

**Building Relationships with the Local Community:
Approaches to Community Engagement
at Australian Folk Festivals**

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature

Date

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the social dimension of event impacts, and seeks to provide insights into those approaches employed by Australian Folk Festivals to engage with their local communities from the point of view of event organisers. Over the past decade there has been an increased awareness of the impacts, both positive and negative, that events have on their host communities, and a recognition that community support can play an important role in the success and longevity of the event itself. While event-hosting communities are acknowledged as important stakeholders for festival organisations, little effort has been made to identify the spectrum of practices purposefully employed to seek their engagement and manage their relationship. This exploratory study has sought to go some way towards the understanding of a ‘continuum’ of community engagement within events and in so doing, provides event managers with a deeper appreciation of the approaches to host community engagement available to them during the planning and delivery phases of their events.

A qualitative exploratory research approach was employed, with the intent of providing insights into the issue of concern to this study, which was reflected in the enquiry’s research aim:

Identify the spectrum of approaches and practices used by the organisers of folk festivals to engage with their local communities with a view to building relationships leading to both event longevity and positive community outcomes.

An extensive literature review was conducted, the results of which were employed to frame a series of in-depth interview questions, which were then posed to a number of festivals (20) listed, amongst others, on the Folk Alliance Australia calendar of events. The practices identified from the analysis of this data were then placed into one of three engagement categories - transactional, transitional or transformational. The practices within these groupings were then explored in terms of their intent. Those factors that served to facilitate or hinder them were also noted, along with the stakeholder groups linked to them.

The enquiry found that the practices used by event organisers seeking to build relationships with their communities are predominantly of transactional and transitional nature, with events acknowledging the importance of engaging with their communities yet retaining control of the process. Only a few examples were found of

transformational strategies. However, while the study provided an understanding of the strategies currently in use, it also highlighted that the community engagement continuum only partially reflects the diversity of experiences of folk festival organisations in this area. This suggests that the engagement process in the context of Australian folk festivals is a complex one, that could benefit from a strategic focus.

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to provide event organisers, both in the folk festival area and in the broader public events field, with a deeper appreciation of the range of potential practices available to them when seeking to engage their host communities, along with those factors that might impact such efforts. This appreciation in turn, should serve to ‘sharpen’ the strategic focus of such events in the community engagement area, and assist them in articulating their engagement efforts when seeking government support through public grants. In conclusion, the study identified opportunities for further research, specifically: the investigation of the insights emerging from this study in other public event settings; and the exploration of stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of the various approaches to community engagement identified here, along with their desired outcomes.