The project is the largest investigation into community engagement in Australia's infrastructure sector, to date.

This report represents the expertise, experience and advice of almost 200 individuals working in community engagement, government, peak industry bodies, institutional investors, project planners and proponents, sector recruitment and civil society. These contributions were complemented by a national survey that found that 'stakeholder and community pressure' was the most impactful contributor to project delays or cancellations, according to respondents.

This report applies years of research into stakeholder engagement, impact assessment, social risk and social licence to current practice. It represents diverse research perspectives ranging from urban planning, economics, social

science and psychology to engineering and policy science. In the spirit of consultation, the project also reflects deep and challenging conversations with community engagement practitioners, our colleagues at universities across Australia, and the input of peak professional bodies internationally.

The Next Generation Engagement project is propelled by the gap between best practice community engagement principles and practice and on-ground experiences. It began by presenting 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? To 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?

Five priority research themes

Our team has spent the past few months analysing data to generate early answers and identify priority themes for further research. Our findings suggest that there are five priority research themes vital to addressing the gap between best community engagement principles and on-ground practice.



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 (outreach).



2. **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 (in-reach).



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



4. **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.



5. **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.

This report distils the top five research priorities defined through the first phase of the Next Generation Engagement project. The full research report will be available from late September 2017 at: <http://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/nextgenengagement/>. Watch out for the Next Gen team as we share the Phase 1 findings at forums across Australia over coming months.

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 planning and delivery, and what can be done to realise its potential.

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Your colleagues are defining Next Generation Engagement: **so can you**



The findings highlighted in this report outline a research agenda to inform community engagement in infrastructure. But this is a research agenda with a difference: It has been designed by almost 200 professionals working in and with Australia's infrastructure sector, with the guidance of researchers.

The 'co-design' method represents the research future of industry-government-civil society collaboration. Together, we have identified the priority issues that need addressing and the core questions that need answering.

Our aim is for these early findings to guide the scope and content of future research in the sector.

We invite you to apply your critical curiosity here. Tell us what you think, share with colleagues and keep the conversation fresh as we look to the next research phases that can make Next Generation Engagement a reality.

You can contribute by:



Accessing the project website to provide direct feedback:
<http://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/nextgenengagement/>



Joining or starting a conversation on our online deliberation tool at:
nextgenengagement.dialogue-app.com



Speaking with or emailing the researchers with your ideas or questions. Our team's contact details appear on the back cover of this report and we welcome a conversation.



Participating in conversations at national forums later this year. Details of events where we will present are on our website.



Contributing to the next phases of the research, beginning in 2018.

Aims

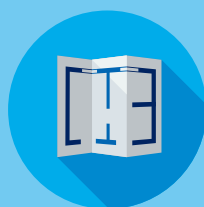
The Next Generation Engagement Project aims to reduce the gap between best community engagement principles and on-ground practice.



excellent
community
engagement
methods
and tools



join
them
with



selection,
planning
and delivery
process



in a way that is
meaningful across
organisations
(in-reach)



and valued in
planning and
regulation
(outreach)

Phase I: Research methods overview

The first phase of the Next Generation Engagement project used a variety of methods to identify priority research areas for the sector. Findings highlighted here come primarily from the National Practitioners' Workshop Series (workshops), detailed below. This work complemented data from preliminary interviews with a range of professionals representing diverse interests and organisations and a national survey in which 123 practitioners shared their experiences.

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 below, 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 interactions and 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 other disciplines in project delivery and to map the main helpers and hindrances to achieving best practice community engagement against four major project phases: problem definition, planning, delivery and closeout.

The findings summarised in the following sections represent this co-design process.

RESEARCH PHASES



- 1 Phase one:** National survey and desktop research (February-May 2017)
 - 2 Phase two:** Fieldwork: Partner launch events and National Practitioner Workshop series (May-June 2017)
 - 3 Phase three:** Analysis, circulation of draft report for partner comment and commence national consultation (August-September 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



Fresh thinking on sticky problems

The community engagement challenges and opportunities driving the Next Generation Engagement project represent ‘sticky problems’ for Australia’s infrastructure sector; they have been around for some time and have proven difficult to shake. While these issues are long-standing, the current global and national context presents a unique and pressing opportunity to address them with fresh thinking.

Our ‘Situation Analysis’ and ‘Expert Commentary Series’ illustrated the relevance and importance of improving community engagement within the context of a thriving sector with more than \$100 billion in projects currently on the public books. Those analyses highlighted:



The contributions of the sector to the Australian economy (10.2% of GDP in 2014-15)



A global context that estimates a \$57 trillion infrastructure need to 2030



Recent, multi-billion dollar costs of project delays or cancellations, influenced by community opposition



Shifting delivery models, including growth in public-private partnerships



Increasing need for more sophisticated understanding of non-technical or social risks



Economic and wellbeing costs to communities, especially in terms of relationships and resilience



Economic and wellbeing costs to infrastructure professionals in antagonistic delivery environments



Common timings and approaches to community engagement that may inhibit best practice



The central role of policy and regulation and politicisation of projects



Opportunities for formal professionalisation of community engagement to enhance prioritisation and legitimacy

This context provided the launching pad for our investigations and the design of the five-point research agenda detailed on the following pages.



This icon is used throughout this report to highlight key research questions to be pursued in the next phases.

Why is community engagement such a sticky problem?

It is helpful to take a moment to consider the broader question raised by the priority research themes identified.

Why do these five particular challenges remain so difficult to budge or address, especially when they are widely acknowledged among community engagement and related professionals?

We found that, despite the many gains made by community engagement over the past two decades—in terms of acceptance as a vital component of project delivery, formalisation of roles, and growth in the number of individuals dedicated to the practice—community engagement continues to lack the recognition and influence of other project design and delivery components. As workshop participants stated,

‘Success is measured by “on-time and on-budget”, not services and community outcomes’.

Better understanding of community engagement’s value and integration into the entire project lifecycle will require a holistic approach to tackling community engagement challenges and optimising benefits. Or, as another workshop group put it, this will demand ‘industry leadership, knowledge sharing, consistency and efficiency.’

A key aim of the Next Generation Engagement project is to break professional and disciplinary silos to view long-standing challenges through new perspectives. Systems thinking¹ offers a productive means of doing this and can result in greater success in tackling sticky problems. It helps us to see the breadth,

depth and diversity of issues influencing the concern in question. For community engagement in Australia’s infrastructure sector, applying systems thinking in the workshops helped to clarify the disparate influences that make challenges to community engagement so persistent.

Defining the research themes

In the sections that follow, we set out the five priority research themes defined through the project’s first phase: of values, regulation & policy, professionalisation, measurement and timing & approaches. For each of these themes we offer an overview of their content, highlight key challenges and opportunities, and raise key questions.



What influences community engagement?

To date, research on community engagement has been largely siloed. Studies may investigate engagement as a professional practice, the role of communications or regulation, or focus on models and methods. By working with practitioners to build influence diagrams we were able to map the critical influences and channels informing community engagement. This unique, holistic approach allows us to focus in on key factors, identify priority themes and shape targeted research questions that will allow future research to interrogate these issues in context.



The influence diagram shown opposite, for example, illustrates just some of the factors participants identified as affecting: how community engagement is valued, the quality of community engagement (and perceived need for that engagement), and the likelihood of community objection to a project. This snapshot is one section of a larger system that reveals the complex interactions shaping community engagement in Australian infrastructure.

Guidance for how to read influence diagrams is provided in our full research report. The influence diagram, labelled with **B**, opposite, 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.

The balancing feedback loop clearly shows that as opposition levels and costs increase, the perceived need for engagement also goes up, as do budgets or 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. Then as community engagement acts to decrease community opposition, the perceived need for engagement is also reduced creating flow on effects through budgets that eventually result in the costs of community opposition increasing again... and so on.



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 (outreach).

Defining the value of community engagement will require making the intangible more tangible. Or, as one participant suggested, 'The Next Gen 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'.

Key challenges and opportunities

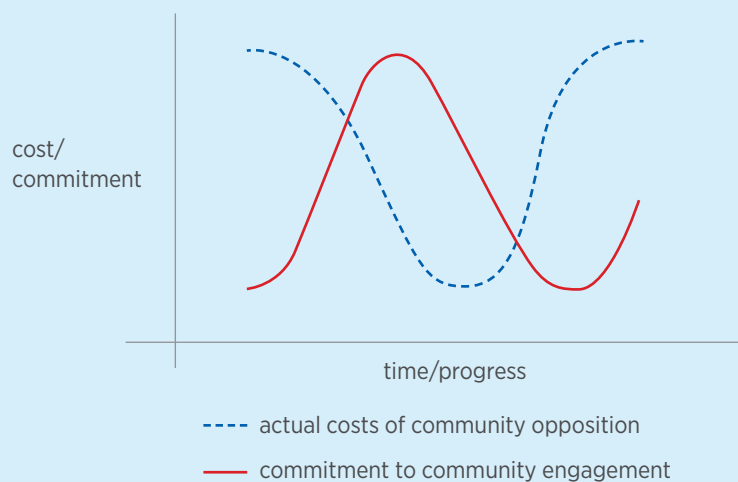
- **Integration:** Community engagement continues to lag engineering, finance, risk and governance in terms of its perceived value and consequent influence, despite being better integrated into project delivery now than ever before. Findings demonstrate that community engagement faces a paradox in regards to this: Engagement is often commenced 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), better resourced or supported to pursue best practice, such events might not occur at all. As the graphic at right shows, perceptions about the need for community engagement appear driven by *costs incurred* due to community opposition. This creates a negative relationship in which community engagement is reactive and in which its value becomes apparent only when it is employed to combat costs. But engagement can also support *cost avoidance*, which is much harder to quantify and, therefore, value.

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



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?

Reactive engagement: Costs of opposition drive levels of engagement



Source: National Practitioners' Workshop Series





How can the value of community engagement to project performance be better articulated without detracting from its role in realising outcomes of intangible value such as community resilience and goodwill?

‘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 of this kind 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, impacts, benefits and risks 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 surmised, ‘success is rarely defined in terms of community outcomes and project success needs to be separated from ‘political success’. 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.



To what extent does the politicisation of projects hinder best practice? What policy mechanisms could provide greater certainty to support best practice engagement?



How can better assessment of return on investment in community engagement, especially in terms of costs avoided, be measured? And how might this be incorporated into business case evaluation?



What evidence could shared data provide to support a shift in understanding of community engagement from one of cost-to-project to value-add-to-project? How might data-sharing be encouraged in a highly competitive environment?



Theme 2: 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 (in-reach).

Findings from the Next Gen National 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.



What would effective regulation, incorporating best practice community engagement to achieve on-time, on-budget infrastructure delivery look like? What existing models, nationally and internationally, show promise and could be adopted or adapted?

Key challenges and opportunities

Policy uncertainty: Both the National Survey and Workshop results confirm that policy uncertainty is seen as a major inhibitor to successful project delivery and to attracting private sector investment. '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.⁵ Workshop participants reported that policy instability also complicates and often degrades 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.'



How can infrastructure policy and regulation become more engagement-focused? What would that process entail and what would such policy look like?

Project politicisation: Politicisation detracts from community engagement practitioners' ability to focus on and deliver best practice.⁶ 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 rather than genuine engagement. 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 'election and project cycles'.

Benchmarking via compliance: Aims of going 'beyond compliance' are *de rigueur* for most project developers 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 Victorian Auditor General's Office,⁷ have been made to suggest that engagement-focused regulation and policy structures can help to embed best practice engagement,⁸ 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.'"



What are the key social and policy drivers necessary to foster policy stability for infrastructure delivery? What role can community engagement play in this process?

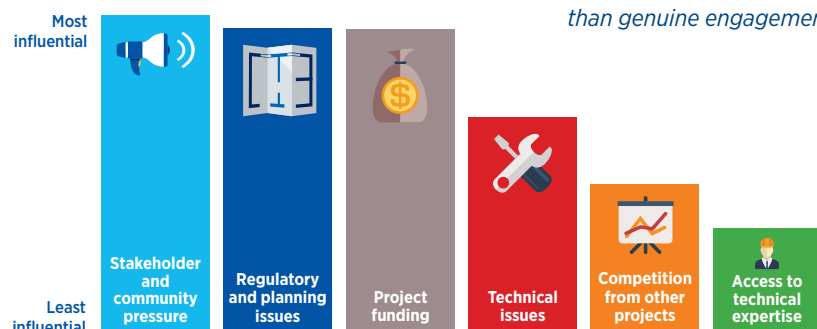


To what extent could the timing, approach or extent of community engagement act as a counter to challenges stemming from project politicisation?



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

Most influential factors affecting project delivery:



Source: Next Gen National Survey, 2017. N=122.



Theme 3: Professionalisation

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

Recognition of community engagement as a 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 certification like that of the IAP2 Quality Assurance Standard.⁹ The formalisation of community engagement as a profession was generally seen as crucial to 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.



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?



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?

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 the sector 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.



How do role-related factors, including the organisational structuring of community engagement roles, levels of responsibility and authority, and average salaries inform perceptions and valuing of community engagement's status as a practice/profession?



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?

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 'gatekeep', 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.¹⁰ Consideration of these other aspects of professionalisation will be critical to advancing the standing and influence of community relations.



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



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?

Theme 4: Measurement

The preceding themes highlight *what* participants believe needs to be investigated to inform the next generation of community engagement. This theme focuses on *how* best to do that, 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 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.


Key challenges and opportunities


Measuring social risk: Non-technical risk is today widely accepted as a central consideration in project selection, planning, design and delivery. Yet measures of non-technical, social risk continue to lag those of technical and financial risk. This is partly the case because social factors are consistently tagged as ‘soft’ or intangible, and are consequently viewed as too hard to measure. Arguments against quantification of certain, intangible social issues, such as cultural attachment 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 issues are appropriately measurable and new technologies, access to ‘big data’ and growing interest in improving understandings of non-technical risk hold great potential. Social risk metrics are needed and will achieve greater value through improved understanding of the risk terrain.


Big 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.


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.


 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?

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

 How can social risk be priced as a means of informing planning and investment decisions, incorporating current issues including the discount rates debate?

 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 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 5: Timing & approaches

If the 'Measurement' theme addresses the how, the 'Timing & approaches' theme speaks to the *when* and *why*, 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. But a more systematic approach is needed. Findings suggest that substantial value could be gained 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. If risk profiles and engagement approaches could be better aligned, this knowledge could also inform curriculum development, engagement planning and improved assessment of whether certain approaches are likely to be successful in particular situations.



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



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?

Early engagement: The timing of first engagement on a project proved to be a contentious issue in the research co-design, 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 community engagement practitioners should be part of the conversation 'at the point of options analysis' and that practitioners were 'not being involved early enough.' It was noted that engagement practitioners rarely have a seat at the table during preliminary risk assessment 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 moment to engage.



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?



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



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?

Lifecycle integration: Findings also suggest that community engagement needs to be better integrated throughout the project lifecycle. In certain instances, contributors suggested that late entry or early exit of the engagement role from a project resulted in lost value or increased costs. Participants suggested that evaluation of engagement can be a particularly helpful component of lifecycle integration, capturing 'lessons learned aligned to best practice engagement methods.' 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 or lack of benefits realisation. 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.'



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



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

Next steps for Next Generation Engagement

The Next Generation Engagement project is now primed to pursue a research agenda that responds to the infrastructure sector's priority concerns around community engagement, having worked with industry to identify the key knowledge gaps, challenges and opportunities. 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-production',⁴ 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 stakeholders 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. The project can deliver comparative cases that put best practice community engagement within a global context 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 to play 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.



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 how your organisation's project ideas and how you can be involved in this groundbreaking work.

Value



- 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
- Comparative international case studies demonstrating the timing, processes and approaches supporting achievement of optimal community benefits and project value
- Creation of a de-identified case study database, shared throughout industry
- 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
- Study to identify the costs of conflict and project opposition, similar to work previously completed in the mining, oil and gas sector

Professionalisation



- 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
- Initiation of engagement with the tertiary sector for graduate research curriculum design to support specialised qualifications and integration of community engagement studies into related degrees, including Engineering and Finance

Measurement



- Historical case studies (national and international) to quantify and model precursors of social risk and generate generic project risk profiles
- Comparative, interdisciplinary study to benchmark project value/costs against technical (i.e. financial risk) and non-technical risk (i.e. social, political)
- Development of social risk registers and processes, including technology development

Timing & approaches



- 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
- 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
- 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
- Study to combine social risk modelling with case data to recommend the best community engagement approaches to use in communities with particular risk profiles

Regulation & policy



- Comparative cases focused on different delivery models (e.g. DIY, PPP, public, private)
- Regulatory mapping to identify tensions, contradictions and overlaps contributing to red tape inefficiency
- Comparative international cases to produce regulatory and policy models that support efficient and successful project delivery
- In-depth study into implications of policy instability for project success



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

Our partners

Government and industry partners:



Infrastructure agency partners:



Industry association partners:



Research partners:



Founding partners:



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