A review of postgraduate

community engagement courses

in

Australia and New Zealand

for

The International Association of Public

Participation (IAP2 Australasia)

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Executive Summary

Community engagement (CE) has increased in breadth and scope over the past decade to be found in fields including urban development, community revitalisation, mining and construction. As employment opportunities increase, higher education courses in community engagement have emerged in various disciplines. To date there is little empirical research that explores the theoretical foundations of community engagement pedagogy (teaching methods) or provides guidance on how academia and industry could collaborate to increase professionalism in community engagement practice. To address this knowledge gap RMIT University, in partnership with IAP2 Australasia, have embarked on a project that investigates ways to advance community engagement professionalism in IAP2 Australasia's region of responsibility, Australia and New Zealand (Australasia).

A pilot study commenced in February 2020 to provide base line data for the project. Focusing on postgraduate CE courses (graduate diploma, master and doctoral), the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How is community engagement pedagogy conceptualised by universities?
- Is there a body of knowledge taught across academic discipline areas?
- Is tertiary-based community engagement pedagogy aligned with industry needs?

A mixed-methods research design was deployed to understand the planning, content and delivery of postgraduate CE course design in Australasia. In addition to a literature review, primary data was collected from course outlines including program descriptions and reading lists, and interviews with a sample of course coordinators offering postgraduate CE courses.

Findings reveal that postgraduate CE courses are situated across a range of academic disciplines, indicating that universities have responded to the need for community engagement expertise in a variety of employment contexts. Regardless of discipline, there is a resounding and consistent understanding of CE within the Academy, with all respondents defining CE as a practice during which people participate in decision making on issues that affect their lives. A consensus was evident regarding four components considered fundamental to community engagement-participation, paying attention to the inclusion of multiple views, the existence of power struggles during decision making, and community empowerment.

Results indicate that a cohesive, transdisciplinary body of knowledge is taught across discipline areas, providing a foundation for standardisation in community engagement pedagogy and valuable insights toward increasing CE professionalism. Practice-based CE models taught in university-based courses are critically analysed within a framework of theoretical concepts. This conceptual interrogation of practice-based techniques highlights a point of difference between university CE courses and skills-based CE training.

With no evidence of academic-industry collaboration to align course content with CE employment trends, results confirm a disjuncture between university-based CE teaching and CE practice occurring on the ground. Academic tensions toward CE practitioners were identified, including mixed reactions to an IAP2 Accreditation program for university-based courses. However, opportunities to align tertiary based courses with employment trends, and to bridge the academic-practitioner divide between skills-based training and university-based education, emerged from the study. Respondents proposed development of a skills-based, IAP2 module for inclusion in university-based courses, an industry-academia 'community of practice', and areas for future industry-based research. These opportunities have potential to increase CE industry-academic collaboration, and to advance community engagement theory and practice.

The report concludes with evidence-based recommendations that could strengthen strategic community engagement interventions on the ground, supported by theory-based and practice-informed teaching in universities.

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I. Introduction

Community engagement (CE) has increased in breadth and scope over the past decade to be found in fields including urban development, community revitalisation, mining and construction. Increasing statutory requirements for public institutions to engage communities have contributed to growing demand for skilled community engagement practitioners across many industries and sectors. As employment opportunities increase, higher education courses in community engagement have emerged in a range of disciplines including Urban Planning, Communication, and Political Science.

Challenges encountered by academia and practitioners when attempting to work together is well-documented. Not everyone agrees with the idea that scholarship can help with many practitioners taking a pragmatic view that we need to do the job so do it and forget the theory. Conversely, academics are interested in what drives professional practice and explaining the paradigms in which practitioners work. There is little empirical research that provides guidance on how academia and industry could collaborate to increase professionalism in CE practice or that explores the theoretical foundations of community engagement *pedagogy* (tertiary-based learning and teaching methods). To address this knowledge gap, the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Australasia, has embarked on a project to explore methods to bridge the academic-practitioner divide and to advance community engagement professionalism in Australia and New Zealand, IAP2 Australasia's region of responsibility.

In February 2020, a pilot study was commenced by RMIT University in partnership with IAP2 Australasia to provide base line data that informs the project. The pilot study focuses on postgraduate CE courses (graduate diplomas, master and doctoral)

2. Research Questions

Based on a review of literature including previous community engagement research*, the study answers the following questions:

- How is community engagement pedagogy conceptualised by universities?
- Is there a body of knowledge taught across academic discipline areas?
- Is tertiary-based community engagement pedagogy aligned with industry needs?

*Literature review is included in academic journal article currently under review

3. Method

This study deploys mixed-methods research designed to understand the planning, content and delivery of postgraduate CE course design in Australia and New Zealand. The research questions require a detailed understanding of a diverse range of course offerings and therefore includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. In addition to the literature review, primary data was collected from course outlines including program descriptions and reading lists, and interviews were undertaken with a sample of course coordinators offering postgraduate CE courses. Interview data was combined with textual analysis of related course documents to provide a detailed understanding of what is occurring in postgraduate CE pedagogy across Australasian universities, and whether alignment with industry needs and future employment prospects is evident.

Sample: The study's unit of analysis is higher education postgraduate courses in community engagement. The term 'course' is used here to denote a learning unit or subject, situated within a diploma or degree program that comprises multiple learning units/subjects (Newell & Bain, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to identify all Australasian postgraduate CE courses offered in 2020. Twelve courses were identified (Figure 1). Ethics approval was obtained, and an email sent to course coordinators by IAP2 Australasia, inviting them to participate in interviews. Permission for participation was sought through an informed consent form and an information sheet approved by RMIT University's ethics committee. Eight course coordinators agreed to be involved.

Figure 1. Postgraduate courses offered in Australasian universities
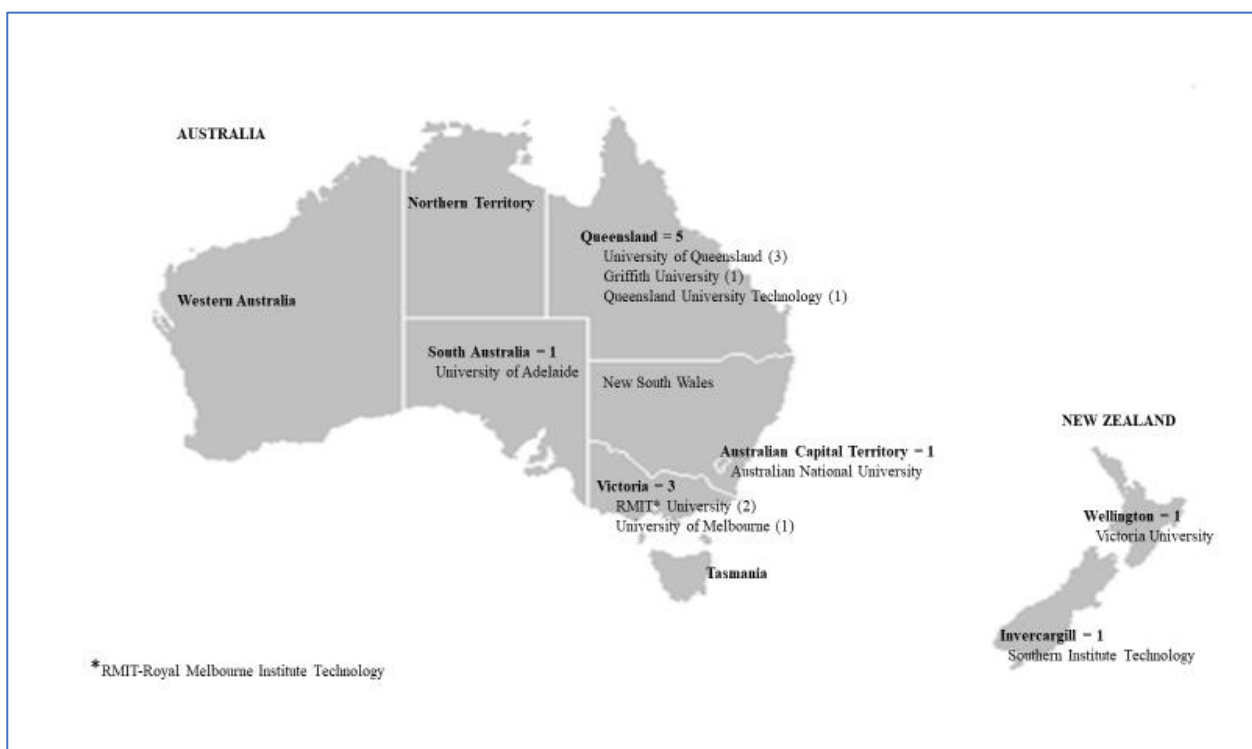
Data Analysis: A matrix was developed to code the data, based on the standard headings of published higher education course outlines. Matrix categories included course description (aims), learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities, resources, and assessments. Data was further coded into sub-categories using a deductive approach, derived from theoretical knowledge identified in the literature review. Themes were further explored in semi-structured interviews with course coordinators.

Interviews: Eight semi-structured interviews were undertaken by videoconferencing following an interview protocol based on the literature review. Interview data and field notes were transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis conducted on the pooled materials. Codes were developed from the data and integrated with the literature and course related documents. Sub-categories emerged from the data that provide new perspectives on the design and delivery of postgraduate CE courses in Australasia.
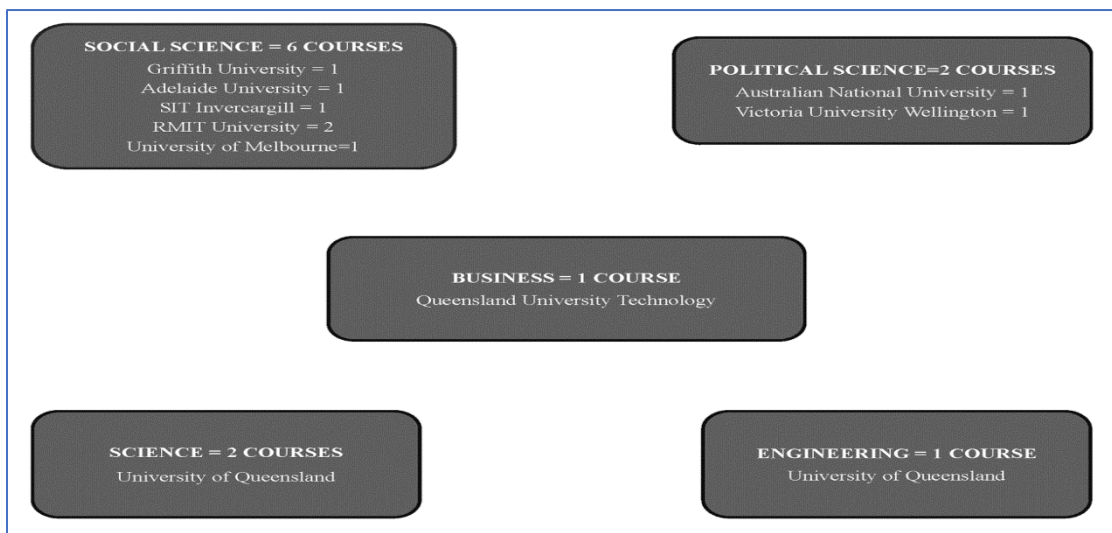
4. Findings

Findings reveal how each university understands community engagement, how CE courses are designed and delivered, and whether course content aligns with industry and employment needs.

4.1. How community engagement is understood in higher education

We commenced by examining how each university positioned their community engagement courses within disciplines, schools and degrees. Postgraduate CE courses in Australia and New Zealand are predominantly situated within the social science discipline, with the remainder spread across political science, natural science, engineering and business (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Australasian postgraduate community engagement courses by discipline

SOCIAL SCIENCE = 6 COURSES
Griffith University = 1
Adelaide University = 1
SIT Invercargill = 1
RMIT University = 2
University of Melbourne=1

POLITICAL SCIENCE=2 COURSES
Australian National University = 1
Victoria University Wellington = 1

BUSINESS = 1 COURSE
Queensland University Technology

SCIENCE = 2 COURSES
University of Queensland

ENGINEERING = 1 COURSE
University of Queensland

Although 50% of postgraduate courses are situated in the traditional areas of urban planning and communication, the remaining 50% are spread across degrees in environmental and/or resource management, business, public policy and e-government degrees, fields not traditionally associated with engaging communities (Table 1). In some universities, CE courses are offered as university-wide electives that can be credited toward completion of other degrees, providing cross-disciplinary education for students.

Table 1: Australasian postgraduate community engagement courses by degree

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COURSE	MASTER DEGREE	UNIVERSITY
Public Involvement & Community Development	Urban & Environmental Planning	Griffith University
Participatory Planning	Urban Planning	University of Melbourne (UM)
Community Engagement	Environmental Policy & Management	Adelaide University
Community Engagement	Graduate Diploma Communication (Local Govt.)	Southern Institute Technology (SIT)
Community & Civic Engagement	Communication	RMIT University
Communication for Social Change	Communication	RMIT University
Participation, Community Engagement & Public Talk	Public Policy: Policy Communication	Australian National University (ANU)
Digital Engagement in the Public Sector	E-Government	Victoria University Wellington
Effective Stakeholder Engagement	Agribusiness	University of Queensland (UQ)
Community Planning & Participation	Urban & Regional Planning	University of Queensland (UQ)
Community Consultation & Engagement	Business	Queensland University Technology (QUT)
Community Engagement for the Resources Sector	Responsible Resource Management	University of Queensland (UQ)

Community engagement components taught: Within the academy there is a resounding and consistent understanding of CE. All respondents defined CE as a practice during which people participate in decision making on issues that affect their lives. Findings show a consensus regarding four components considered fundamental to community engagement:

- participation
- paying attention to the inclusion of multiple views
- existence of power struggles during decision making, and
- community empowerment.

'participation' and 'community engagement' were terms used interchangeably by respondents, for example,

> People participate, engage with the issues and…provide their views and voices in terms of what they need (C7).

The importance of identifying and understanding power relationships between parties is explained by C7,

> Community engagement involves an understanding that we are not equal and that how you relate to the public, and…power relationships that exist… are central and they are central to my work (C7).

More than half the respondents described community engagement as a practice that empowers community members. According to C5, many community engagement practitioners choose this career because of their desire to empower communities:

> People doing it [community engagement] …got into this because they want to empower communities and because they want better outcomes and they… really believe that… collaboration will get us there (C5).

This view is supported by C1's description of community engagement and power,

> Community engagement is…about giving power over, and I'm…interested in how communities take power back (C1).

4.2. Design of community engagement courses in higher education

Results indicate that postgraduate CE course design incorporates a cohesive transdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary body of knowledge, crossing various academic discipline boundaries (Table 2).

Transdisciplinary: Community engagement was described as a concept broader than any university boundaries by 36% of respondents, and most courses place emphasis on:

- Theories and models of power and participation
- Critical analysis and reflection skills
- Community engagement's legislative environment

Results indicate that Shelley Arnstein's article on power and participation, and Jurgen Habermas's studies on communicative action and power, are evident in most courses across academic discipline boundaries. Other concepts included in more than half the courses include:

- The legislative environment of community engagement
- Social movement concepts
- Deliberative democracy, indigenous health, stakeholder analysis and facilitation skills (Table 2).

Table 2. Theories, models and concepts taught across disciplines

Theories, model, concepts evident in ≥50% of CE courses	%	Theories, model, concepts evident in ≥50% of CE courses	%
Critical analysis & reflection	100	Social movements, agonism, insurgency, activism, social justice	55
Power	90	Deliberation, democracy	55
Participation	90	Indigenous engagement	55
Governance, regulations, policy	73	Stakeholder analysis	55
Politics of difference, diversity	73	Facilitation, build relationships, trust	55

Cross-disciplinary pedagogy: This term is used to describe when one dominant analytical lens or context is used to view concepts. One interviewee describes using the context of mining as a dominant analytical lens to view cross-discipline community engagement concepts. In another course, concepts from various disciplines are analysed through the lens of public relations. As one respondent notes,

> It depends very much on… community engagement for what….my course is about community engagement...but it's about community engagement in relation to planning, …So it's not community engagement about health or…(C7).

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Findings reveal that all course coordinators are active researchers in community engagement/public participation. Interviewees described how research informs their teaching with 64% of course coordinators including their work as reading material. Respondents also combined their practical CE experience with their research. As C2 explains,

> The material for teaching comes from my own field experiences, experiences of my former students working in international development, and local industry partners… My course largely focuses on three approaches that I outlined in my book (C2).

4.3. Delivery of community engagement courses in higher education

Pedagogical approaches: Class sizes ranged from 15 to 300 students. One large class enrolled between 130-200 students from a range of different master programs. More commonly however, class sizes comprised between 15 to 45 students. Delany et al.'s (2016) description of transformative learning styles corresponds to findings from 45% of respondents, with Paulo Freire's transformative pedagogy a commonly reported approach (Table 3). As the following respondent describes,

> (Freire) had a big influence for me…and relational pedagogies… I do very strongly believe that learning is a relational process. Having that transformative pedagogical approach… to reflect on our own positionality and how that affects our experiences of each other…those ways of seeing differently (C5).

Table 3. Pedagogical frameworks used in CE courses

Pedagogical theory	%
Transformative learning	45
Social constructivism	36
Constructivism	18

One respondent described the value of teacher and class learning together,

> The teaching of the course is largely built on Paulo Freire's lifelong work in critical pedagogy and conscientization…teachers and students learn together. The aim is to challenge students to engage with the learning process and materials. It is often dialogical in which students take the lead in their own learning. (C2).

Classes were offered as combined lecture/workshops where student led role-plays and discussion were used with case studies. Attempts to weave theory, practice and self-reflection throughout a course were also reported, for example,

The theory kind of does come the whole way through in the sense that, throughout they've got readings that are… a mix of…more practical case study type stuff. And…also… more abstract readings. They do a reflective learning journal throughout (C5).

One informant offered lectorials as interactive lecture and discussions to introduce theoretical concepts in a mixed undergraduate-postgraduate course offering. Additional extension seminars for postgraduate students are offered each week to provide more theoretical discussion in terms of community participation frameworks, and why community participation in planning is important. In this course a CE practitioner panel was also engaged to provide opportunities for all students to interact and network with industry.

Some respondents drew on 'radical' or 'non-traditional' academic work concerned with social mobilisation and social justice, describing their pedagogical approach as unique within their discipline, for example,

In my program and in my faculty, I would be considered… a radical planner…my course is probably one of the few times that they [students] would actually engage or, think about what it is to…engage at that more grassroots community level. I guard that a little bit jealously (C7).

The findings support earlier research that suggests an overlap in pedagogical approaches is common in CE teaching (Delany et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2006). For example, one respondent described using a constructivist pedagogy that is delivered by encouraging student reflection and critical thinking,

I've shifted…into more radical views of participation ... I have this feeling that university is such a unique opportunity to do some reflecting and thinking, … I'm designing my course in that way until someone tells me I have to stop (C1).

Innovative learning activities: The findings reveal that CE courses involve a variety of innovative learning activities. Interactive workshops, project-based learning (studios), panels, student-led role-plays, and practitioner-led scenarios were described, confirming the use of transformative pedagogical approaches in many courses (Table 4). One interviewee considered the course as an opportunity to broaden student views,

I want them to understand that… natural science…is part of a wider social system. The most important thing I want them to take out of this…that basically, this hard system is embedded in a broader soft system (C7).

Games and online interactive tools were introduced as techniques to gather collective intelligence, as well as to build relationships and empathy during community engagement projects (Table 4). LEGO Serious Play and role-plays were used to teach interpersonal communication and relationship-

building (Carpentier, 2011; Renwick et al., 2020). As one respondent said: 'I want them to just play …a lovely roleplay about multi-stakeholder engagement' (C6).

Table 4. Learning activities in courses

Learning activities	%
Lectorial, workshop, studios, role-plays	73
Empirical examples, guest speakers, panels	64
LEGO Serious Play, gamification	36
Traditional lecture & tutorial	18

4.4. CE course alignment with industry and employment needs

Industry involvement: The most common examples of industry involvement were practitioner guest speakers, case studies, inclusion of practice-based CE models, fieldwork and internships (Table 4). A regional difference in the approach to industry involvement was observed in this study. According to respondents teaching a CE course in New Zealand, an 'industry' does not (yet) exist in New Zealand, as the following quote reveals,

> We don't have an [community engagement] industry in New Zealand. We don't have lots of public engagement consultants. There's no one much. There's only a couple of people in New Zealand who make a living from public engagement and they usually fly across the Tasman for work (C4).

Their comments indicate that New Zealand's approach to CE is limited to consultation on decisions that government has a priori determined, for example,

> Local and central governments are in the mode of "we write the policy and we put it out for comment." And that is what public engagement in New Zealand is (C4).

Practice -based CE models: Findings reveal that practice based CE models are taught in most courses (Table 5). Respondents described introducing a variety of community engagement models and encouraging students to use theoretical concepts to critically analyse them. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Participation was the only practice-based model consistently taught in most courses. As one respondent said,

> IAP2's important. It's internationally recognized. It's used all over the world. It doesn't matter if you're in Timbuktu or New York… if you're employed in this area, IAP2 will come up…I say to the students, "It's the international gold standard. Don't be stupid. Don't ignore it" (C3).

Although IAP2's Spectrum is included in most courses its limitations were acknowledged, for example,

I don't think the IAP2 model is robust and agile enough to take on those [wicked problems/complex social] issues. I think it's formulaic; participation is conducted in this way, and if you don't like it, then your voice is not legitimate (C1).

Table 5. Industry involvement in higher education community engagement pedagogy

Type of industry involvement	%
Practice-based community engagement models	90
Guest speakers, case studies, empirical examples, panel of experts	73
Fieldwork	18
Internships, work integrated learning projects	10
Course design/content	0
Advice re alignment with employment & industry trends	0

Respondents mostly viewed practice-based models as biased toward meeting the needs of the 'client' rather than the community, emphasising the need for students to critically assess whether practice-based models provide forums to listen and act upon, community views. One respondent said,

A lot of the models… are very government centric. One of …my key messages to students is to… think of it [community engagement] from a participant' point of view rather than from the government agency point of view, which is not the way many of these… models have been… structured (C3).

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation was suggested as one theoretical lens to analyse IAP2's model, for example,

The IAP2… I think-- has a less overtly political kind of slant to how it's presenting itself. It is … a more professionalized lens…but that's also really valuable to critique as well and, and to think about … I don't think Arnstein's ladder [Ladder of Participation] is unproblematic…but it's a very clear theorization of power there… that is much less clear in IAP2, or it gets masked behind … you have to look deeper (C5).

Industry involvement in course design or content: There was no evidence that CE course coordinators sought practitioner advice on course content or industry trends. Our findings indicate that academics are reluctant to involve industry practitioners in design or content of community engagement courses. Reference was made to challenges and tensions between different community engagement 'factions', as a barrier to seeking industry input. Some suggested that three types of CE practitioners exist: in-house practitioners, consultants engaged by private companies, and grass roots activists. According to one respondent,

For private developers, their approach, their underlying philosophies, their interests and concerns are likely to be quite different from, say, someone doing a similar role in government or someone doing a similar role in a kind of grassroots …C1).

Other respondents suggested that allowing practitioners to advise on academic content could damage the overall neutrality of tertiary-based education in the field, for example,

Community engagement is…really fraught as a practice because the people doing it can have a huge variety of interests…negotiating those can be quite tricky (C5).

Accreditation: Interviewees were asked whether they supported the idea of an IAP2 accreditation program for community engagement courses. There was a 50-50 split in views, with 50% of respondents against the idea, and 50% considering it a possibility. Master programs in urban planning are accredited by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), and participants suggested that any further accreditation would need to be approved by that association. Accreditation is usually awarded to a complete degree, so questions were raised as to how one course in an overall program could be accredited. Fears were raised that the accreditation criteria would be too prescriptive if it was designed to assess the content of one course in a degree. A sample of comments are included in Table 6.

Table 6: Sample of views on accreditation

Positive	Negative
It would be excellent…. I think that would be really good for the students and it would be good for our university to be able to say that we were linked into an international organization like that.	My biggest fear around this accreditation thing is that we would be teaching participatory planners to go out and work for their clients and not work for the community. That's my biggest concern.
It could be good, but it could be too limiting… it's good to have accreditation. At the same time, it's all this bureaucratic process that you need to go through every five years…	I think accredited…short course, maybe, but as to kind of come in and have them frame the core subjects, the core teaching around participation, I resist that a little bit.
So in the case of IAP2 accreditation, I think that, in a way, um, yes, it would be-- it might be good	Organisations that want to try and control what's content and process…is another major problem.

Skills vs theory: Another theme emerged in relation to skills-based approaches, techniques and tools. A commonly held view was that this was not the priority of tertiary-based CE courses. Many respondents considered that tertiary education's primary role was to introduce students to theoretical perspectives of public participation, and to teach students to use theory when considering the ethical, social and political contexts of CE practice. In the views of respondents, tertiary-based community engagement pedagogy aims to encourage critical analysis of CE practice. As one respondent said,

> The design of my community engagement course is not to produce a bunch of people who can go out and run community engagement processes. I think they can learn that on the job. My interest is giving them the framework to understand their practice (C1).

Implications for practice: Despite academic reluctance to involve practitioners in course design, possible opportunities for industry-academic co-design emerged. The first suggestion was an IAP2 skills-based module for inclusion in higher education CE courses. There was general support from respondents (36%) for exploring ways to include a practical module, taught by IAP2, into their course and providing students with some form of certification from the peak industry body. As one respondent said,

> If it would help my students …if it's something that they could then put in their e-portfolios or LinkedIn or resumes…a little badge of something that they can say that they've undertaken a course (C4).

A second proposal was to establish a 'community of practice', enabling collaboration between practitioners and academics on CE research and teaching, for example,

> I'd be interested in the idea of a community of practice around people…teaching and learning in these spaces together…to help me reflect on my teaching practice and what I could do better… that kind of critical reflection is always useful (C4).

Future research: Several possibilities for practice-based research emerged from the study. They include: how community engagement can address wicked problems, exploring how CE can address political, social, and or cultural divisions evident in society; CE facilitation, examining how CE practitioners can learn to be adaptive and build their personal resilience; and methods to evaluate CE, including studies to gain a better understanding of the role of power in decision-making, and explorative studies to co-design context-specific engagement techniques. The emergence of a research agenda provides further impetus for a CE academic and practitioner 'community of practice' to contribute further knowledge and advance professionalism in the field of community engagement.

Conclusion

Four key findings emerge from this study. First, postgraduate CE courses are situated across a range of academic disciplines, indicating that universities have responded to the need for community engagement expertise in a variety of employment contexts. Despite evidence to the contrary in the literature, academics, regardless of discipline, identified four components when defining community engagement. These were participation, paying attention to the inclusion of multiple views, the existence of power struggles during decision making, and community empowerment.

Second, a cohesive, transdisciplinary body of knowledge is taught across discipline areas. Critical analysis and reflection, power and participation, CE governance, diversity, and social movements are fundamental concepts in community engagement pedagogy, regardless of academic discipline or engagement context. These findings provide a foundation for standardisation in community engagement pedagogy and valuable insights toward increasing CE professionalism (Rowe and Frewer, 2005; Christensen, 2018).

Third, findings confirm a disjuncture between CE teaching in universities and practice occurring on the ground, with empirical evidence supporting claims in the literature that academia and practitioners face challenges when attempting to work together (Kahane and Lopston, 2017; Escobar, 2017). There was no evidence of academic-industry collaboration to align course content with CE emerging employment trends, and barriers to expanding industry-academia collaboration were identified. An important finding was that practice-based community engagement models are critically analysed within a framework of theoretical concepts in higher education courses. Combining this academic, conceptual interrogation with practice-based techniques highlights a point of difference between university CE courses and skill-based CE training in developing CE professionalism.

Fourth, opportunities to further HE course alignment with employment trends and advance community engagement theory and practice, emerged from the study. A proposed IAP2-led module for inclusion in higher education CE courses, an industry-academia 'community of practice', and a future research agenda that includes many practice-based topics, have potential to reduce barriers to CE industry-academic collaboration, and to bridge the current divide between skills-based training and university-based education in community engagement.

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