

Community Engagement in Australian Local Governments: The Practice and its Pressures

Helen Christensen
BA, BEd (QUT), MDevPrac (UQ)

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Technology Sydney

December 2019

Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Helen Christensen declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

Production Note:

Signature removed prior to publication.

Date: 18 November 2019

Abstract

Community engagement has become an imperative of Australian local governments. Driven by legislative requirements and increasing demands from communities, there has been a proliferation of practitioners, policies, frameworks and reports that aim to enhance public involvement in decision-making. The facilitation of this involvement is lauded as a demonstration of democracy in action; however, the practice in its current form is in relative infancy. As such, issues surrounding the practice and professionalisation are emerging which require examination and careful consideration. These issues include the increasing commercialisation of community engagement, social closure created through professionalisation, and the impacts of current practices on the quality and effectiveness of local democracy.

The purpose of this research is to critically explore the practice and professionalisation of community engagement in Australian local governments. The exploration is guided by an explanatory mixed-methods research approach that combines quantitative and qualitative instruments to ensure a robust and thorough exploration. The main instruments for collecting data are a census of local government community engagement practice, a survey of community engagement practitioners and a series of semi-structured interviews with senior practitioners.

The relevant literature, findings and analysis are presented in a series of seven publications. The first outlines the legislative environment in which local governments have been increasingly required to undertake community engagement. The second presents empirical data which show how Australian local governments understand and practise community engagement, and the third uses participatory budgeting to explore how Australian local governments ‘adopt and adapt’ community engagement processes. The fourth problematises the commercialisation or growing ‘industry’ that has emerged around community engagement. The fifth problematises the professionalisation that is occurring in community engagement, while the sixth presents empirical data on the practitioner cohort in Australia and identifies how they differ by work context. The seventh and final paper explores the tensions that practitioners face and how they manage them.

The research makes contributions in four areas. First, it presents empirical evidence about the historical development and contemporary legislative requirements for local governments to undertake engagement, discusses how Australian local governments are practising engagement, and provides basic demographics and experience of the practitioner cohort and describes the type of work they do and the tensions they experience in practice. Second, it challenges existing knowledge around the complexities in the field, focusing on the role of commercialisation in community engagement

practice. Third, it advances understandings of local democracy and professionalisation. Finally, its findings are of relevance to policy makers, public managers, professional associations and practitioners.

Appreciation, gratitude and apologies

It is standard practice to call this section ‘acknowledgements’ but I’m going to see if I can buck the trend as ‘acknowledgements’ sounds a bit too sanitised for what has actually gone on. While I’m proud of this accomplishment, I’m cognisant that my achievement is ultimately the result of the time and resources given to me by others. I’m also aware that over the last four years there may have been times where I was not my “best self”. So here goes...

One of the benefits of starting a PhD in your late 30s is you know yourself a little better. For me that meant knowing that if I was to have any success I would need to have a supervisor who I respected intellectually, who could assist me to navigate the bureaucracy, who could give me feedback in a way that wouldn’t bruise my sensitive ego, who would tolerate my need to work very much on my own terms, who was quick to reply and easily available (even though I’m not) and who had a particular sense of humour. No mean feat given this needed to be coupled with the somewhat specialist research interest of community engagement in Australian local government. I have been extremely fortunate to have had Bligh Grant as my supervisor as he has exceeded in all of my unreasonable expectations. He has challenged me, supported me, shielded me, tolerated me and made me laugh. I couldn’t have done it without you, Bligh, my most sincere thanks.

I also couldn’t have done it without the participants. Hundreds of community engagement practitioners and local government staff who completed surveys and took time to be interviewed. Not only did they participate willingly, they regularly inquired into my progress and were keen to find out what I had discovered. My research has confirmed my suspicion that community engagement practitioners and local government staff are some of the kindest and most selfless people around. My heartfelt thanks to all of you.

My thanks also to the Institute of Public Policy and Governance, including my co-supervisor Alan Morris. I’m extremely grateful for the support and for the Centre for Local Government scholarship which allowed me to take the time to focus on my research. I’m also grateful to UTS and its wider community, from the librarians to the IT support staff to the people who keep the places clean and the people who keep the lights on.

Thanks also to those in the academe who have supported me. This has included unknown individuals who have acted as blind reviewers of the articles, journal editors, university assessment panels, conference organisers, panel attendees and people who have kindly had a chat with me during those awkward conference breaks. It can be an intimidating environment, but I have never felt like I don’t belong.

Last but not least my family and friends. While this journey has seen me be less socially active than normal, I’m lucky to have friends who seem to thrive on neglect. I look forward to being more present in the future. And my family, Bernie, Linda, Michael and John. Thank you for your unwavering unconditional love and support. A special thank you to Mum and Dad for the sacrifices you’ve made (for all us) to achieve our best. (I’m picturing you, Mum, reading this with a big smile on your face, pleased with yourself because your strategy of very regularly telling me that you picked my name because you thought “Doctor” sounded good in front of it worked. Well done you.)

I could keep going – Ruby (the mini foxie) for the emotional support and lap warming, Cadbury for making chocolate, Netflix for endless procrastination opportunities but I best leave it there.

Table of Contents

Certificate of Original Authorship	iii
Abstract.....	v
Appreciation, gratitude and apologies	vii
Table of Contents	ix
List of Figures	xi
List of Tables	xi
CHAPTER 1 - EXEGESIS	1
Introduction.....	1
Thesis Overview.....	2
Research Methodology	4
Research Questions	4
Research Design.....	5
Quantitative Instruments	7
Qualitative Instruments	9
Ethical Considerations.....	11
Chapter Outlines	12
Discussion of Contributions.....	28
Areas for Future Research	32
Conclusion	33
References.....	34
Appendices.....	40
Appendix 1: Local Government Census – Survey Instrument.....	41
Appendix 2: Practitioner Survey – Survey Instrument.....	43
Appendix 3: Practitioner Interviews – Questions.....	48
Appendix 4: Information and consent forms.....	50

PART 1	52
Chapter 2 – Christensen, H.E. 2019a. ‘Legislating community engagement at the Australian local government level.’ <i>Commonwealth Journal of Local Government</i> , 21: Article 6515.	52
Chapter 3 – Christensen, H.E. and McQuestin, D. 2019. ‘Community engagement in Australian local governments: a closer look and strategic implications.’ <i>Local Government Studies</i> , 45(4): 453–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2018.1541794	83
PART 2	114
Chapter 4 – Christensen, H.E. and Grant, B. 2016. ‘Participatory Budgeting in Australian Local Government: An Initial Assessment and Critical Issues.’ <i>Australian Journal of Public Administration</i> , 75(4): 457-475.	114
Chapter 5 – Christensen, H. E. and Grant, B. 2019. ‘Outsourcing local democracy? Evidence for and implications of the commercialisation of community engagement in Australian local government.’ <i>Australian Journal of Political Science</i> . Online 19 November 2019 https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2019.1689921	135
PART 3	157
Chapter 6 – Christensen, H.E. 2018. ‘Community Engagement and Professionalisation: Emerging Tensions.’ <i>Research in Ethical Issues in Organisations</i> , 20: 117-113. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1529-209620180000020010	157
Chapter 7 – Christensen, H.E. 2019c. ‘Participatory and Deliberative Practitioners in Australia: How work context creates different types of practitioners.’ <i>Journal of Public Deliberation</i> , 15(2): Article 5. Available at http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol15/iss3/art5	177
Chapter 8 – Christensen, H.E. 2019b. ‘Managing Divided Loyalties in the Emerging Profession of Community Engagement.’ <i>Journal of Sociology</i> , Online 17 October 2019 https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1440783319879243	204

List of Figures

Figure 1: Explanatory design (QUAL emphasised).....	6
Figure 2: Hybrid research methodology	7

List of Tables

Table 1: Research questions and chapter references.....	5
Table 2: Data sources and chapter references	10
Table 3: Typology of approaches to community engagement legislation in Australia.....	13

