Stakeholder engagement with funding bodies, steering committees and surveys: Benefits for education projects

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Stakeholder engagement is fundamental to the implementation of effective education research projects. Indeed, funders often partially judge research project applications on the evidence of quality stakeholder engagement. Thus, with high levels of competition for funding in education, and some community members judging successful projects by the reflection of community input, stakeholder engagement is an important area to explore. This discussion paper examines the definitions, as well as the benefits and challenges of stakeholder engagement. The discussion is framed around the current theories of stakeholder engagement and stakeholder management. These theories are used as a lens to view an Australian early childhood education online research project utilising a steering committee, funding bodies and stakeholder surveys. Discussion about the benefits and challenges these inputs bring to a project is situated in the literature. Such discussion will be of interest to those undertaking educational projects and funding.

Introduction

Effective stakeholder engagement is required for quality community projects. This paper investigates the challenges and benefits of stakeholder engagement through an examination of stakeholder engagement frameworks. It will demonstrate how strategic stakeholder engagement works to benefit researchers and research projects by increasing opportunities for funding and success through the analysis of an exemplar project. The project aimed to develop educational resources and digital programs for parents and early childhood educators supporting children from Australian military families. Traditionally used by the public relations and business disciplines, stakeholder engagement processes provide useful frameworks for enhancing outputs and definitions of success for research and community education projects.

This paper applies the stakeholder engagement framework proposed by IFC (International Finance Cooperation) (2007) to outline and define stakeholders as users, influencers and providers. The paper outlines five key components of stakeholder engagement as defined by IFC (2007): stakeholder identification, analysis and engagement, information disclosure, reporting, and consultation. These components demonstrate how steering committees and relationships with funding bodies were used to identify stakeholders and capitalise on their knowledge and insight for the benefit of the project. In keeping with the analysis and application of the stakeholder engagement framework, the paper outlines how the project used a steering committee and funder relationships to inform, report to

and consult with the wide range of stakeholders. Stakeholder surveys are also discussed as a way to harness stakeholder ideas.

The significance of the findings presented in this discussion paper is due to the increasing competition for educational research funding. Those who fund research increasingly emphasise the need for demonstrated effectiveness of previous engagement as a pre-requisite to apply for funding. Using an exemplar, this paper explores the lessons from one research team as they engaged with stakeholders. These lessons will be of interest to educational researchers as they plan projects and seek funding.

Literature review

Stakeholder engagement definitions, benefits and challenges

Stakeholders are vital to the success of projects where their individual and/or collective collaboration and commitment are underpinned by a shared goal. This illustrates a need for stakeholder education (Rogers, et.al, 2021b). Similarly, it needs to be acknowledged that there may exist high diversity and polarisation amongst stakeholders (Eppard et.al, 2021; Walshe, Evans & Law, 2022). As competition for scarce funding increases, more projects have needed to involve the community, business and financial sectors for success (IFC, 2007). Within this context, positive stakeholder relations must be nurtured early to avoid complacency, tardiness and failures that potentially fuel business and reputational risks arising from poor practices. Within this context, good stakeholder relations are a prerequisite for good risk management. IFC (2007) defined the term "stakeholder engagement" as

> a means of describing a broader, more inclusive, and continuous process between a
> company and those potentially impacted that encompasses a range of activities and
> approaches, and spans the entire life of a project (IFC, 2007, p. 12).

Depending upon the project, there are typically four different types of stakeholders comprising *Users, Governance, Influencers* and *Providers* (UPIG) (Department of Agricultural Economics Sociology and Education (DAESE), 2020). The first of these are *Users as stakeholders*, which defines users of the project as target individuals who will benefit from the outcomes of a project or program. The second stakeholder, *Governance*, is described as individuals or groups of individuals (such as steering committees) who have a direct interest in how the project or program is managed. Membership of such groups typically includes auditors, regulatory organisations, and health and/or safety executives. The third stakeholder type is *Influencers*. Influencers are the individuals who are capable of influencing decisions and can change the direction of the project or program, for example, union and lobby groups. The fourth and final stakeholder type is *Providers*. The group of providers may cover a larger number of profiles including business partners, contractors, and anyone else who provides resources to the project or program. Together, these four stakeholder types provide a framework for the identification of key project stakeholders.

The linking of the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is made of the diversity that exists within any community. 'Community' is a broad term used to define groups of people, whether they are stakeholders, interest groups, or citizen groups in a geographic location (community of place), a community of similar interest (community of practice), or a community of affiliation or identity such as industry or sporting club (Millington, 2010) (adapted from the Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI), 2020). 'Engagement' is a framework of guiding principles, strategies, and approaches based on principles that respect the right of all community members to be informed, consulted, involved and empowered. 'Community Engagement' therefore could be understood as

> the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people (Center for Disease Control, 2011, para. 5).

As such, any sort of community engagement must encompass strategies and processes that are sensitive to the community context in which it occurs. In any type of community, there are typically five different types of communities that are defined by the purpose that brings them together. The first of these is interest, where there are communities of people who share the same interest or passion; action, in which communities of people are trying to bring about change; place, where there are communities of people brought together by geographic boundaries; practice, in which communities of people in the same profession or undertake the same activities; and finally, circumstance, where communities of people brought together by external events/situations (Millington, 2010).

To ensure success, effective community engagement employs a range of tools and strategies placing a premium on fostering and enhancing trust, as a critical element in long-term, sustainable engagement and effective governance. Community engagement is, therefore, a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation to identify and address issues affecting their well-being.

Theoretical frameworks for stakeholder engagement

To assist researchers in building trust, communication, and meeting the needs of stakeholders, various frameworks have been adapted from project management and business disciplines to assist the engagement process from the commencement of the project. The project team's shared principles of engagement are informed by the main components of stakeholder engagement, detailed in Figure 1.

The components of engagement in Figure 1 are not a step-by-step process. Instead, the components are a continual lens that is consistently used throughout the project. The Association for Project Management (2020) provided a simple, five-component framework of engagement components: communicate, consult early and often, remember they're only human, plan it, and relationships are key.

Figure 1: The main components of stakeholder engagement (adapted from IFC, 2007)

These components speak to the true meaning of research partners. It is not possible to have meaningful partnerships without transparent communication, and the development of relationships amongst stakeholders. Rajablu et al. (2015) provided a framework that assists in identifying the influencing independent variables that stakeholders bring to the project table. It is how project teams manage these variables, through "identification, communication, engagement, empowerment, and risk control" that will determine the success of the project (p.2).

With project success determined by the strength of the relationships that are built amongst and within project teams and stakeholders, the initial engagement journey shared below, highlights some key considerations and strategies for empowering stakeholders throughout the project process. Principles and strategies for the recognition of variables that are brought to the project by stakeholders, the promotion of transparent communication, and the empowerment of stakeholders are shared within the context of a current and evolving engagement research project.

Stakeholders in education settings

In educational settings, how policy can be better informed by research and vice versa, has been a popular topic in educational research and public policy (Allan et al., 2010; Ball, 2009; Gillies, 2014; Levin, 2013; Moll et al., 1992, 1997; Ozga 2009). Cuthill et al. (2014) reminded us of public university's stakeholder civic duty to engage with the broader society at the local, national and international levels, on the area of public relevance. Ensuring that all stakeholders of projects are duly informed is pivotal to the success of knowledge transfer (Allan et al., 2010; Gillies, 2014; Levin, 2013). In their study, Allan et al. (2010) identified and explored the viability of various knowledge exchanges within the context of applying research findings to business, industry, service and public sectors. Their study sought to improve the two-way flow of ideas between research and the stakeholders of the wider economy to benefit citizens, communities and broader society. Using Derrida's (1993) notion of *aporia*, the internal contradiction in a theory, they presented charity project officers with questions that forced reflection upon what are considered to be important obligations and potential areas of privileging. This choice of knowledge exchange varies from the more popular forms by simplifying the intended message to the stakeholder, and emphasising a singular form of transfer. Abernathy and colleagues' (2001) theory of the 'Five C's' – clear, concise, consistent, compelling and continuous, is a popular tool for making an impact on knowledge exchange where the role of the stakeholder is quite clear. Other approaches to knowledge exchange where the stakeholder's role varies include reductionist approaches (Lingard & Ozga, 2006; Ozga & Hones, 2006) and approaches that emphasise governance by reducing complexity (Ball, 2009; Ozga 2009). Irrespective of which form of knowledge transfer is used in educational contexts, the literature is clear in the message that there needs to be a symbiotic relationship between research and public practice policy.

Research project context

The Early Childhood Defence Program (ECDP) is a three-year project which aims to fill a gap identified in previous research (see Figure 2; https://ecdefenceprograms.com/). The research that showed there was a lack of age and culturally appropriate resources and programs for very young children from Australian Defence Force (ADF) families (Rogers & Bird, 2020). Parents and educators requested physical resources, such as storybooks, digital resources such as apps, and programs (Rogers, Bird & Sims, 2019). Despite military parent stoicism (Siebler, 2009; 2015), the lack of resources and programs meant parents felt unsupported and isolated as they tried to assist their very young children to understand and cope with stressors that military families face (Rogers, 2020).

These stressors include a parent working away for many months during deployment, regular training episodes that required the parent to work away, and frequent family relocations (Andres & Coulthard, 2015). Additionally, some families experience a parent who returns home with injuries, mental health conditions, or tragically, does not return home at all (Rogers, 2017). Family transitions throughout the deployment cycle create unique challenges for all members of the family (Franklin, 2013; Rogers et al., 2021a),

Figure 2: *Early Childhood Defence Programs* project logo
(Source https://ecdefenceprograms.com)

especially reintegration when the deployed parent returns home (Bowling & Sherman, 2008). To address this need for support, funding was supplied by The Ian Potter Foundation, the Foundation of Graduates of Early Childhood Studies and the University of New England to produce free, research-based online programs to assist parents, educators, and family and social workers better support very young children from defence families (Rogers et al., 2021a). The programs, which include a series of static and interactive eBooks (Figure 3) and learning modules (Figure 4), are being evaluated with educators, parents, parents, social workers and family workers who are using programs and resources with young children (Rogers & Johnson, 2022). The project was funded by two philanthropic foundations via a competitive grant process as well as supported with internal funding from the university.

Figure 3: *Early Childhood Defence Programs* static and interactive research-based children's books (Source: https://content.une.edu.au/2022/ebooks/index.html)
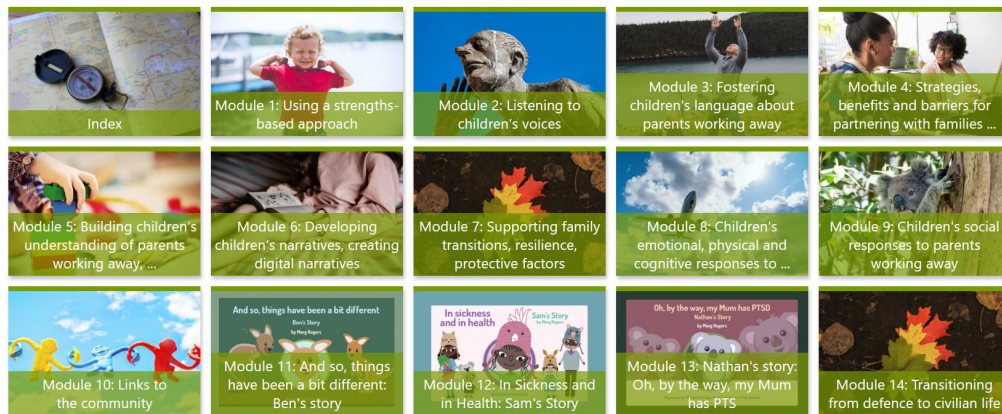
Figure 4: Example of learning modules for educators (https://ecdefenceprograms.com/)
(use web reader or PDF reader 'zoom in' function for reading)

Research questions and method

This paper answers four research questions:

1. How has the ECDP project engaged in stakeholder engagement in the initial stages of the project using a steering committee, the funding bodies and surveys?
2. How do these strategies fit with the current theories and literature?
3. How effective have these measures been, and what have been the benefits and challenges?
4. What can be learned from these lessons for future work within this project and other projects, and how might this inform other researchers?

To address these questions, the research team analysed and discussed how they have utilised the steering committee, the funding bodies and online surveys to engage with stakeholders. The discussions were verbal and utilised team meeting minutes. The team compared their stakeholder engagement with current theories to inform their discussions and analysis. Then, the team discussed the benefits and challenges they encountered in using these types of engagement.

Results

Examples of stakeholder engagement in the ECDP project

This paper explores three examples of stakeholder engagement in the ECDP project, namely the steering committee, funding bodies, and the use of stakeholder surveys. Although all of the components of good stakeholder engagement proposed by the IFC (2007) in Figure 1 are worthy, this paper focuses on only those components shown in Figure 5. The way these have been developed and used in the ECDP project is discussed in the following sections, then compared to the literature in the discussion section.

Figure 5: Effective stakeholder engagement for the ECDP project involving the
Steering Committee, funding bodies and stakeholder surveys (adapted from IFC, 2007)

Steering Committee, funding bodies, and online stakeholder surveys

Stakeholder identification and analysis
IFC (2007) suggested project organisers "invest time identifying and prioritizing stakeholders and accessing their interests and concerns" (p. 12). In the early phases of project design, it was decided a steering committee would be established to help guide and support the research project. After discussion with the major funding body about how this might best work, the team set about establishing the committee. According to the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW (2020), a steering committee "helps to steer a project through from start to completion" and

> ... usually it is made up of representatives of key organisations who are partners in the
> project, and/or who have particular expertise to lend to the project, and/or whose
> clients are the intended users of the output of the project. (p.1)

This required the identification of key individuals who could contribute to the project in this way.

Figure 6: The formation of the Steering Committee for the ECDP project

In this project, stakeholders were identified in a variety of ways as depicted in Figure 6. To start this process, the team worked with the media officer within the faculty to write and publish a news article about the project that was promoted on social media and tagged in stakeholder groups the team had identified. This process was replicated with a research-based news article the lead researcher in the project wrote and published with an Australian education research blog. These actions prompted self-identification of stakeholders who wanted to be involved. This included a military member with young children (end user) who had previously been a school teacher and an early childhood educator (end user) who was also a defence family member. Interestingly, both were alumni of the university where most members of the research team were based.

Other methods of steering committee member identification included project research team identification, where the team themselves identified particular groups that were important for the project: for example, those who were working with veteran families locally and more broadly through Legacy (provider stakeholder), and a veteran family member (end user). Peer referrals from academics involved in related research fields proved useful in widening our focus within the field of military family research. For example, one researcher was doing her PhD in the field of moral injury from military service and the effect on members' families, another had done her PhD in the field of the impact of military service on families, and one was a professor in early childhood with experience in family support and disability support. All three of these researchers were from the same university as the research team, so the team chose to also include a professor of psychology with research in the field of cognition from another university to broaden our expertise and experiences.

Stakeholder agency referrals were also beneficial, as were secondary referrals from steering committee members themselves. The latter example meant that the team received an email from an educational consultant (end user) who had worked in the field of inclusion support with many children from defence families over the last decade. She also had personal experience, with a father who was a veteran. This member had been referred by one of the Legacy representatives in the steering committee. This organic method meant

there was a wide range of knowledge, experience and interests within the committee. Apart from the examples mentioned above, membership of the ECDP project steering committee included parents within defence families (end users), a social worker (end user), a school chaplain (end user) who supports defence families. The chaplain is employed by the state education department and works at schools with a high enrolment of defence families. Also included in the committee is a founder of a veteran family foundation who was also a counsellor (end user). Importantly, we were pleased to be able to include end users of the programs, such as parents and educators, which is recommended to ensure relevancy (Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, 2020).

While a representative of a relevant government body (governance as stakeholders) was invited to join, they were unable to gain management approval and were only able to offer their services in a less formal way as a supportive colleague. They have remained a constant contact and have proved very useful in providing and disseminating information, providing advice, generating ideas and acting as a conduit to senior management within the department. In this way, informal stakeholders such as these were still important reference points. Whilst they were not contacted as frequently because they were not part of the committee, they were still contacted when major milestones were met within the project, or when their advice, expertise and connections were needed. This demonstrates that individuals can also provide project assistance without being part of a steering committee, however, having the group come together to discuss the project allows for collective problem solving.

Analysis of stakeholders' interests
Analysis of stakeholders' "interests and concerns" (IFC, 2007, p. 12) also occurred organically in various ways. Steering Committee members reported their interests in the project through emails, phone calls, teleconference calls and bi-annual Steering Committee meetings that were held using videoconference software. The use of this software meant we could include members who were in numerous geographic states, assisting us to represent what was happening in their area. Members also acted as a conduit to other stakeholders (end users) in their regions by reporting their needs to the research team. Their wide-ranging roles, interests and experience also meant that they were able to share their experiences and knowledge. For example, the Legacy support worker was able to share specific challenges veterans were facing at the time of the ADF's withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent media coverage. This assisted the research team to post ways families could access support and to say we were thinking of them at this difficult time and make a connection with defence families (end users). Likewise, current defence family members and educators (both end users) were able to communicate how defence families (end users) were coping with the pandemic when children were at home instead of going to early childhood services and school. The research team posted links to existing resources that the team's lead researcher had previously made which were available on our website and the Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS) website.

This sharing of knowledge led to consultation with Steering Committee members when the research team were creating resources and drafting program modules. The team were

aware that we needed to evaluate throughout the process, rather than just at the end. As Dreise et al. (2018) stated

> evaluation should be an ongoing and dynamic part of the project itself. It should be designed right at the start of a project. It should be built in – not bolted on (p. 27).

To enable this, committee members with certain experience or expertise were asked if they would be available for the initial drafting ideas and the content of certain modules that required their expertise. Two research team members and the Steering Committee member would then work to co-construct content ideas for the modules. The lead researcher then wrote the modules based on this co-construction. The draft modules (or sections of the modules) were then read by other Steering Committee members, academics and members of the research team. This method assisted the team's use of current terminology, ensuring that content met the needs of stakeholders, and the deliverables were relevant and current and incorporated input from multiple knowledge sources (Dreise et al., 2018). It also meant that the resources met the needs of a range of stakeholders. As such, this sharing of information that was time consuming but important, because 'doors, ears, and minds should stay open' according to Dreise et al. (2018, p. 27). Steering Committee members have also been consulted when designing project control trials, drafting reports to a funding body and applying for top-up funding from another potential funders. They have also been used to seek out relevant organisations to write forewords for some of the eBook resources. Indeed, one Steering Committee member proved so invaluable they were asked to join the research team and accepted this invitation.

The three funding bodies (governance as stakeholders) have vested interests in the project, but different areas of knowledge. The major funder, The Ian Potter Foundation, has advised on areas of project management through formal and informal training. They offered a face-to-face two-day workshop for grantees which provided very useful insights into ways to build solid stakeholder engagement, community and media engagement, funding reporting and ways to improve project design to ensure relevant deliverables and project outcomes. Informally, their research officer was able to offer support to design and conduct effective conducting research control trials and offer insights into how to adapt the trials during the pandemic. The funder also provided information about stakeholders, and encouraged the research team when we contacted them informally about meeting project milestones, or when we reported to them formally. This funder also disseminated some project media releases and social media posts, increasing our project's reach.

Another funder, The University of New England (UNE), offered research and project management advice from management and senior management within the university. This has included budget and reporting support in the first year, by proof reading our report to the funder. The faculty research office also provided funds for travel to training workshops, and in-kind support through administration, digital learning design advice and technical support to set up our website and online learning platform for the deliverables. The university also provided top-up funding to create digital deliverables, media releases

written by various media officers, assistance in applications for further external funding, and encouragement for the research team.

Our third funder is the Foundation of Graduates of Early Childhood Studies, who funded further creation of two interactive digital deliverables for vulnerable families who encountered health issues in service. As the newest funder, we are still exploring the potential for engagement, however, to start the process we tagged them into our social media announcements and news stories about the grant and the new interactive deliverables.

Surveys were purpose-designed by the research team to engage *Stakeholders as users* and elicit their needs, concerns and input to assist with developing the online programs. Sadashiva (2020) explained that stakeholder surveys are used to improve the project team's

> ... understanding of the knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, interests and experiences of their stakeholders … Findings are used to make improvements in the delivery of programmes and/or services (p. 1).

In this project, the importance of the surveys was to gather information from a wider group of stakeholders. To gather relevant information, the stakeholders were divided into two groups, parents and educators. While the surveys were mostly similar, several questions were targeted to each cohort that recognised their unique situation, knowledge and expertise. Ethics approval was granted by The University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee to inform the development of the programs and to allow survey responses to be used as data for journal articles, conference presentations and reporting to funding bodies. Stakeholders were recruited through forum posts, emails, media releases, website advertising and social media posts which invited them to complete the online survey. Stakeholders self-identified (Khazaal et al., 2014) if they met the criteria and then followed the advertised links to respond to the surveys. The survey provided the conditions of the research and asked stakeholders to consent by clicking continue to agree, and if they did not, they exited the survey.

Initial parental survey responses provided feedback about concerns parents have for their young children when a parent is working away. Respondents raised concerns about the lack of "face-to-face support and services"; "additional support of help in the community"; and when accessing resources, parents had to make compromises to their "employment and wellbeing to do so". One respondent raised concerns around the different services and support available in each state, a concern increased due to the high incidence of relocation in defence families. These are general community services, rather than ADF supports. Many defence parents and partners connect to informal social media defence family groups when relocating to an area to find out about the services available. Some families will connect with defence personnel, such as Defence School Mentors, or Regional Educational Liaison Officers when they are moving to a new location. Sometimes this can be problematic when the area is a long way from where these services are available, or where the position is vacant or unavailable in the education setting that

they choose. Early childhood educators themselves can prove to be a support for families, linking them to services in the community.

When asked what support and resources they would like, one parent responded, "respite and support opportunities for [my] child." The issues they would like addressed in the resources included, "stress children experience when (a) parent is away." A positive response was that one respondent found the early childhood educator's "experience in working with young children" a great help in times of parental deployment. Apart from linking families to services, early childhood educators employed by local services can offer guidance about childhood development. Research exploring stakeholder views of apps for young children found apps can meet all stakeholder requirements when there is a shared understanding of learning and what constitutes quality apps (Colliver, Hatzigianni & Davies, 2019). One aim of our surveys is to determine what each stakeholder group wants from the programs being developed.

Information disclosure

The information about the project has been communicated to all stakeholder groups from the start of the project in a variety of ways (Allan, et.al., 2010; Gillies, 2014; Levin, 2013). IFC (2007) suggested project organisers

> ... communicate information to stakeholders early in the decision-making process, in ways that are meaningful and accessible, and continue this communication process throughout the life of the project. (p. 12)

Due to the nature of funding applications, however, some of the larger decisions had already been made before the Steering Committee was formed. This included the open access, online delivery of the programs and the number of modules in each program. Flexibility within the design and content of the program modules meant that the Steering Committee influenced these areas as the project progressed. For example, the Legacy family worker was able to give far more information about services and programs than anticipated, so modules were divided up to allow space. The early childhood consultant had ideas on how modules could fit together and be grouped, which meant changes were made in the order and number of modules.

In addition to information disseminated directly to the steering committee, members were able to follow and interact with the project via, social media feeds (on *Facebook* and *Twitter*) and the website (see https://ecdefenceprograms.com/). This facilitated an interactive dialogic loop (Taylor & Kent 2014) between steering committee members, stakeholders, and the research team (Rogers et al., 2021), where steering committee members submitted comments and suggestions which were then actioned. Sharing updates via digital platforms allowed for members to easily share content with their own networks, which effectively increased engagement. The project also distributed information from steering committee members which was of interest to the project's audience.

Reporting to stakeholders

It is recommended that project organisers "report back to stakeholders on ... performance, both those consulted and those with more general interests in the project" (IFC, 2007, p. 12). This has been in the form of bi-annual Steering Committee meetings and through project progress reports. The latter were reported in the form of an infographic to make them visually appealing and quick and easy to read (see a portion of one of the infographics in Figure 7). These infographics were made available on the website and also shared with other stakeholders who were not part of the Steering Committee, but interested in the project – for example organisations, ADF education support personnel (Regional Educational Development Liaison Officers [REDLOs]), defence family researchers and allied partners who already used early childhood resources that the lead researcher had previously created for children from defence families.
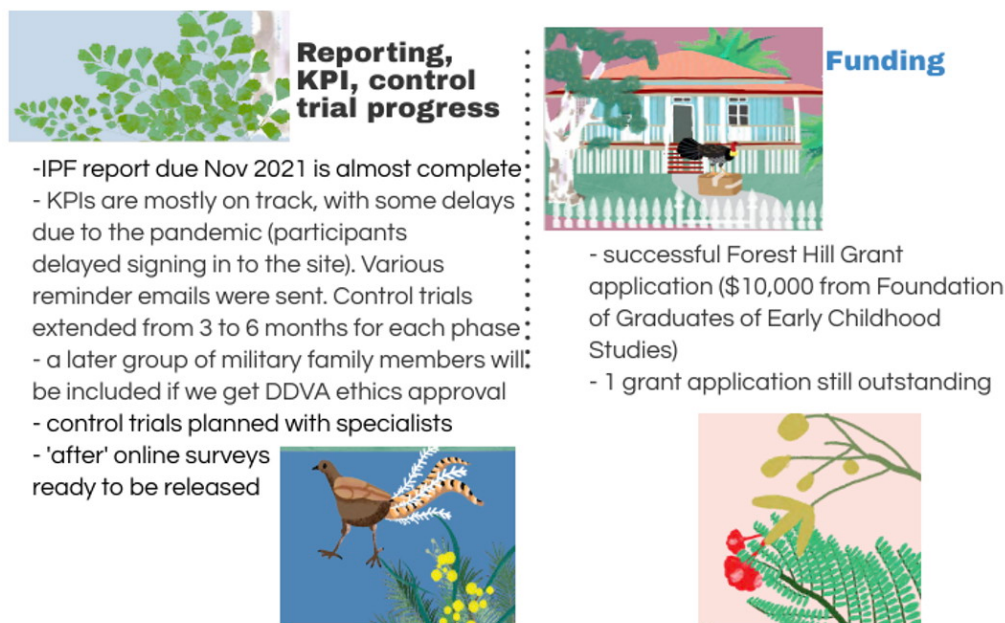

Figure 7: A section of an infographic for an ECDP project report to stakeholders
(use web reader or PDF reader 'zoom in' function for reading)

Funding body reports for this project are both formal and informal. While the major funder, The Ian Potter Foundation, has bi-annual reporting requirements, we have communicated more often with the funding body to notify them of research team changes and project delays due to the pandemic. Within UNE, informal monthly reports were provided to management on the progress of the digital deliverables.

Stakeholder consultation

The IFC says to "plan out each consultation, consult inclusively, document the process and communicate follow up" (2007, p. 12). Our project has informally consulted Steering

Committee members, asking for their ideas and feedback on various aspects of the project. Some members responded relatively quickly, while others took a long time to respond due to other commitments, so the researchers have learned they need to give longer notice than anticipated. These contributions were all followed up as quickly as possible to show appreciation, and where relevant, the ideas, changes or additions are acted upon and shown to the member. While the IFC (2007) recommends consultations are inclusive, we do not contact all Steering Committee members for all areas of the project. Rather, we selectively seek feedback according to the experience, skills and interests of the members for each task requiring consultation. This ensures we do not bombard the members with too many requests, given we want to sustain their interest and input over the three years. For example, after additional funding was received to create two additional interactive versions of eBooks, a short-term Working Party was formed with the Legacy family worker, the educational consultant and two members of the research committee with expertise and experience in that area. This resulted in three focused, productive meetings to action specific tasks.

Stakeholder engagement in project monitoring
The recommendation to "involve directly affected stakeholders in monitoring project impacts, mitigation and benefits, and involve external monitors where they can enhance transparency and credibility" is important (IFC, 2007, p. 12). We have communicated with The Ian Potter Foundation when additional internal funding was received, when the budget needed readjustments, when there were changes to the research team and potential delays to the project due to the impact of the pandemic. In turn, they gave extensions and encouraged us to consider upgrading our initial plans. For example, we initially wanted to pilot and evaluate the programs, but they suggested we conduct the evaluations online. This change gained extra funder support through assistance with the evaluation design. Management within UNE were notified of project delays and additional managerial support and advice was given to advance the project.

Management functions
We were also aware we needed to "build and maintain sufficient capacity within the ECDP project to manage processes of stakeholder engagement, track commitments and report on progress" as IFC recommended (2007, p. 12). We have not done this formally, however, the online stakeholder surveys were advertised on our social media platforms, as well as the website. Monthly analytics are recorded and reported to the research team and it is summarised in the yearly report to the funding body. While these analytics display engagement with the social media pages, we can determine the number of stakeholders who took up the invitation and completed the surveys.

Discussion

The application of stakeholder engagement frameworks has benefited the project (Rajablu, Marthandan & Wan Yusoff, 2015). Already, it is evident that the engagement of stakeholders is a form of good risk management, as a higher level of authenticity is reached through individual and shared insights of the stakeholder advisory group. Of the

four different forms of stakeholders, three have proven to be the most valuable to this project: *Users as stakeholders, Governance as stakeholders, and Providers as stakeholders* (DAESE, 2020). To date, there has been a minimal need for feedback, advice, and communication with the *Influencers as stakeholders*. It will be interesting to observe if this remains the case throughout the life of the project.

The different definitions of "community" have particular relevance to this project. It has been imperative to consider the different communities of practice, interest groups, geographical locations, and affiliations. The different groups have highlighted similarities and differences in the experience they have shared. In particular, it has been noted that stakeholders have influenced the content of the modules and assisted the research team in developing a better understanding of the needs of the target audience. Stakeholder engagement has enabled the inclusion of real stories and case studies to provide greater depth to the content of the modules. It is also evident that the engagement activities have developed a deeper understanding of the real emotions involved and the influencing factors within military family life.

In relation to Millington's (2010) description of different types of community, it is evident that this project reaches and collaborates with each of the five types. These include interest, action, place, practice, and circumstance. Most of the stakeholders in the advisory group could be placed in multiple classifications of community, even all of them. The strategic process of facilitating community engagement at the commencement of the project did require different strategies that were adopted simultaneously. These include material shared through the *Facebook* platform, the formation of a community advisory group that meets through a teleconferencing platform twice a year, an art and craft competition, an online survey, and email contact.

The purpose of the paper is to identify and analyse how different groups can be engaged in a project. At this early stage of the project, it is not possible to report on the outcomes of community engagement, however, concerning the *Key Components of Stakeholder Engagement* (IFC, 2007), the project team has made the following observations about components that have shaped the nature of community engagement. It became evident, very early in the process, that communication needed to be transparent at every level (Allan, et al., 2010; Gillies, 2014). This included the level of commitment required in the engagement process, communication of meeting minutes, and activity towards meeting the deliverables of the project (Levin, 2013). This level of communication drove the consultation process in a positive direction. There is also a sense that a level of trust has been cultivated, which appears to negate any fear of not coming forward, should there be a complaint or criticism of any facet of the project. Our strategic partner negotiation was less involved, as all parties shared the main goal: supporting families with young children, and early childhood educators, through the deployment process of a significant person in the family context. The initial survey assisted the team in identifying and prioritising stakeholder concerns, and this has continued through the community advisory group meetings. It will be interesting to assess the level of engagement in monitoring the outcomes of the project when the online modules can be accessed, and data collected to assess change.

The reflection of the applicability of the *Key Components of Engagement* (IFC, 2007) is echoed by the usefulness of the five-component framework. Again, communication is key, showing there is a need to pre-plan community engagement and commence it from the project starting point. The focus on the human element is stressed in this framework and reminds us to keep in mind the very individual and unique story that each person brings to a community. The importance of relationships and partnerships as key to the engagement is also highlighted.

In relation to stakeholder influential variables (Rajablu et al., 2015), the most applicable to this project so far has been the influence of interest and network. The management components of "identification, communication, engagement, empowerment, and risk control" resemble the important key components of good stakeholder engagements (Rajablu et al., 2015, p. 121). Most importantly, the team has recognised the value in keeping the community engagement process dynamic. Stakeholders can be added at any time, and some may decide to leave the group if they feel that they have contributed enough, or are simply not engaged in the process.

A positive outcome of the engagement has been the project team's growing sensitivity towards the context. This is a result of the dialogue between stakeholders and the team where there has been a sharing of knowledge that only experience in the context can bring. The engagement provides an avenue for sharing the individual and collective experience to the research team that does not have the personal experience of the context. Whilst the project has completed year one of three years, the project team is committed to continuous positive stakeholder relationships throughout the entire research project.

Need for further research

The power of stakeholder engagement frameworks, when harnessed appropriately, can support the development of a successful and effective relationship between a research design, targeted aims and objectives, stakeholders and research participants. With the reality of tightly restricted research funds, the use of stakeholder involvement facilitated through steering committees offers many benefits. These benefits do not require a large input of time from the research team for the amount of benefit gained. Further research into the ongoing impact of this over a longer period will provide deeper insights and is worth exploring, especially since researchers work in an increasingly time pressured environment (Connell, 2019; Sims, 2020). This will also determine the level of feedback, advice, and communication the stakeholders will provide, and the complete outcomes of community engagement.

Conclusion

Effective stakeholder engagement through the use of stakeholders, specifically the creation of a steering committee and facilitating positive relationships with funding bodies, have been key to ensuring stakeholders ideas are heard, project deliverables are more likely to be relevant for stakeholders needs and include stakeholder ideas, and are known about by the wider stakeholder network. The benefits of engaging stakeholders

have included providing further opportunities for gathering stakeholder support and ideas from wider sources. Grounding the project aims and objectives within existing frameworks of stakeholder engagement assisted the team's reflection about the nature, usefulness and necessity of stakeholder engagement through these mediums.

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Declaration of interest statement
The authors do not profit from the research project so there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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