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# Developing the Lismore CSG Poll – A University/ Local Government Collaboration

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# Developing the Lismore CSG Poll – A University/Local Government Collaboration

## **Abstract**

Regional universities can contribute to the capacity of regional governance by providing an important source of specialist knowledge that can be used to aid problem-solving and engage communities more actively in decision-making. This paper reports a case of a partnership between a regional university and a local government authority (LGA), in a situation where the local government authority chose to run a referendum-style poll on a regionally important environmental and industrial issue; the development of the coal seam gas industry in a rural area. The partnership was adopted to produce an independently developed question for the poll. The poll question was developed by university academics who having consulted with stakeholders, provided advice to the LGA, which took responsibility for the final wording of the poll question. An evaluation of the processes involved in developing the poll question included reflection on the collaborative relationship between the university and the LGA. While the independence implicit in the university staff role was acknowledged as important, the importance of a university-LGA collaboration was also highlighted. The value of a more formally-structured process was noted, as were the importance of emphasising the university's role as an advisory body only, and the LGA's ownership of the final decision. Implications for policy include (1) the important role that regional Australian universities can play in enhancing governance and decision-making processes, (2) the potential for independent input to policy development processes for local and regional governance, and (3) the poll process which provides a robust method for ascertaining social acceptance of a controversial land use issue.

## **Keywords**

Governance, regional universities, collaboration

## **Introduction**

This paper reports a case of a partnership between a regional university and a local government authority (LGA) in developing the question for an LGA poll on a matter of regional planning. The context is one in which a local government authority had elected to run a referendum-style poll on a regionally important environmental and industrial land use issue. The purpose of this decision was for the LGA to seek views from its electorate on the issue, as part of its efforts to inform its planning and decision-making processes. In short, the LGA sought to discern the strength of community views on the issue. The planning issue is the development of a coal seam gas industry in a rural area. The LGA elected to develop a relationship with its local university, in order to draw on local expertise in social research techniques: this partnership was adopted to produce an independently-developed question for the poll. The LGA contracted university academics to develop draft poll questions and provide advice around their suitability and applicability.

The role of the university included consultation with regional stakeholders, drawing on the university's existing network through prior research into the coal seam gas issue (Boyd, 2013; Lloyd, Luke and Boyd, 2013; Luke, Lloyd and Boyd, 2013; Luke, Lloyd and den Exter, In Press). On advice from university academics, the Lismore City Council took responsibility for the final wording of the poll question. The poll was put to the electorate in association with the New South Wales local government elections in September 2012, resulting in an overwhelming vote against the development of the industry in the LGA. While there are policy and practise implications for this voting outcome for the LGA specifically, the success of the university-LGA partnership is also of interest from the broader perspective of regional governance and decision-making practises. This paper, therefore, reports not only on the process, but also on an evaluation of the university-LGA partnership and related processes.

## **Regional universities and regional government**

By their nature, universities are sources of specialised knowledge, with a unique skill-base that can be used to contribute to decision-making and problem-solving. For those universities that are located in regional communities the nature and importance of this contribution is heightened. Regional universities can play an important role by participating in the governance of a region's development via a range of pathways, including senior staff sitting on advisory boards but also the contribution made by faculty and staff contributing expertise (Goldstein and

Glaser, 2012; Regional Universities Network (RUN), 2013). In these ways universities can improve the steering capacity and effectiveness of governance whilst improving the competitiveness of the region (Porter, 2003). Five factors that create an environment conducive to university-regional engagement in Australia have been identified by Garlick (2000):

- 1) That knowledge-creation and transfer has become the most important ingredient for regions being competitive in the modern global economy.
- 2) Regions, more than nation states, are being considered as the appropriate platform for economic development in the global economy giving rise to tension between central institution policy development and community aspirations for regional development.
- 3) Universities, as publicly-funded institutions, are increasingly being called upon to adopt efficiency and effectiveness returns and as a result, university campuses are being more tightly managed within an institutional framework.
- 4) The number (approximately 152) of publicly-funded university campuses throughout Australia, with around 30 percent of these being located in non-metropolitan regions.
- 5) A growing expectation by communities for the publicly-funded university in their local areas to be more than just a 'good corporate citizen' and to contribute leadership and targeted knowledge to strengthen the 'sense of place' that they are part of.

Key findings from a recent study undertaken by the Regional Universities Network (RUN) demonstrates that universities are able to play a critical role in regional governance from a knowledge and expertise perspective, with the alignment of mutual priorities around research and education, and interdependencies with other regional agencies (RUN, 2013). Where universities are considered to be 'knowledge hubs' for many regions often outside political constraints, such universities have made strategic decisions to invest in those areas of education and research that resonate with the needs of their regions. Such activities are able to benefit regions by providing access to the universities' physical and intellectual resources, including the academic, technical and management expertise of their staff and students, which better equips them to make strong contributions to regional development (Goldstein and Glaser, 2012; RUN, 2013). The RUN study identified the distinctive positioning of regional universities.

It is critically dependent upon their immersion in regional communities on a day-to-day basis, a deep understanding of their specific regional contexts and issues, and the mutually beneficial relationships and levels of trust, credibility and goodwill they have built through continuous and multiple interactions with regional organisations and communities over substantial periods of time (RUN, 2013, p.1).

Whilst not only developing trust and relationships at different levels between organisations, Goldstein and Glaser (2012) argue that active partnerships between councils and universities can have a symbolic importance for the image of a city or region.

Southern Cross University (SCU) as a member of the RUN has a commitment to playing a transformative role in communities that comprise its regional footprint, including the Northern Rivers region (RUN, 2013). Further, the founding act of the University describes a principal function as being "the provision of courses of study or instruction across a range of fields, and the carrying out of research, to meet the needs of the community" (NSW Government, 1993, p.3). Part of the SCU mission states that, "We create and apply knowledge in partnership with our communities in fields that are regionally relevant and globally significant" (Southern Cross University, 2011, p.2) Collaborative partnerships are positioned as central to this strategic emphasis on mutual benefit. This paper describes a university/local government partnership between Southern Cross University and the Lismore City Council that sought to achieve an independently-developed question for a community poll involving a controversial land use conflict around the rapid development of the coal seam gas (CSG) industry in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales.

## **Background to CSG and the Poll**

The conflict between meeting growing domestic and international energy demands, whilst minimising greenhouse gas output, has led to the development of new energy resources in regions with little or no experience of mining exploration. With gas projected to be the fastest-growing, non-renewable energy source over the next 20 years (Geoscience Australia, 2012), Australia faces development of a non-conventional gas industry on an unprecedented scale (Clark, Crutzen and Schellnhuber, 2005; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Irvine, 2011; O'Kane, 2013). Non-conventional gas extraction commonly uses a process of hydraulic fracturing (known as 'fracking') to access shale gas and CSG reserves from porous rock strata. Whilst the resources sector typically regards this as a low-risk method of extraction with a small surface footprint, others perceive it to involve unmanageable and unacceptable risks to (subsurface and surface)

water and land resources (Brown, 2011; Duddy, 2011; RBS Morgans, 2011; Cham and Stone, 2013; O'Kane, 2013).

Following widespread reportage of potential impacts of gas industry development, community attention has become focused on the CSG industry, and on increasingly competing reports of potential negative and positive impacts of CSG projects (RBS Morgans, 2011). Criticism of the CSG industry has also been growing from a number of farmers, activists, scientists and celebrity advocates (Appelcamp, 2011; Kerr, 2011; Klan, 2011). As a result, strong views and a network of community action groups began to form across the country from around early 2011 (Lloyd et al., 2013; Luke et al., In Press). In August 2011, an online poll indicated that 83 percent of the Australian public was opposed to CSG (Sky News, 2011). In February 2012, *The Australian* published poll results stating that only 33 percent of respondents were in support of the CSG industry, with 27 percent still undecided, and 40 percent claiming to oppose the booming industry (Walker, 2012). Matters of contention that surround the CSG debate have not only been fuelled by unanswered concerns around issues of competing land-uses and landholder rights, but also due to a specific focus on potential water impacts and concerns relating to human and environmental health. Key concerns raised have also involved a lack of sufficient research, operational processes, industry regulation and compliance (Luke et al., 2013; O'Kane, 2013).

Stretton (2006) emphasises the need for a more integrated approach to policy that recognises the interconnectivity of sectors of business, education and environment. He also acknowledges the challenge for politicians involved in arriving at policies that compliment and do not restrict each other. Many environmental problems call for judgments on risk-against-risk, lesser-versus-greater evil, choices of cheaper, poor quality goods over goods of higher quality and price. Trends towards sustainability promote movement towards increased community empowerment and participation in decision-making on local and national scales (Ostrom, Norberg, Wilson and Walker, 2008; Robinson, Styles, Evernden and Kirkham, 2013; Tallon, 2011). Natural resource management decision-makers often struggle to balance demands for economic development with associated environmental risks (Reid et al., 2010; Suzuki and Dressel, 2003). Whilst society faces a number of 'grand challenges', there are urgent calls for research and development towards mechanisms that allow science and society to address decision-making and the needs of citizens at global, regional, national, and local scales (Reid et al., 2010).

Participatory processes have been shown to provide citizens with a better understanding of key issues and potential outcomes, with a two-way process that values the experiential knowledge held by communities (Smith and Lazaro,

2006). Such approaches emphasise partnership with affected communities and interests to build capacity and resilience in planning and decision-making processes (Head, 2007). However, in the case of the CSG industry, members of affected communities have often reported feeling that they had not been adequately informed of the full implications of CSG development in their region (Kerr, 2011; Klan, 2011; Leser, 2011). This is hardly surprising given that it has been recognised that “Government in Australia, like government elsewhere, does not have a good track record of involving citizens in the development and implementation of public policy” (Hartz-Karp and Briand, 2009, p.135). For government and industry, there is a need to strike a balance between economic growth, ecological needs and social progress, as resource-extraction projects can have a significant impact on the local population (McGee, 2009; Labonne, 2009). Social expectations of industry are also changing, and thus there is increased pressure on the mining industry to improve the integration of environmental and social policy into its operations (Labonne, 2009).

The benefits of developing communication, transparency and trust between natural resource management agencies and natural resource users have been highlighted in previous research (Gray et al., 2012; Robinson, et al., 2013; Williams and Walton, 2013). As individuals gain insight into the motives, objectives and behaviors of others, cooperation and the level of trust between individuals and groups improves, and coordination across a diverse range of stakeholder groups increases (Beratan, 2007; Beierle, 1999; Owen and Virderas, 2008). Such communication also decreases public perception of risk (Eiser et al., 2007), whilst increasing the likelihood of cooperative behaviours (Dickson et al., 2009). There is also evidence that suggests this may increase the overall resilience of social-ecological systems (Ostrom et al., 2008). It is for these reasons that community-engagement, embodying principles of participation, deliberation, trust, respect and empowerment has become increasingly adopted as good practice in regional governance in recent times. However, community-engaged approaches have not replaced old methods of hierarchical control and regulation, nor have dialogue and consensus-politics replaced interest group conflicts (Head, 2007).

The term ‘social licence’ has been gaining prominence in regards to the resources sector, in recognition of communities affected by extractive activities (Williams and Walton, 2013). Boutilier and Thompson (2011) explain the concept of social licence as reflecting the idea that a society or a section of its members can grant or withhold support for a company and its operations. Williams and Walton (2013, p.1) describe social licence as “tacit, intangible and context- specific”; also as ‘dynamic and shifting’ as people’s experiences and perceptions of an operation or industry may change. A divide has been highlighted in recent times in regards to

community and industry expectations of consultation processes, with a public dialogue taking place around what, in practise, a ‘social licence’ may look like, and ways in which it may be achieved (Klan, 2011; O’Kane, 2013; Williams and Walton, 2013). An understanding of how various levels of stakeholder support are proportionally distributed throughout community networks can provide an important basis for informing an overall social licence (Boutilier and Thompson, 2011).

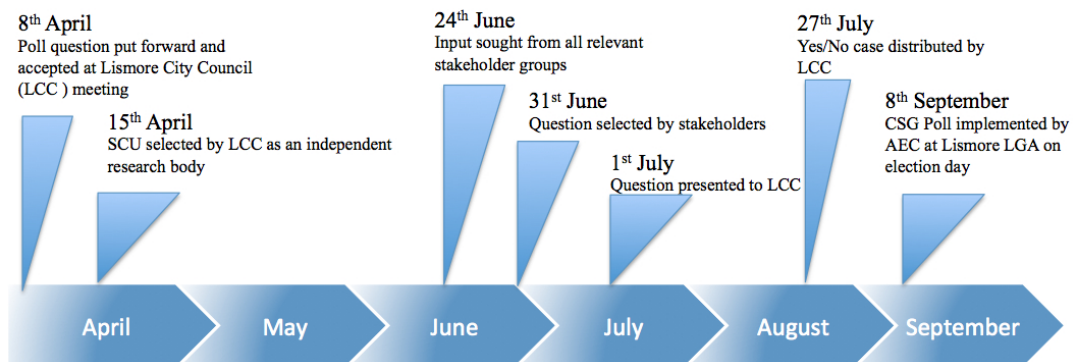
The community referendum, as a democratic method for ascertaining community sentiment and guiding policy, is one of the most promising processes to promote informed participation by citizens (McGee, 2009). Used in this context, such referenda represent a new and accurate measurement of whether a community has provided the free, prior and informed consent to proposed development as required under international law (McGee, 2009). Furthermore, when people share their reasons in a dialogue about public problems, this may also cause greater sensitivity to broader public concerns (Fishkin, 2009). In the context of this paper, the application of community referendum marks a shift from ‘local government to local governance’ (Aulich, 2009) and provides one pathway towards “institutionalising” collaborative, deliberative participation known as deliberative democracy (Hartz-Karp and Briand, 2009).

## **Developing the Poll**

On 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2012 (Figure 1), the Lismore City Council voted to conduct a referendum-style community poll on the issue of CSG mining to determine community response to the issue across the Lismore LGA (Figure1). The argument for the poll to be conducted was articulated in the mayoral minutes as follows.

Despite the apparent community opposition, the actual level of that opposition can only be estimated. Indeed one communication to Council has stated that the apparent opposition to CSG comes from ‘reckless emotive “terrorist type” attacks by the largely unemployed and “rent a crowds” who are easily led by misinformation’ thereby implying that the real level of opposition is much less than might appear ... The results of the poll, albeit with non-compulsory voting and a non-binding outcome, would provide Council with the most accurate measure of our Local Government Area’s (LGA) attitudes on CSG (Lismore City Council, 2012a, p.5).





**Figure 1:** Timeline showing an overview of the CSG poll question development for the Lismore City Council election poll, 2012.

At the meeting on Tuesday April 10<sup>th</sup> it was resolved “that Council:

1. Conducts a poll in conjunction with local government elections to determine community support for a ban on Coal Seam Gas exploration and mining in our Local Government Area.
2. Informs the Division of Local Government, the Local Government and Shires Associations and NOROC Councils of this intention.
3. Suggests to NOROC Councils that each member Council might like to consider a similar poll.
4. Request staff prepare a report on the preferred wording for a poll question and the information for both Yes and No cases” (Lismore City Council, 2012a, p.6).

Six councillors voted for the motion (Councillors Houston, Dowell, Yarnall, Ekins, Clough and Smith, whilst five voted against (Councillors Graham, Battista, Meineke, Marks and Chant) (Lismore City Council, 2012a). As an outcome of the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012 resolution, council staff were required to prepare a report on the preferred wording and the information for the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ cases. Southern Cross University (SCU) was invited by council staff “to assist in developing the question and to ensure an independent approach to the issue” (Lismore City Council, 2012b, p.1). SCU agreed to the invitation from the Lismore City Council on a no-fee basis.

The referendum-style poll would be implemented by the Electoral Commission of New South Wales, hence the development of the question was guided by the Electoral Commission requirement that the poll could gain only a simple 'yes' or 'no' response. As the poll outcome would not be deemed legally-binding, it could not be termed as a referendum question, although the literature relating to referenda is highly transferable (Levy, 1983; McGee, 2009; Greenhill, 2013).

To maintain transparency of process and ensure best-practise community engagement (Cuthill, 2002; McGee, 2009; Kleine, 2012; Kumasi et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2013), SCU researchers involved stakeholders from the outset. Stakeholder input was sought in the development and selection of the referendum-style poll question aimed at determining the community sentiment on the CSG issue in the Northern Rivers, NSW. A list of key stakeholders was developed, including the CSG energy companies, Metgasco and Arrow Energy, regional natural resource and agricultural bodies, Norco (an agricultural cooperative), NSW Farmers Association, Rous Water, the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), and the social protest group, Lock the Gate Northern Rivers. Individuals identified from each group were invited by email to suggest possible poll questions.

Due to time limitations set by the Electoral Commission (Lismore City Council, 2013c) there was less than a week available for feedback from stakeholders to be provided to SCU researchers. The majority of discussion in the stakeholder consultation took place via email, with an iterative process of refining the draft question. This involved individuals suggesting questions, which were further commented on, and subsequently revised, until three common question variations emerged. A number of stakeholder groups did not respond to this initial email, and one formally declined to participate. The Lock the Gate Northern Rivers group responded enthusiastically, with support from the EDO. This particular group represented a network of approximately fifteen local campaign groups active on the CSG topic. The email request that had originally been sent to one point-of-contact, was then circulated using a Google-group email to one or two individuals from each local campaign group, representing an estimated six hundred residents active on the CSG topic in the Lismore LGA.

To conclude the stakeholder consultation process, the three variations of the poll question, with relatively minor wording differences, were sent out to the original list of stakeholders. At this point the CEO of local CSG company, Metgasco, commented that since there was "very little exploration acreage in the Lismore shire" (Henderson, 2012, p.1), it would be more appropriate for other CSG companies to participate. He also stated that the poll would have little significance

due to it being non-compulsory and non-binding, pointing out that “resource management is a state government, not a council issue” (Henderson, 2012, p.1).

The final preferred question developed by the community group network was, “Do you support the banning of CSG exploration and production in the Lismore City Council area?” This question was presented to Council on the 6th June, 2012.

### **The final question**

Drawing on best practice survey design with the intention to identify the clearest and least ambiguous question as possible (Blankenship, 1940; Gallup, 1941; Levy, 1983), the discussion at that meeting between SCU researchers and councillors focused on the two key topic variables in the question – exploration and production. It was acknowledged at the meeting that the inclusion of both should occur, given that CSG companies in the area were still in the exploratory phase, and that the Electoral Commission had limited the poll to only one question. In their presentation to council the research team advised the councillors that:

- 1) Metgasco’s key concern was regarding the role that council will play in ensuring the provision of unbiased information to the local community.
- 2) This reinforces the need for information material developed by council to be clear and present both sides.
- 3) The researchers suggest a “for and against” sheet be produced with input from the opposing sides in the debate.

There then followed a discussion over whether the question should be posed in a positive or negative sense; in order to avoid a potential accusation of “push-polling” (Levy, 1983). It was acknowledged that putting it in a negative context may lead to industry fears of bias. Since there was no legal apparatus for the council to ban the industry, the word ‘banning’ was removed from the question. The final wording, approved by council vote was, “Do you support coal seam gas exploration and production in the Lismore City Council area?” Further discussions with Lismore councillors on the efficacy of the process led to a decision to qualify the responses with the use of exit polling. The survey process and results of the exit poll are detailed in Luke et al. (2013).

The Lismore City Council distributed information about the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ cases for the poll through the local media and at the polling booths, for four weeks prior to the election date. To maintain impartiality of process, the “no” case for the poll was developed by the core anti-CSG protest association, Lock the Gate Northern

Rivers, and the “yes” case was developed by the resources industry group, the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA). Despite initial support for the poll, APPEA withdrew its support one week prior to the election date, stating that it found the question ‘leading’. Instead APPEA provided an alternative wording “Regardless of your personal feeling about Coal Seam Gas, do you support CSG for Australia’s economic and energy future?” (Broome, 2012). By this time the electoral material had already been printed and was awaiting distribution.

## **Poll Outcomes**

The poll took place as planned on September 8<sup>th</sup> 2012, with 97 percent of all voters participating (a total of 25,595 votes cast), with a strong result of 87 percent of respondents voting “no” to the poll question (Electoral Commission NSW, 2012). Following this result, the poll was used as a key piece of evidence for the Lismore City Council’s stance on the issue of gas developments, with a specific reference that a ‘social licence’ for the CSG industry had been ‘denied’ in the Lismore City Council LGA (Lismore City Council 2012d). In October 2012, following a 9:2 vote, the council resolved to write to all key ministers and MPs, urging them to call on federal and state ministers and MPs to acknowledge the poll result in parliament by opposing CSG activity in the Lismore LGA (Lismore City Council, 2012d). It was anticipated that the NSW Strategic Regional Land Use Plan would be developed for consultation within a twelve month period. The council viewed the 87 percent “no” poll result as key in providing informed input into the plan, requesting that all licences for exploration and production in the Lismore LGA be revoked (Lismore City Council, 2012d).

In December 2012, the Lismore City Council voted (8:1) to approach the Northern NSW Local Health District to request that it carry out a health impact assessment on the possible impacts of coal seam gas (CSG) production on local residents. At the same meeting, the university-LGA partnership was further developed in regards to the CSG topic in particular, with the council resolving to request that the Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils (NOROC) investigate the joint funding for SCU research into baseline groundwater data in areas of proposed CSG developments, proposing \$30,000 per year for three years to match Australian Research Council Funding (Lismore City Council, 2012e). This proposal was also resolved by a vote by Council of 8:1.

Finally, the council voted (7:2) to erect five official signs quoting the poll result, to be placed at the gateways to Lismore including the airport, shown in Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** One of five signs erected by Lismore City Council to advertise the CSG poll result; this sign was still standing at the entrance to the City a year after the poll (Photograph: Hanabeth Luke).

## Evaluation of the CSG Poll Development Process

To seek feedback from the Lismore city councillors regarding their views on the effectiveness of the engagement process of the council and the university co-development of the poll question, the Mayor of Lismore City Council, Councillor Jenny Dowell, was approached to seek comment from all councillors in August 2013. To elicit the personal perspectives of individual councillors, the issue was introduced thus:

SCU is reviewing the process of working with Lismore City Council last year to develop a poll question about CSG in the Lismore area as part of the September 2012 local government elections. SCU is seeking the views of Lismore City Councillors and General Manager as the primary stakeholders in that poll, on the process of the Council and the University working together to develop the poll question.

The Mayor distributed four questions to the councillors, encouraging them to respond directly to the research team.

1. What aspects of working with Southern Cross University to develop the CSG poll question worked well?
2. What aspects of working with Southern Cross University to develop the CSG poll question could have been improved?
3. Do you feel that you played a part in the development of the CSG poll-question?
4. Do you think that the CSG poll results had impact on policy at the local, state or federal level?

Three councillors responded.

*What aspects of working with Southern Cross University to develop the CSG poll question worked well?*

One councillor spoke in detail about this question, offering an opinion that the fact that the question was initially prepared independently of council worked well. This allowed the council to demonstrate to the public that there was no “political interference in the question”. In this context, this respondent also noted that eventually the councillors opted for a simpler question on the recommendation of council staff. A second respondent was of the view that the council achieved a good question from the process, commenting positively on the documentation and explanation to councillors.

It was also noted that the council prefers to use the university for this type of work, since it provides both an opportunity for the council to support local activity and a meaningful learning opportunity for students.

*What aspects of working with Southern Cross University to develop the CSG poll question could have been improved?*

Two respondents commented, in different ways, on the challenges facing the university team in arriving at recommended versions of the questions. This was in part, according to one respondent, due to the problematic nature of the yes/no form of the question. Some councillors, suggested a second respondent, expressed suspicion about the framing of the question. This respondent suggested that further explanation of how to structure questions and about the skills and experience of university staff might have allayed these suspicions.

*Do you feel that you played a part in the development of the CSG poll-question?*

One respondent stated “yes and no”, drawing attention to the role of the council initially resolving to have a poll question at the election, and ultimately selecting the question to be put at the poll. On the other hand the respondent noted that the initial task was, “rightly, given to SCU as an independent party”. A second respondent felt that s/he had not played a part in the development of the question, but had been “kept in loop with the process”.

*Do you think that the CSG poll results had impact on policy at the local, state or federal level?*

While one respondent suggested that the poll result probably had an impact on local, state and federal policy, two indicated that this was undoubtedly so. One respondent was clear that the poll result had definitely had an impact at a local and a state level. This respondent noted that it was “very worthwhile [and that] it all depended on the phrasing of the question, and it was a good one”, commenting that “it might have been a less useful result if a different question was asked”. Another respondent commented that the poll result has led to changes in the council and its representations to state and federal governments, explaining that:

The 87% opposition has, together with community action, helped lead to state government legislative changes and possibly to the Federal Government water 'trigger' legislation. In LCC [Lismore City Council], it has strengthened resolve to reject CSG because we are able to demonstrate a robust process, high voter turn out and a very strong level of opposition. That 87% poll result is irrefutable evidence of community rejection – it has allowed Council to reject the claims of CSG companies that the 'No' movement is just a loud, 'hippie' minority.

## **Discussion**

Several themes emerged from the councillors’ reflections on the engagement processes of the university-LGA partnership. Councillors valued the independence of the research team and highlighted the importance of the process being collaborative, rather than consultative. In this regard, the embedded local nature of the university and researchers appears to have been important for the council, with the research team being valued as part of the council’s community.

The feedback from councillors has reinforced that the question wording was paramount in providing a sound result that could be fed into decision-making processes, and possibly into policy (Gallup, 1941; Levy, 1983; McGee, 2009). While none of the councillors who gave feedback commented on the contentious

nature of CSG, it is likely that, given the prominence of the debate in the Lismore region, all parties came to this discussion with pre-determined understandings of the issue. These may not have been made as explicit as they could have been. However councillors clearly understood the importance of clarity of documentation and explanation, as well as the clarity of communication of roles and stages of the process as a partnership activity, in this instance between the university and the LGA. A future such exercise, from each party's perspective, could be more formally structured. It is notable that councillors in their feedback played down the final decision process, in which the council effectively took ownership of the question. From the researchers' point of view, this was highly significant, reflecting a successful outcome of the engagement.

Whilst the SCU and LCC relationship is a primary focus of this paper, it should also be noted that there have been further benefits from the university-LGA partnership. An important one has been the relationship between the university and the community, whereby members of different community groups became involved in the development of what they saw to be their own question. This provided a novel opportunity for community input into the decision-making process, which can also create a deeper relationship with the result (Kumasi et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2013). The process of asking the poll question itself can also have an important transformative effect; Fishkin (2013) argues that the very act of being asked to form an opinion on a topic can be likely to draw a person into a greater level of curiosity on a topic, hence increasing public engagement on an issue.

Although the council as a body (through its democratic process) had a majority support for the poll, consensus, as with many such initiatives, was not gained in the voting that took place in regards to the poll and poll development process (Lismore City Council, 2012b). This is unsurprising given the controversial nature of the topic in question, however may account for a lack of feedback from some of the councillors who were less supportive of the poll. Were it possible, it would be good to ascertain their reflections on the process, and whether its perceived success may have altered their views in any way. Despite a lack of initial consensus, the support for policy decisions relating directly to the outcome of the poll was much more broadly supported by councillors.

Data from the council minutes combined with the councillor feedback provided leads us to the conclusion that they were satisfied with three aspects of this work: 1. That the process was undertaken by independent SCU researchers; 2. That the process was communicated by SCU researchers; and 3. The involvement of the council following the provision of the SCU researchers advice.



Given the sensitivity of the issue and the need for independent expert advice on the development of the question, this university-council process has demonstrated how university researchers can contribute to regional governance using their knowledge and expertise.

In terms of policy outcomes, the poll is considered to have been worthwhile. Locally, it supported council's resolution on the matter, providing what council considered to be sufficient evidence to deny the CSG industry a social licence to operate in its LGA. The council also utilised the poll result as evidence to justify the commission of research into potential health and water impacts, whilst seeking support for its stance on CSG developments at a state and federal level (Lismore City Council, 2012d, e). Following the poll (and of course the election), resolutions passed on these council policy decisions gained support of up to 9:2 within the council, from an initial 6:5 when the first resolution for the poll was passed, suggesting less marked polarisation on this topic within the Lismore City Council following the poll.

At a state government level, the Liberal National Party (LNP) acted to increase the regulation of the CSG industry in NSW, including key changes to its Strategic Regional Land Use Policy regarding valuable agricultural land and residential areas. This included a two kilometre buffer for new CSG activities across existing residential zones, as well as lands identified for future residential growth in order to protect rural communities from perceived threats (NSW Government, 2013). Whether such changes will be sufficient for the 87 percent of Lismore residents, who voted against the industry, remains to be seen.

## **Conclusion**

This evaluation of the processes involved in developing the poll question included reflection on the collaborative relationship between the Southern Cross University and the Lismore City Council. While the independence implicit in the university staff role was acknowledged as important, the importance of a university-LGA collaboration was also stressed. The value of a more formally-structured process was noted, as was the importance of emphasising the university's role as an advisory body only, and the LGA's ownership of the final decision. Feeding into decision-making processes such as these, the quality of the poll question was important, while, given the contentious nature of the issue and the highly volatile situation surrounding the social protest against CSG in the region, a rigorous and independent process around the development of the question was paramount.

Apart from the policy decisions made by the Lismore City Council as a direct outcome of the poll (and its input into state policy), additional policy implications include the critical role that regional Australian universities can play in regional decision-making and governance processes, and the potential for independent input to policy development processes for LGAs. This paper highlights the critical role that universities headquartered in regional Australia can, and should, play in regional governance. Further the poll process provides a robust method for ascertaining social acceptance of a controversial land use issue.

The collaborative processes described have helped to strengthen community input into regional governance and decision-making, effectively contributing to a more active citizenship for the university whilst aiding an important democratic process. Through an emphasis on community engagement, regional universities such as Southern Cross University position the health and vibrancy of the regions in which they are based as a key outcome for their teaching and research practices. This positions universities as catalysts for community and civic capacity, whilst reinforcing the importance of place particularly for those universities located outside metropolitan areas.

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