



Councils learning from each other

An Australian case study

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Executive Summary

The 'Councils learning from each other' study has been carried out under the auspices of the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) with the following objectives:

- to understand and describe the phenomenon of councils learning from each other in the Australian context
- to identify the mechanisms which facilitate inter-council learning in order to understand how associations, jurisdictions and educators might make use of this enhanced understanding to inform capacity building programs promoting local government reform
- to put forward the study as a contribution to current national and international research and debates on inter-organisational learning in local government.

Adopting a case study approach, the research comprised a literature review, including an in-depth exploration of using case studies as a research strategy; data gathering and analysis of in-depth one-on-one and group interviews with people working in local government; and feedback reports from students undergoing training in local government leadership.

Research questions

The questions that underpinned the research are as follows:

- What situations, programs and initiatives encourage personnel in local government to learn from each other?
- What are the mechanisms of learning, and the facilitators and barriers of these mechanisms?
- What are the reported benefits of peer-to-peer learning for Australian local government?
- What implications do the data have for programs that are designed to support local government capacity building?

Key findings

Respondents in this study provided insight into a wide variety of situations, programs and initiatives that encourage them to seek out information and ideas from other councils. Findings suggest that they are motivated by factors such as the search for constant improvements in their own councils, staying on top of developments in the sector, seeking out best practice based on trust in peers, and desiring to do the best for their communities.

Based on these wide-ranging motivations, they are encouraged to seek and take advantage of a similarly wide range of opportunities to learn from their peers in the sector. They readily take advantage of informal means of peer-to-peer learning within activities that are organised on a more formal basis.

A conceptual framework derived from the literature was tentatively drawn upon to illustrate the mechanisms of learning and the facilitators and barriers of these mechanisms. Findings suggest value in positing a 'trajectory of learning' from intuiting ideas and tacit or implicit knowledge; interpreting ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation; diffusion of ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation and its variation through replication in context; and the explicit embedding of ideas and/or knowledge in the organisation. More research would be needed to understand variations in this trajectory and to provide data that could be useful for capacity-building programs.

Reported benefits of peer-to-peer learning include efficiency benefits through 'not having to reinvent the wheel'; personal benefits, including those derived from professional networking and helping to inspire staff who may be stuck on certain ways of doing things; and inspiration and models for problem-solving on specific issues.

Concrete changes in 'receiving' organisations include: changes to systems and procedures, particularly areas of council practice (such as purchasing and procurement) where cost savings could be brought about; participation in forums where professionals from various councils meet on a regular basis and also establish email connections and online chat forums; and the development of 'sister relationships' with other councils.

Several respondents highlighted the point that all learning derived from other councils needs to be adapted to context; it also needs to be shown to have been modified in this way. After a period of time, it may be difficult to distinguish between the learning derived from other councils and learning derived from other sources, including the local government's own dynamics of change and reform.

Implications of the findings for enhancing capacity building in the sector

The respondents themselves pointed to the following as recommendations for capacity building in the sector:

- Incorporating 'learning from other councils' as an explicit element of learning and development within individual councils. This would include providing specific training on how local government personnel can best learn from the experiences of other councils and the opportunity for personnel to participate in networks.
- Continuing to work on the development of an organisational culture that favours openness and reciprocity.
- Including other councils in the governance networks of the council. This may include strategies such as 'staff swapping' and establishing formal structures around specific needs common to all councils.
- Joint training initiatives. There is strong support for inter-council mentoring, and other means may include documenting and workshopping case studies of council practice and other workshops dealing with particular topics, perhaps with the support of the state government.
- Acknowledging that much shared learning is based on informal personal networks.

In addition, specific recommendations were given by respondents for improving the inter-council learning aspect of a formal, planned program such as the Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA) Management Challenge.

There is value in conducting further research into a phenomenon which is widely regarded as important to, and useful for, local government, but of which the mechanisms are only beginning to be understood in ways that would provide sound evidence for continuing learning and capacity development programs in the Australian local government sector.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale for study

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government's (ACELG) 'Learning in Local Government' project is an exploratory review of the training needs of Australian local government. The project aims to inform and facilitate educational and professional development programs for local government, and has been funded through ACELG's Workforce Development program.

The 'Learning in Local Government' project aims to explore gaps in content and availability of education and professional development that specifically relate to local government. One of these areas of investigation is the current practice and future promise of local governments learning from each other.

Findings from this project have suggested that councils look to each other for solutions to commonly arising problems and challenges, particularly within the context of reforms to the sector. Local governments who seek to understand and learn from the experiences of others in order to frame decisions and programs are engaging in a valid and important method of learning to adapt to changes in a number of policy areas, professions and levels within their organisations.

While this approach for adapting to change is beginning to emerge as a priority for agencies promoting local government reform, the mechanisms and methods for supporting and enhancing it are in their infancy. Pockets of innovation have emerged and are worthy of exploration. Generally, however, education, professional development and capacity-building programs do not typically encourage this form of learning, and if it is an element of program design it is typically not made explicit.

Research focusing on strategies and methods to achieve knowledge transfer which are grounded in a theory of knowledge management, and focussing on the means of applying learning within the organisation can provide insights into peer-to-peer knowledge transfer within Australian local government. There is a lack of research in the Australian context on this phenomenon.

The 'Councils learning from each other' study is designed to address this gap in an exploratory way, and is located in a growing body of knowledge on this topic that has emerged in recent years internationally. The study was planned and conducted between mid-2013 and mid-2014.

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- to understand and describe the phenomenon of councils learning from each other in the Australian context
- to identify the mechanisms that facilitate inter-council learning in order to understand how associations, jurisdictions and educators might make use of this enhanced understanding to inform capacity building programs promoting local government reform
- to put forward the study as a contribution to current national and international research and debates on inter-organisational learning in local government.

Strategies and mechanisms that are used when councils learn from each other could be more formally built into a number of programs which aim to raise capacity within councils, and such information may be of use to local councils, state regulators, professional associations and education providers such as regional training organisations and universities.

2 Literature Review

In keeping with the overall research design of this study, current academic literature was drawn upon to discuss the concepts and methods that have been used to achieve knowledge transfer between local governments. The questions for the literature review were:

- What is the understanding in the literature of key terms pertaining to learning in organisations and knowledge sharing amongst professional peers?
- What models of councils learning from each other are discussed in the literature?
- What evidence is there for the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of peer learning as a tool for enhancing local government organisational capacity?

This section provides a summary of key points from the literature in response to these questions. The evaluation studies from which evidence is drawn are described in greater detail in the 'table of evidence' provided in Appendix A.

2.1 Discussion of key terms in the literature

2.1.1 *Organisational learning*

Organisational learning can be described as 'a process of individual and shared thought and action in an organizational context' which involves cognitive, social, behavioural and technical elements (Rashman, Withers and Hartley 2009, p. 470). An organisation 'learns' if individuals or units within the organisation acquire knowledge that is of potential use to the organisation as a whole (Huber 1991).

There is debate in the literature as to what the entity of learning is: some commentators argue that only individuals, not organisations, are capable of learning; others argue that organisations are able to learn as though they were 'superpersons'; most commentators agree that it is both the individuals and the organisations that learn (Örtenblad 2002, p. 217). Hartley and Allison (2002, p. 103) put forward the view that organisational learning requires individual learning as a prerequisite, and, drawing on the debates, Örtenblad (2002, p. 217) illustrate the process through which:

- employees learn as agents of the organisation
- the knowledge is stored in the memory of the organisation
- the memory consists of routines, dialogue or symbols, ensuring that the knowledge is embedded, 'encultured' or encoded.

2.1.2 *Tacit and explicit knowledge*

The literature points to the value of distinguishing between two kinds of knowledge – 'tacit' and 'explicit' – which are complementary dimensions. Commentators suggest that it is important to take account of both forms of knowledge when considering learning in organisations.

Table 1: Tacit and explicit knowledge

Knowledge	Characteristics
tacit, implicit or informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primarily embodied knowledge, consisting of mental models and metaphors, intuitions and know-how • may be taken for granted or not recognised as learning, or regarded as part of a person’s general capability rather than something that has been learned • the transfer of this informal kind of knowledge depends on close interaction and development of trust, and a shared understanding.
explicit or formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capable of being articulated, and can be accessed and exchanged • can be codified and transmitted using formal languages – linguistic, mathematical, databases • the knowledge can be separated from the person who holds it and can be transferred across time and space, independently of that person.

Sources: Polanyi (1966, cited in Hartley & Benington 2006, p. 103); Lee & Van de Meene (2012); Rashman, Withers & Hartley (2009); Eraut (2004).

Knowledge partly resides in the shared systems, routines and norms of organisations, where it may be embedded as tacit and/or explicit knowledge. For knowledge transfer to occur, the literature suggests that the following are among the necessary conditions (see Downe et al. 2004, p. 534; Eitel 2012, p. 687):

- Learning occurs when concepts meet experiences through reflection.
- Learning is embedded in a collaborative relationship and includes successful interaction amongst individuals, facilitative leadership styles, and trust.
- Learning occurs when value is attached to it, and when methods are in place to convert knowledge into a collective form.
- Technology can make connections possible, but does not itself cause learning to happen
- Enabling conditions include the opportunity for curiosity, openness to learning from differences, and having safe spaces for exploration.

2.1.3 Inter-organisational learning

Learning from the experiences of other organisations is an option open to all organisations and can occur through:

- a single source broadcasting to a range of organisations, such as through government legislation and guidance (coercive learning)
- contacts between organisations and the movement of personnel (mimetic learning)
- a mixture of these mechanisms whereby learning is diffused through contacts between organisations and personnel, but is then broadcast by others, for example experts or training organisations (normative learning). (Hartley & Allison 2002, p. 104)

Inter-organisational knowledge transfer depends on organisations being willing to both ‘teach’ and ‘learn’. Once the knowledge comes into an organisation from some external source, the recipient needs to ‘rely on its ability for intra-organizational knowledge transfer to diffuse the knowledge within the organization so that it can be assimilated and utilized’ (Easterby-Smith, Lyles & Tsang 2009).

Research in the private sector has suggested that informal, social ties between members of the same organisation or different organisations are productive conduits for knowledge flow between organisations that are geographically distant from each other (Easterby-Smith et al. 2009, p. 680).

2.1.4 Public sector organisations as 'learning organisations'

Workplace learning and development has increased in importance in recent decades as a means to cope with change and for personnel to maintain their occupational skills. This has also been the case in local government (Tones, Pillay & Kelly 2011). Debates in the literature (see for example Vince & Broussine 2000; Barrados & Mayne 2003; Common 2004) suggest that researchers and practitioners should be cautious in applying concepts such as 'learning organisations' and 'organisational learning' uncritically from the private and management literature (e.g. Huber 1991; Miller 1996) to the local government context.

Considering public service agencies as 'learning organisations' could be questioned because of the role of a centralised bureaucracy, which results in 'key decision-makers being remote from service delivery': this makes it difficult for them to either elicit or make use of the contributions of intelligence by their ordinary members (Common 2004, p. 39). Strong hierarchies and risk-aversion behaviour are also characteristics which tend not to support a learning culture (Barrados and Mayne 2003, p. 102).

Common (2004, p. 46) provides a summary of the debates relating to 'organisational learning' in the literature, and finds that 'organisational learning in government will always be compromised by the political environment'. In similar vein, Vince and Broussine (2000, p. 25) suggest that organisational learning in local government is a political, as well as a personal experience: 'it serves both a desire for change and a desire not to change'.

Organisational learning may be impaired by the encouragement of 'defensive posturing' or a 'blame culture' within the organisation; and by the distribution of power in public sector bureaucratic settings (Coopey, cited in Common 2004, p. 40).

Hartley and Benington (2006, 103–4) and Rashman, Withers and Hartley (2009, p. 486) identify features that are distinctive to modern public service organisations and which are necessary in order to understand knowledge creation and transfer within and between these organisations. These features include:

- Knowledge generation and transfer occur in an openly contested environment that needs to take account of power relations and political processes.
- Public sector organisations have a reduced ability, in comparison with private organisations, to choose their markets, customers or portfolio of products and services.
- Knowledge generation frequently takes place across several boundaries (for example different services) and is often a process of co-production.
- The explicit drawing of comparisons between public service organisations has been enhanced in recent years with policy frameworks based on performance indicators, audits and inspections, but this could also lead to possible competition over reputation and resources with adverse implications for mutual learning.

2.1.5 Network learning

The concept of 'networks of organisations' is important in the public sector and includes considerations of vertical networks between levels of government and horizontal (or lateral) cross-boundary networks (Rashman et al. 2009, p. 474). The literature on network learning draws on the increased interest in networks as an organisational form (Knight 2002).

Drawing on the definitions above, network learning is 'primarily a mimetic approach' (i.e. it is based on contacts between organisations and movements of personnel), but may also draw on elements of the coercive and normative approaches (Hartley & Allison 2002, p. 104). Stuckenschmidt, Siberski and Nejdli (2005, p. 481) describe the importance of inter-organisational knowledge management in what they describe as 'peer-to-peer content sharing networks', and suggest that information sources in such networks are 'autonomous entities that can selectively publish information and access information published by other sources'.

At another level, network learning can occur when it is the group of organisations that is the 'learner', not just the individual organisations within the group (Knight 2002, p. 428). As such, learning in an inter-organisational network occurs at a level beyond that of the individual, group and/or the individual organisation (Knight 2002).

2.1.6 Benchmarking

Braadbaart and Yasnandarshah (2008, p. 422) make the point that benchmarking is a 'private sector import' and thus, within the public sector, an 'outgrowth of New Public Management'. Immordino (2010, cited in Eitel 2012, p. 688) defines benchmarking as follows:

[Benchmarking is] the process of comparing one organization, or the function, processes, and results of that organisation, with another; commonly used to identify, study, and imitate best practices or to compare an organisation with its peers or the leading agencies in its field.

Three broad approaches to benchmarking are identified in the literature:

- Compulsory benchmarking is carried out as part of an external audit regime. It is primarily concerned with metrics or results that are driven by the need to demonstrate accountability for the use of resources.
- Defensive benchmarking is a managerial approach. It acquits accountability obligations by providing proof of efficiency and of well-delivered services. It generates evidence for inspectors, auditors and regulators that the performance of the organisation is at a certain level.
- Voluntary benchmarking is developed from within the organisation, rather than externally imposed. It aims to identify and implement change to secure performance improvements or to encourage organisations to be the best service providers. (Bowerman, Ball & Francis 2001)

At its most general level, benchmarking involves looking at a role model and then attempting to emulate it. One needs to find the 'best in class' performers of similar work (and who agree to co-operate) and then adapt or adopt key principles from that role model for personal and organisational use (Eitel 2012, p. 688).

2.1.7 Mentoring

Mentoring is a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support:

[Mentoring entails] informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé) (Bozeman & Feeney 2007, p. 731).

Mentoring is traditionally considered to be a mechanism for helping the protégé advance in the organisation and, as such, mentoring shares 'concept space' with closely related phenomena such as coaching and apprenticeship (Atterton, Thompson & Carroll 2009, p. 52). Recent research also focuses on the psychosocial support it can provide, the information it can transfer about the informal aspects of the organisation and its history, and the role it can play in building network resources or 'developmental networks', which in turn can influence career success (Feeney & Bozeman 2008, p. 1652; Dobrow et al. 2012).

Although mentoring is not necessarily regarded as a key mechanism of inter-organisational learning, its role in promoting network ties has relevance for the current study. There are also models of peer or group mentoring discussed in the literature. Atterton et al. (2009, p. 52) argue that peer mentoring relationships can fulfil traditional mentoring functions as well as enabling a two-way exchange of ideas and information to create new organisational and individual knowledge. In peer group mentoring the learning emerges from the dynamics of the group as a whole rather than from relationships between two individuals (Atterton et al. 2009).

Research suggests that peer group mentoring is a viable option for the development of personal and professional skills (Huizing 2012). Feeney and Bozeman (2008) have carried out research which suggests that enhanced network ties are generally beneficial in public sector work, and that mentoring has a powerful role in facilitating network ties.

2.2 Models of inter-organisational learning

Drawing on discussion of the concepts above, this section considers several models or conceptual frameworks that are described in the literature for learning to occur at the inter-organisational level, with a focus on learning in public sector organisations.

2.2.1 Conversions of tacit and explicit knowledge

The learning processes that occur within an organisation can be understood as various ‘conversions’ of tacit and explicit knowledge, concepts which have been introduced above. These models are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Models of knowledge conversion in organisations

Model	Meaning	Processes
tacit to tacit	Socialisation – conversion of tacit knowledge that is known by one person or group to tacit knowledge held by another person or group	Sharing experiences, mental models and technical skills through observation and imitation.
tacit to explicit	Externalisation – articulating tacit knowledge into explicit concepts and ideas	Expressing tacit knowledge in formal language is often imprecise and the conversion process is enhanced through dialogue and reflection, and the use of metaphors, anecdotes and stories.
explicit to explicit	Combination – reconfiguring existing information, which can be diffused and learned	This occurs through sorting, adding, re-categorising and re-contextualising information. Databases are an example of the combination of explicit knowledge.
explicit to tacit	Internalisation – converting explicit to tacit knowledge through action and practice	Manuals and documentation can help, but the embodiment of knowledge through action is critical.

Source: Nonaka, cited in Hartley and Allison (2002)

This framework provides useful concepts – socialisation, combination, externalisation and internalisation – that can be used to better understand the processes through which learning within organisations occurs.

2.2.2 Phases of organisational learning

Rashman, Withers and Hartley (2009) carried out a systematic review of the literature relating to learning organisations in both the private and public sectors. A total of 13 papers were included in the review, covering the period from 1990 to 2005. The study found that there was a wide variety of perspectives on organisational and inter-organisational learning processes in the public sector, summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Phases of organisational learning

Organisational learning processes	Different ways of conceiving the processes in the literature				
Individual perspective	Intuiting ideas and tacit knowledge	Reflects on tacit knowledge	Reflection and reflexivity	Generate variation of ideas	Knowledge acquisition
Shared understanding	Interpreting ideas and integrating in context	Knowledge creation in teams	Working groups create and reframe meaning	Internal selection	Interpretation to achieve shared understanding
Diffusion	Feed forward (exploration) and feedback (exploitation)	Middle managers act as catalysts	Inter-level dialogue	Diffusion, variation and spatial replication	Distribution among members in the organisation
Embedding in organisation	Routines, rules, diagnostic systems	Structure and conditions for knowledge creation	Address systemic tensions, and political and cultural barriers	Retention and embedding in organisational routines	Organisational memory, systems and rules

Source: Rashman, Withers and Hartley (2009, p. 476)

This framework suggests that learning begins with knowledge acquisition and/or intuiting ideas and tacit knowledge; is processed as ideas are interpreted and integrated in context, and often involves teams working in specific service areas, units or departments; is distributed among organisational members, often with middle managers acting as catalysts; and becomes embedded in the organisation's routines, systems, rules and memory. The four common organisational learning processes derived from this analysis are therefore 'individual perspectives', 'shared understanding', 'diffusion', and 'embedding in the organisation'.

Many authors have pointed out that learning implies not only a movement from the individual through to the collective levels, but also that it occurs in reverse: collective learning drives individual learning (Rashman et al. 2009, p. 477). In addition, as public sector organisational learning is an inherently political process, formal and informal politics can serve to 'support and/or undermine learning efforts' (Rashman et al. 2009, p. 485).

2.2.3 Model for local governance benchmarking

Benchmarking has an important role to play in the ongoing reform of local government and includes benchmarking with neighbouring or similar councils based on an exchange of cost or service data (Bowerman et al. 2001, pp. 327-8). Learning from peers is central to benchmarking, but if they are to learn from one another, local governments might be required to share confidential information about their processes and routines (Bowerman et al. 2001). At the same time, benchmarking rankings and league tables imply competition.

The potential dilemmas arising from the juxtaposition of collaboration/co-ordination and competition are noted in the literature as an issue to focus upon when carrying out research into benchmarking (see Braadbaart & Yasnandarshah 2008, pp. 423-4).

A 'local governance excellence model' (Bovaird & Löffler 2002), in which benchmarking plays an important role, is provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Local governance excellence model

Feature	Discussion
Rationale	The shift in recent decades towards local governance has led to new ways of measuring and comparing performance. From the wider governance perspective, good councils are those that are not only excellent service providers, but also excellent in the way in which they discharge their political and social responsibilities in their localities.
Objective	Local governance benchmarking uses performance information to encourage innovation and learning at multiple levels – the individual, the organisation, and the organisational network.
Focus	The focus is on governance issues such as transparency, honesty, accountability, levels of respect for democratic processes and the equalities agenda; as well as management of processes that go beyond the borders of the organisation.
Benchmarking indicators	Internal and external operations, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge, skills, values and practices of elected and appointed officials • documentation, policies, procedures • handling of inter-governmental relations and constraints • relationships with multiple contracts and suppliers • local stakeholders’ perceptions of how well governance issues are dealt with in their local area.

Source: Bovaird and Löffler (2002)

The potential links between benchmarking, inter-organisational learning and organisational learning need further exploration. Issues that could be explored through research include whether requirements established within the framework of benchmarking processes encourage greater learning within organisations, both at the formal and informal level.

2.3 Evidence

In this section, evaluation literature is drawn upon to ascertain evidence for the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of peer learning as a tool for enhancing local government organisational capacity and its functioning within its environment.

2.3.1 Australian research

The ‘Local Government Networking and Capacity Building Project to Prevent Violence against Women’ was conducted in Victoria (Murphy & Nagle 2012). The project aimed to capitalise upon the emerging leadership potential within local government by:

- resourcing councils across Victoria to further build their workforce capacity for the prevention of violence against women
- promoting and sharing current promising practice
- providing networking opportunities, strengthening partnerships and offering training and development.

An evaluation found that the project had engaged 82% of all Victorian councils after two years. It inspired people working in local government and generated a sense of optimism that their efforts made a difference. It contributed to the building of capacity through training in leadership and skills to undertake activity in the primary prevention of violence against women. Women’s health and family violence services worked with councils to develop regional prevention networks. Project activities included:

- development of a local government specific website focusing on preventing violence against women

- creating a virtual network for sharing the latest local, state and federal government progress
- ‘leaders’ lunches’ which provided networking and planning opportunities, bringing together elected councillors, CEOs and staff across the range of council departments, and development of a local government leadership network
- hosting of a state-wide inaugural Local Government and Community Leaders Preventing Violence Against Women conference. (Murphy & Nagle 2012)

A limitation of this study is that the evaluation strategy did not investigate impacts of the project, and in particular on the ongoing communication between councils or the internalisation of knowledge within councils once the project had been completed (Murphy & Nagle 2012, p. 62).

The broader project in which this current study is a part – the *Learning in Local Government* project – had found through a local government sector survey with over 900 respondents, that local government practitioners expressed strong support for training which provided information about other council activities:

- Around 80% of all respondents (and 90% of executives and senior managers) expressed interest in *training which provides information about other councils’ work and innovations*.
- Around 70% of respondents were interested in *exchange opportunities with other councils*, with 80% of trades’ officers showing interest in this method.
- Around 70% of respondents were interested in *facilitated problem-solving with peers in other councils*, with councillors (84%) showing particular interest in this method. (Artist & O’Connor 2011, p. 13)

A recent study that focused on work-related learning in Australian local government (Tones, Pillay & Kelly 2011) made use of the *Revised Learning and Development Survey* to measure lifelong learning and adaptive development within the context of work within local government (N=112 local government workers). A key finding from the study was that age was a determinant of career goals and work-related learning and development behaviours (Tones et al. 2012). However, the study delivered no evidence for the prevalence of, or importance attached to, inter-organisational learning.

With the exception of the studies described above, there is a dearth of research into inter-organisational learning in Australian local government, suggesting that there is value in conducting research into this phenomenon.

2.3.2 International research

International studies of capacity building programs for local government provide insight into the learning methods used to encourage councils to learn from each other. Formal evaluations also provide insight into the benefits gained from participants of this kind of learning. Appendix A provides a summary of key points from these international studies.

From this range of capacity-building programs for local government it is possible to draw out the lessons put forward by researchers for maximising the learning from these kinds of programs:

- **The legitimacy of external feedback is enhanced when it is provided by peers.** Staff and councillors from other councils can, in the context of a ‘peer challenge’ program, provide independent assessments of councils’ strengths and weaknesses and the medium term challenges they face, encouraging councils to be more self-confident and outwards looking.
- **Benefits of diverse participants** – Inter-organisational learning and change is maximised by having a mixture of local councils and a blend of participants, including elected members.
- **Need for similarity between participants** – While diversity is important, so is the existence of sufficient professional similarity between partners in order to establish a basis of genuine dialogue and trust.
- **Barriers to learning and change** include workload pressures, resources (especially financial constraints) and ‘transferability’. Transferability issues are linked to scale, local contexts and differing local priorities.

- **Political and managerial ‘champions’** are important in encouraging learning and creating a culture supportive of change. In those cases where political and managerial champions worked effectively together, respondents reported that they were able to create substantial, rapid change in practice and to some extent in organisational culture.
- **Importance of structure** – Programs of events need to be structured to aid knowledge acquisition and to develop the skills of recipients to transfer knowledge into their own context. Simply engaging in social interaction and sharing experiences is not sufficient and such experiences have to be subjected to challenge, reflection and comparison if the lessons arising from those experiences are to be converted from tacit to explicit knowledge.
- **Longer term benefits** – The effects of peer learning and mentoring are only likely to become apparent in the medium to long term since they focus on changing processes, mind sets and ways of working. This has implications for measuring outcomes.
- **Sensitivity to ranking** – While comparisons between local governments can lead to an increased awareness of different ways of working, the additional step of ranking councils may work against the need for establishing trust and open dialogue.
- **Program design** – Supportive elements of program design include: involving both staff and elected representatives in peer teaching/learning; a facilitative and co-learning style; frequent interactive sessions; adult learning methods; blended academic-practitioner events; benchmarking site visits; and options for participants to remain engaged on completion of the program. (Local Government Association 2014; Downe et al. 2004; Rashman & Radnor 2005; Rashman et al. 2005, Atterton et al. 2009, Hartley & Allison 2002)

2.3.3 Measurement issues

Based on a systematic review of the literature, Rashman et al. (2009, p. 485) discuss the following issues as amongst those that need to be considered in relation to the measurement of the outcomes of organisational learning:

- The time lags between learning, implemented changes and performance outcomes make empirical evaluations of the efficacy of learning difficult.
- Learning may not always be ‘positive’ in the sense that organisations can learn the ‘wrong’ things, may be myopic, or may be history dependent.
- Public sector improvements are judged by the addition of public value or contribution to the public sphere, and are thus subject to contested values and debates.

2.4 Summary

Learning in organisations is an established topic of research. There is evidence in the literature that learning from the experiences of peers is a key means by which learning in organisations occurs. A dearth of research into inter-organisational learning in Australian local government gives further impetus for conducting research into this phenomenon.

Research suggests that inter-organisational learning depends on creating conditions necessary to cultivate, transplant and fertilise the new thinking and the new practice appropriate to the specific context and conditions of the receiving organisation. This may include establishing concrete programs in which inter-council learning and development is a key objective. Knowledge transfer depends on organisations willing to both ‘teach’ and ‘learn’, and to commit resources in order for this to occur.

At a more informal level, inter-organisational learning includes making new contacts through social interactions, but research suggests that simply engaging in social interaction and sharing experiences is not sufficient. These experiences need to be subjected to challenge, reflection and comparison if lessons arising from them are to be converted from tacit/informal to explicit/formal knowledge.

Learning is often a process of co-production and depends on organisational cultures in which trusted relationships can be built up carefully over time; takes place in an openly contested environment and needs to take account of power relations and political processes; and recognises explicit comparisons with other organisations as an important element of organisational improvement and learning.

Political and managerial 'champions' are important in encouraging learning and creating a culture supportive of change. Organisational networks that are based on high levels of reciprocity and interaction have been found to support organisational learning processes. Internal and external procedural and accountability factors may have an impact on the processes and outcomes of inter-organisational learning.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research strategy: case study

The study adopts a case study research strategy (Yin 1981, p. 58). Case studies enable researchers to focus on in-depth relationships and social processes in a natural setting and to learn more about the contextual conditions that are relevant to the phenomenon (Dooley 2002; Yin 2003; Eisenhardt 1989; Walter 2006). A literature review was carried out in order to better understand case study research, and the review is provided in Appendix B.

As summarised in Section 2 above, the study draws on the literature relating to inter-organisational or peer-to-peer learning, which includes both formal and informal mechanisms of learning diffusion and acquisition. Despite the importance attached to currently available literature, the study is theory building (Eisenhardt 1989) rather than theory testing in its design. This is due to the paucity of research on inter-organisational learning in the local government context, particularly in Australia.

Using the concepts associated with case studies that are summarised in Appendix B, the 'study phenomenon', i.e. the contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, is *learning amongst practitioners from diverse councils in Australia*. The real-life context in which the phenomenon occurs is *individual, team-based and task-oriented practice within Australian local government*.

For the purposes of the study, 'learning' is understood to be information, advice and/or inspiration that relates to specific issue(s) affecting local communities, organisational issues and/or focusing on the self as a local government practitioner.

Taking the understanding of the 'case' for this study as *learning amongst practitioners from diverse councils in Australia within their real-life context*, personnel working in local government and students undertaking a local government leadership course at the University of Technology, Sydney were included in the field work data gathering.

The study includes within this real-life context those programs which have an explicit intent to promote learning between councils. The criteria for program selection identified that they should be:

- Task oriented – programs have a concrete, practical focus on problem-solving and generating short-to-medium term outcomes for the participants' councils
- Team-based – rather than focusing on an individual skills or career development, programs enlist the involvement of more than one person from each participating council
- Comparative – programs make use of methods that are designed to promote comparison between the experiences of a number of councils
- Accessible – program owners are willing to participate and to share participant contact information for the conduct of telephone surveys.

Based on these criteria, people who participated in the LGMA Management Challenge were specifically invited to participate in the study.

3.2 Research questions

- What situations, programs and initiatives encourage personnel in local government to learn from each other?
- What are the mechanisms of learning, and the facilitators and barriers of these mechanisms?
- What are the reported benefits of peer-to-peer learning for Australian local government?
- What implications do the data have for programs that are designed to support local government capacity building?

3.3 Data gathering

The key data-gathering method was in-depth interviews and the interview guides used in the study are provided in Appendix C and Appendix D. Data were also gathered by means of structured written feedback from students at the moment of listening to presentations from fellow students on initiatives taking place in their own councils.

3.3.1 *Exploring interest in learning from other councils*

The initial question for study participants was to ascertain whether they believed that people working in local government have an interest in learning from other councils. If this interest was confirmed, further issues to explore were:

- motivations for an interest in inter-organisational or peer-to-peer learning in Australian local government
- the benefits of learning from other councils
- facilitators of the spread of information and ideas between councils
- barriers or hindrances to the spread of information and ideas between councils.

3.3.2 *Examining mechanisms of learning*

Respondents were asked to relate concrete instances of learning from other councils. In addition to understanding the subject matter or content of the shared ideas or information, focus was placed on better understanding the process or trajectory of learning, that is, from the point of accessing information, ideas or inspiration from other councils, to taking the learning further in the 'receiving' organisations.

In order to gain further insights into the mechanisms of inter-council learning, information was sought from local government practitioners who had participated in the LGMA Management Challenge and those undertaking a course on local government leadership at the University of Technology, Sydney.

The LGMA Management Challenge is a team-based professional development program co-ordinated by the LGMA National office in partnership with the New Zealand Society of Local Government Managers. The key focus in the interviews was on:

- whether they had learned something about practice and/or policy in other councils while participating in the LGMA Management Challenge
- describing the situations, events or encounters in which learning occurred
- considering the facilitators of, and barriers to, learning
- describing the mechanisms through which learning is or could be embedded within their own councils
- providing recommendations for enhancing the inter-council learning aspect of the program.

These respondents were also asked to provide their views on learning from other councils in a general way i.e. not connected with the Challenge, ensuring that they were able to contribute their insights to the issues described in Section 3.3.1 above.

In order to obtain greater insight into the mechanisms of accessing information from other councils, students undertaking a course in local government leadership at the University of Technology, Sydney were invited to participate in the study. These students presented and listened to fellow students regarding initiatives that were taking place in their respective local government areas. At the time of the presentations, the students were asked to provide instant written feedback on what were described as 'peer learning from place based leadership presentations', focusing on:

- what they learned from the presentation about another council
- why they found the information interesting, or what contributed to them being receptive to focusing on it or learning from it
- what they could take back to their councils from the presentation.

The key aim of this aspect of the data-gathering was to focus on the individual practitioner and his or her intuiting of ideas and inspiration at the moment of accessing new information about or from another council. The hope was that this could contribute greatly to understanding the beginning of the learning journey, and particularly the reflection that practitioners may undergo when they encounter information, ideas or inspiration from their peers.

3.3.3 *Views on benchmarking and mentoring*

Drawing on the insights provided by the literature (see Section 2), respondents were asked to provide their views on benchmarking and mentoring as possible mechanisms of inter-council learning, and the possible connections they would make between these and other forms of learning.

3.3.4 *Longer term benefits*

Interviewees from the participating councils, as well as those who were interviewed as participants in the LGMA Challenge, were asked to share their views on the longer term benefits of learning from other councils. The focus was on the policy, organisational and/or service changes that each respondent believed resulted when councils learn from each other. Issues for probing included:

- benefits of the learning to the council or network of councils, such as changes to council routines, systems or rules
- benefits of the learning to the self as practitioner
- benefits of the learning to work units or teams.

The academic literature suggests that the effects of inter-organisational and peer-to-peer learning may only become apparent in the medium- to long-term, especially when the learning focuses on changing processes, mind sets and ways of working. This has implications for measuring outcomes, and may also serve as a limitation on the present study. Nonetheless, it was regarded as important to ascertain the kinds of organisational and policy changes that study participants describe as being due to the inter-organisational learning derived from participation in the program and their views on the benefits of that learning to themselves, their work units/teams, their council, or network of councils.

3.3.5 *Recommendations for enhancing inter-council learning*

Respondents were asked to provide their recommendations for capacity- building programs to promote peer-to-peer or inter-organisational learning in local government in Australia. For the participants in the LGMA Challenge, questions were specifically asked as to how the design of that program could be improved to enhance inter-organisational learning in Australian local government.

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 *Qualitative analysis within a case study strategy*

The data gathered in this study are qualitative and the techniques for analysing the data focus on searching for patterns, clustering and synthesising. Drawing on the insights from the literature (see Appendix B), analysis was based on:

- case study write-ups for each unit of analysis so as to allow the unique pattern of each case to emerge before moving ahead to generalise patterns across cases
- cross-case synthesis – displaying the data from individual cases according to some uniform framework
- pattern matching – comparing an empirically based pattern with a predicted one.(Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2003)

3.4.2 *Use of a conceptual framework*

Taking the insights gathered from participants in the study, the examination of the mechanisms of learning were compared and contrasted with evidence provided in the current literature, summarised in Section 2 of this document. In particular, a model generated by Rashman, Withers and Hartley (2009) on the basis of

extensive research provides four categories which have the quality of ‘phases’. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Conceptual framework for ascertaining mechanisms of learning

Phase of learning	Example mechanisms	Example facilitators	Example barriers
Intuiting ideas and tacit or implicit knowledge	<i>Inter-organisational networks; informal social ties; the individual is able to reflect on knowledge and/or ideas</i>	<i>Learning occurs when value is attached to it; individuals have self-awareness and reflexivity; there is successful interaction amongst individuals in a shared program, supported by skilled facilitation within the program</i>	<i>Workload pressures; the ranking of councils may work against the need to establish trust and open dialogue</i>
Interpreting ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation, including the reframing done by working groups or teams	<i>The learning is processed as ideas are interpreted and integrated in context through shared understanding, often occurring in teams</i>	<i>Group dynamics that enable the creation of shared understanding; sharing of knowledge in open networks, within an overall framework of collaboration rather than competition; political and managerial ‘champions’</i>	<i>‘Transferability’ issues linked to factors such as differing local priorities</i>
Diffusion of ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation and its variation through replication in context	<i>Mechanisms to explore include feeding forward (exploration); feedback (exploitation); inter-level dialogue; and embedding the learning in the receiving organisation’s routines, systems, rules and memory</i>	<i>Policies, procedures and a work culture that promotes learning within the organisation; middle managers act as catalysts; programs of events may be structured in receiving organisations to aid knowledge acquisition and to develop the skills of recipients to transfer knowledge into their own context</i>	<i>Systemic tensions; political barriers; ‘culture of work’ barriers</i>
Embedding ideas and/or knowledge in the organisation	<i>Mechanisms to explore include the processes of organisational change needed to embed the learning; and the tangible impact on routines, systems, statements of principle, and policies and procedures</i>	<i>Policies, procedures and a work culture that promotes learning within the organisation; support from senior management and elected representatives</i>	<i>Systemic tensions; political barriers; ‘culture of work’ barriers</i>

It was not the intention to test this literature-derived conceptual framework in the current study, but rather to make use of it as a guide for gathering, clustering and making sense of the data by:

- serving as a framework for illustrating vignettes from the case study data
- assisting in describing the trajectory of learning from the individual perspective, through shared understanding and diffusion within the receiving organisation to embedding in the organisation's systems, routines and memory
- providing a more solid foundation for suggesting where there may be gaps in understanding.

3.4.3 Overlap of data analysis with data collection

This study is exploratory and seeks to generate categories that could be combined into tentative conceptual frameworks. Insights from the literature on case studies (see Appendix B) suggest that there is value engaging in 'frequent overlap of data analysis with data collection' (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 538) and, when employed in this exploratory study, it was intended that this would help not only to put forward tentative conceptual frameworks, but also to provide indications of gaps in understanding. This would provide grounds for suggesting where further research may be needed.

4 Data presentation and analysis

In this section, data from the several units of analysis in the study are presented and analysed qualitatively.

4.1 Personnel in councils

A total of 18 respondents from seven local governments in NSW were included in the study. These participants were interviewed one-on-one or as a small group, and either face-to-face or via conference telephone, as suited to the respondents. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each.

4.1.1 Examining the preference to learn from other councils

Level of agreement

Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement with the statement that ‘people working in local government have an interest in learning from people working in other councils’. In order to gauge participants’ strength of agreement with the statement, they were also asked to place their level of agreement it on a scale (out of ten). All agreed, and showed the strength of their agreement by giving ratings of 7 to 10.

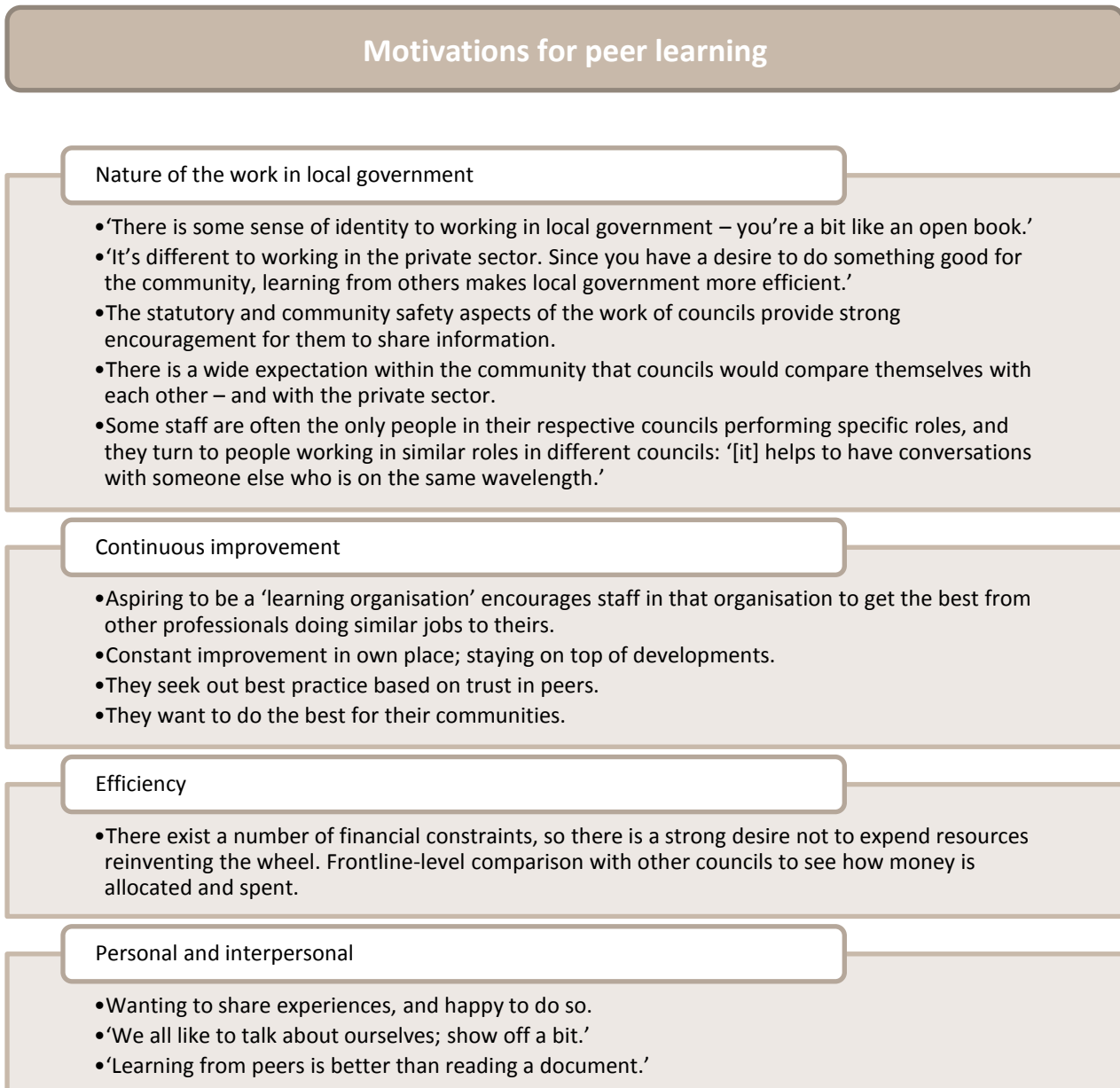
One respondent – who rated her agreement with the statement at an 8 – provided a useful level of comparison by noting that ‘it’s much more so in local government than in the private sector where I worked before and where I’d give the interest in learning from other companies a 2’. A different respondent made a distinction between local government employees generally, for which she would give a rating of 8, and for those working in economic development, where she would give a rating of 10. The study did not explore further the possible distinction between role and preference to learn from other councils, but it may be an issue for further research.

In summary, support for the view that people working in local government have an interest in learning from people working in other councils is strong and consistent amongst this sample of local government practitioners.

Motivation for the interest to learn from other councils

Since all respondents had agreed with the statement that ‘people working in local government have an interest in learning from other councils’, they were asked to elaborate on what might motivate this interest. Following the method of qualitative data analysis (described in Section 3 of this report), their responses regarding motivations for learning from other councils were arranged into thematic clusters:

Figure 1: Clustering of respondent comments regarding motivations for peer learning



Box 1: Source of the impetus for learning

The role of the community vis-à-vis experts in motivating inter-council learning

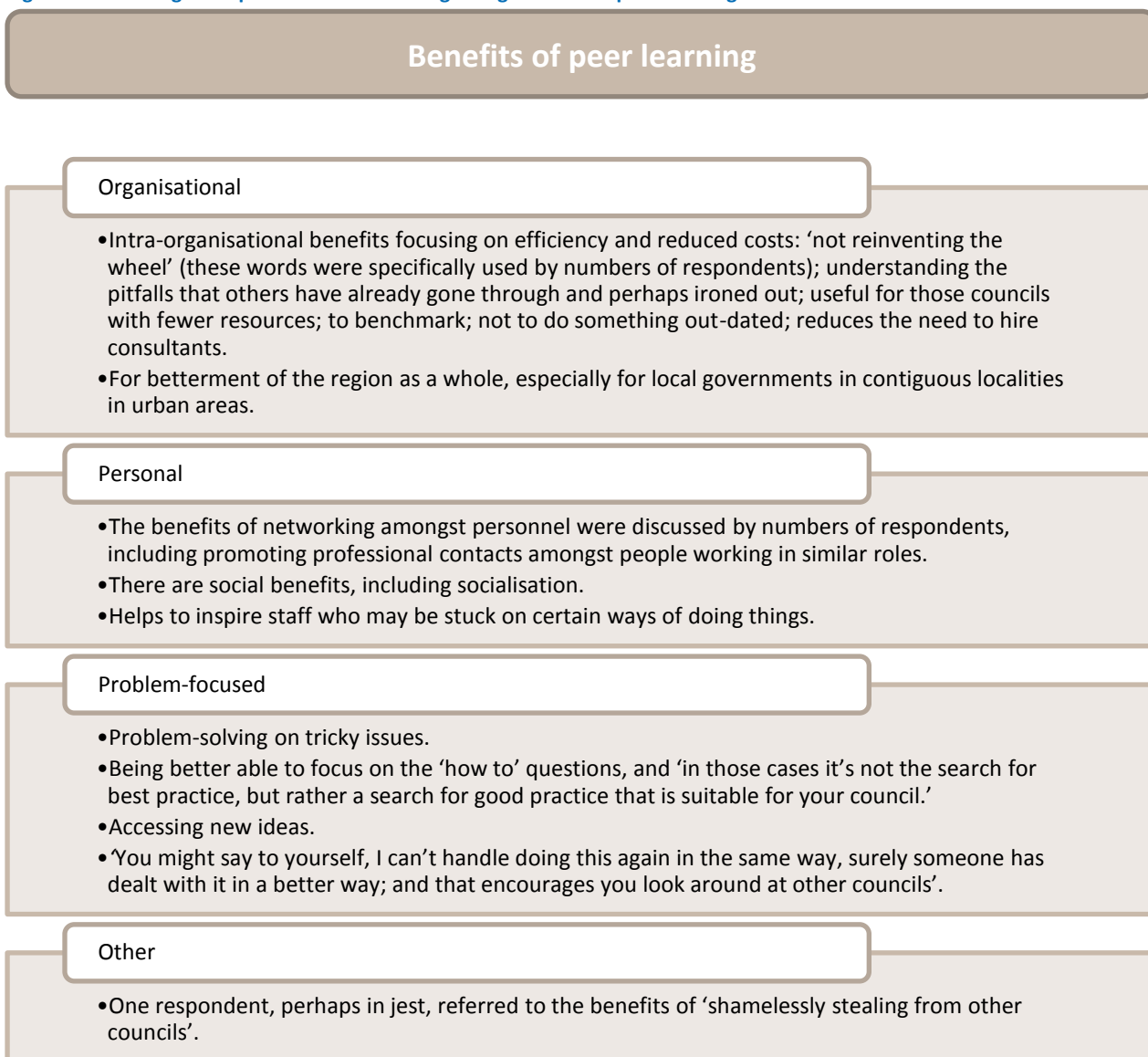
Two respondents made the point that there may be value in considering the source of the impetus for learning, and primarily whether it is from the community or expert-led.

Often the impetus for learning comes from the community, who take an idea to the councillors, who then discuss it with senior management. It may then become part of the planning and strategic operations. This can be called ‘community-led’ learning. It is formal in the sense that it follows the local democratic processes. Sometimes, the learning is ‘expert-led’ – in an example raised by a respondent, it was noted that flooding is an issue in their area and that it would have an impact on business continuity. However, it was not the community that raised the issue; the respondent had brought it up in the context of local economic development. This provided the context and thence the impetus for finding out what occurs in other councils.

Benefits of learning from other councils

A separate question focused on the benefits of learning from other councils, but in the feedback provided, it became evident that respondents did not necessarily make a distinction between the 'benefits' of learning from peers and 'motivation' for learning from peers. Their responses are clustered into organisational, personal and problem-solving benefits, although the distinctions between the three are not necessarily fixed:

Figure 2: Clustering of respondent comments regarding benefits of peer learning



Box 2: Questions about innovation

Discussion of the innovation issue

Discussion with one respondent led to questions about innovation. If councils are strongly focused on doing what has been done in other councils, would it not lead to a lack of innovation?

The response was: 'Not really – the accepted norm is that we don't have enough money to do things and we go from the premise that we need to innovate. It may be an issue of balancing money, human resources and community benefit. Innovation should mean: What's fit for purpose? At the same time, we must beware of simply rehashing stuff.'

Facilitators of the spread of information between councils

Respondents were asked to identify factors that facilitated the sharing and spread of information and ideas between local governments. Their responses are clustered as follows:

Figure 3: Clustering of respondent comments regarding facilitators of learning



Respondents showed strong support for formal networks as facilitators of inter-organisational learning. These included networks formed for the purposes of regional cooperation, joint initiatives and investment initiatives.

At the same time, issues relating to leadership and organisational culture, as well as personal and professional impetus, suggest that there may be something about 'local government in the age of governance' (see Geddes 2005; Bovaird and Löffler 2002) that contributes to inter-organisational learning. One respondent encapsulated some of the complexity of modern local governance and its impacts on shared learning by suggesting that:

Learning comes through consultants working over time in several councils, information that is made public through the local media, the public nature of any given issue, industry forums, and the demands for open funding tenders. (Respondent)

Box 3: Focus on a specific topic

The value of focusing on a specific topic

In response to some of the feedback received from respondents, the researcher enquired whether learning is facilitated when there is a focus on a specific topic.

One respondent suggested that 'it may be more difficult to assist someone if you don't have an idea of the topic, so it is probably better if the learning occurs around some particular topic.'

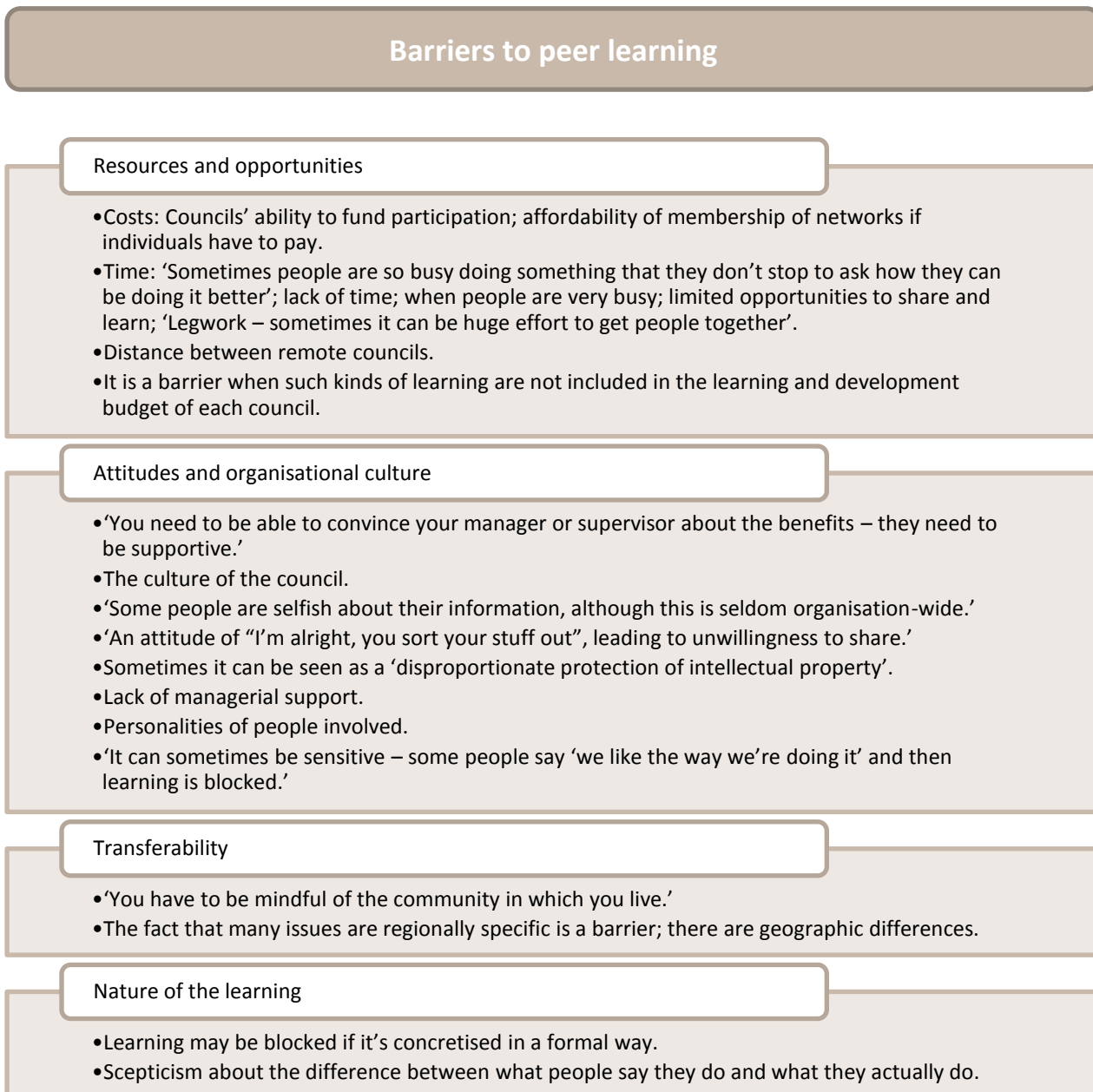
Another made the point that 'it does help if there is a focus on a specific issue – this brings people to think, let's get our heads together and sort this out. At the GM level, they tend to focus on councils as a whole.'

Another noted: 'There has to be a need and then people will go out and search for the examples and information to address that need.'

Barriers to learning between councils

In the same way that respondents were asked to identify factors that facilitated sharing and learning, they were also asked to reflect on the factors that, in their opinion, served as barriers or hindrances to inter-council learning. Clustering of their responses generated the following categories:

Figure 4: Clustering of respondent comments regarding barriers to peer learning



4.1.2 Examining the mechanisms of inter-organisational learning

Vignettes of learning

In order to illustrate the mechanisms of learning amongst councils, participants were invited to relate concrete instances in which they learnt from other councils and took the information further in their own councils. These are described as ‘vignettes of learning’.

Box 4: Sharing on topical issues

Four concrete examples of learning in the context of an inter-council focus on a topical issue were related by study participants.

- Issues relating to ‘special rates variation’ are very topical at present. A council in the region opted for a variation to rates – this was put on the agenda of the respondent’s council ‘in case we got into the same situation’. The managers invited a person from [the council that had opted for rate variation] to come and say what was happening there.
- A regional workshop to focus on bushfires was called. Respondents spent a day with peers from other councils in the area to focus on what councils could and should be doing in the immediate aftermath of damaging bushfires in the area.
- The participant attended a presentation in [regional centre] on community consultation, focusing on the language used to share things with ordinary people. Then went out to twelve different communities. This got her thinking more broadly. She didn’t document it too much, but built it into her way of working. She came to realise that there’s a difference between what people tell you they’re doing, and what they’re actually doing – ‘it’s good to develop some scepticism of what they’re actually doing, and that’s the problem with documentation.’
- There was concern around the way budgeting was occurring in the council. Under direction from the General Manger, the respondent contacted colleagues from a neighbouring council and from interstate, and built up a model in-house from the information received. He described the process as: building up an idea of what’s going on elsewhere; working on it; making it suitable for the needs of his council; and then presenting it to the leadership team. There was not open disagreement with the model, but he needed to keep on working on the information received externally in order to make it more suitable to the area. As he summarised: ‘It’s not difficult to learn from others, as long as you have a name and number, you go for it. I’ve had very little resistance up to now. People respond positively to requests for assistance in this industry.’

Box 5: Email groups

Several respondents made reference to ‘email groups’ that had developed, generally amongst personnel working in specific areas of local government, such as in property services, engineering and administration. In some cases, these email connections were said to number in the hundreds. The origin and formalisation of one such group was described as follows:

It started when people shared their cards/addresses at a conference, and communication got going on an individual level. Then it spread by word of mouth that ‘hey, I’ve communicated with so-an-so and she or he’s got some wonderful ideas.’ Gradually it started to develop an identity as an ‘email group’. The result is that you can send out a question, and be absolutely sure that many people will respond to it. And if you see that a question is out there, you feel motivated to respond to it if you have something useful to contribute.

Box 6: State Government

Impetus for sharing and learning provided at State level

Several respondents made mention of the recent rollout of the NSW state-wide Integrated Planning and Reporting framework as having led to shared learning amongst councils. When drawing up their own suite of documents, the teams within one council took on ideas from the examples of other councils; workshopped the manual; rolled it out to middle management and then to senior management.

Another example was described as follows:

In the previous year, the Office of Local Government held workshops across the state on preparing the End of Term Report. In [the region], practitioners who either had or were about to write this report were asked to critique the End of Term Reports of other councils against the guidelines contained in the Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) framework.

Learning was based on the conversations held in the workshops, based on questions such as: What style of report did you choose and why? What is better? There was discussion about why the language of some reports would be impenetrable to communities, and of the need to 'relate through language' based on ease of access for people. Specific reports were shown as examples of what to avoid.

The critique technique allowed the emergence of what an 'ideal' report might contain that was useful to a community – the perspective was from both the practitioner and the practitioner as a community member.

Learning was promoted in this situation through the use of real End of Term Reports from real councils and use of the critique technique in the workshops. Barriers arose for numbers of practitioners from councils in the region because it was necessarily held in a single location in an all-day session.

Box 7: Local government as a learning organisation

Description of a local government as a learning organisation

One of the councils included in the study has explicitly set itself up as a learning organisation. Features of this council as a learning organisation include:

- There is a learning and development team.
- Every staff member has a learning plan for the year.
- The council has a standing item on its agendas for team meetings called 'what have you learned/where have you been?'
- Middle managers are held to account for the development of their people, and this may include doing secondments or staff swaps.
- Review is an ongoing, rolling process. The council undergoes a sustainability review process every four years, and a requirement of this formal process is to benchmark with other councils.
- Use is made of the internal net (intranet) to share information in a more informal way
- The Business Operating System sets out 'the [council] way', which is followed by all functions within the council. It is freely referenced in council policies and procedures. The aim is to gradually eliminate 'unwritten ground rules.'

Probing was carried out in the interviews (two respondents) to gauge how the learning organisation approach works in practice. The respondents noted the importance of building leadership, and creating opportunities for staff to develop skills and knowledge in formal and informal programs as far as resources would allow. Leadership from the top was noted as being important to encourage staff to participate in informal and formal networks in the context of the learning organisation strategy. Resource limitations may be barriers to participation; however in some cases the culture of the organisation is equally limiting.

In terms of the reporting/documentation of learning experiences, it was noted that the level of documentation depends on the quantity and quality of the learning input. Making a formal report to the team by any staff member who had been to a conference was compulsory, and if someone had received funding to go to a conference or workshop, they were expected to write a full report.

Box 8: Vignette - Public Liability

Pools Scheme on Public Liability for Local Governments

In the late 1980s, the insurance market for local governments was very difficult. The key issue was that councils could not easily find companies that were willing to underwrite risk, partly because 'the insurance market goes up and down'. Some managers looked at models that had developed in the USA and other places, brought back valuable information, and set up a 'Pools Scheme on Public Liability' in Australia. It ensures that there is a base contribution level for each of the councils that are members of the Scheme and evens out the highs and the lows.

The scheme was set up with a board consisting of General Managers and Mayors of member councils, and a management committee consisting of risk managers and finance managers of member councils. Both the board and the management committee meet on a regular basis, based on a deed of agreement that they would participate in the structure. There has been a clear outcome: the Pool has gone from strength to strength over 25 years and its membership has increased. It was noted that 'it definitely improves things at a strategic level.'

Methods of learning have included:

- General Managers did some field trips, got documentation and then adapted them to suit local conditions.
- The Pools Scheme on Public Liability runs risk management training seminars for all member councils, and whether individual councils pick up the information and run with it is up to them.
- There is a continuous risk improvement program funded by the Pool, so there is a clear incentive for each council to adopt the learning and apply it.

Barriers to learning in this situation were identified:

- While there is a commitment to participate, it is harder to ensure that the learning be incorporated into the policies and procedures of individual councils.
- There were self-interest issues – self-interest can be located in the individual and/or the council.
- Some management styles did not encourage learning.
- 'Questions of which comes first, your council or the joint organisation – which hat are you wearing?'

Box 9: Vignette - Economic development

Economic Development Officers' Network

With links to Economic Development Australia as a peak body, the Economic Development Officer's Network was established to focus on economic development in the outer suburbs of Sydney. This objective was combined with the specific learning objective of obtaining information, advice and inspiration for the economic development coordinators in participating councils.

The Network has developed a style and model of practice that focuses on people (e.g. by providing employment support), place (e.g. by investing in a prospectus for the area) and business (e.g. by working with local Chambers of Commerce and developing a business email group).

In considering the learning that occurs within the context of this Network, the respondent pointed out that the 'boundary between the formal and informal are fuzzy' and that it could be described as a process of co-production of learning or 'network learning'. There is a formal aspect to it (based on mentoring) in that when a new economic development person is employed at one of the 14 participating councils, the respondent and a colleague at another council make themselves available to the new person as mentors. The person spends a day or two with either of them, and they show them all the things they've learned over the years. They also add the newcomer to the Network. 'They come and sit at my desk and I show them the tools and information we use, what was done, why it was done, and how it was done. This gives them permission to contact me and anyone else in the Network as needed. They're included on the email list.'

The network learning has also led to formal training days, such as a Cluster Navigators course on how to develop industry clusters in areas. People from local governments further afield (outside of metropolitan Sydney) came to this training as well. Conferences focusing on economic development are planned and organised.

Facilitators to learning in this Network are described by the respondent in the following comments:

- ‘There is lots of interest in [the area] on the issue of investment, and on employment growth in the area as a whole.’ This suggests that the wider context plays an important role.
- Her senior manager supported her to work on the issue for the benefit of her council.
- Her expertise was recognised amongst her peers, and she had connections at state level, including contacts with the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Time is the major barrier and the work hasn’t been adequately documented. The respondent noted that ‘while it may be a good model for local governments throughout the country, it has no way of getting further without this documentation.’

Accessing information, ideas and inspiration

A key theme in the respondents’ views on accessing information, ideas and/or inspiration from other councils was their grappling with the various ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ means of obtaining insights, ideas or information, and the difficulty they had in separating these mechanisms.

In the case of ROCs, for example, it was noted that although the structure is formal, much of the sharing is informal, and occurs between individuals at the meetings and in the course of joint activities. Another example where it was noted that it was difficult to separate the formal from the informal arose during participation in a course of training. Participation in formal training was described as a major means of learning from other councils, not so much through the classroom teaching/learning, but rather in the course of the informal discussions and relationships that developed amongst the students.

Conferences were also mentioned as situations where it would be difficult to separate the formal from the informal. As one respondent commented:

At conferences, it is the intention that many would learn from some, but very often it is conversation outside of the presentations that makes the connection.

Informal social interaction with workers from other councils happens on a regular basis, perhaps especially in regional areas, and it may occasionally be serendipitous. Learning through serendipitous informal interaction was reported as happening in once case as follows:

Box 10: Vignette - Highly informal

Beer with a mate

The participant was ‘having a beer with a mate’ who works at a neighbouring council. Amongst other topics, they were talking a bit about work, and the mate mentioned something that they were doing, which made him think, ‘Aha, that’s useful’. It was a profound insight. He thought about it the next day, and how to customise the approach to his own council.

In addition to informal means of contact and sharing being given favourable appraisals by the respondents, several expressed their support for formal mechanisms of inter-council contact, in which sharing and learning was an explicit aim. One respondent described formal mechanisms as most effective, holding that ‘a regular program of activities ensures that experiences can be shared’ and discussed the example of the establishment of regional organisations (ROCs) or the new joint organisations in NSW. Another noted that formalised structures focusing on specific issues are an efficient way to share learning.

The following are tentatively put forward as key sources of insight from other councils, using the heuristic device of an ‘informal-formal continuum for accessing information, ideas and/or inspiration from other councils’ drawing on the insights gained from the respondents, and briefly discussed above. The use of a continuum suggests that it is valuable not to view the categories as discrete entities, and it seems to capture the trend of the respondents’ views.

Figure 5: Continuum of accessing information, ideas and/or inspiration from other councils

Accessing information, ideas and/or inspiration

Personal and professional connections

- 'You get the idea there's something good happening in that council and you say to your colleagues, hell, let's find out more through our networks.'
- 'At unusual times, an idea jumps out at you, perhaps at a conference, it interests you; it seems to fill a gap.'
- People take part in email groups and blogging sites.
- Participation in networks, such as an informal inter-council network of planners in the region.
- 'Staff seek out international examples of practice through their own web-based research or reading.'
- Freely check the websites of other councils. 'Just Google things, and see what comes up.'
- Social contact in non-work settings.
- One respondent's husband works for a local government organisation interstate, and so she is able to learn about developments in that jurisdiction.
- 'In particular fields there may be "gurus" that people turn to'; It's all about reputation in the field.

Insights from advisors, suppliers, contractors and consultants

- In one council area, a university was involved in developing a water recycling system in a new housing development, and this has come to be of interest to other councils.
- Picking up things from suppliers (e.g. IT providers).
- 'It is valuable not to rely too much on consultants – information from industry practitioners is more authentic.'

Learning through planned contact

- Networking at the professional level, including a financial assets manager's day with guest speakers, software providers, people take turns to present; economic development officers.
- 'One of my colleagues has recently been appointed to a role for which he had limited experience. I used my networks to put him in touch with the right people in other councils so that he could tap into their experience to develop his own frameworks.'
- 'Regional collaboration, for example the [region] ROC is a good means of sharing things on particular issues, such as workforce, environment, legal, engineering. A problem here is that the lead-up time is generally poor.'
- Attendance at conferences.
- Formal training; 'There is a place for formal education, but the quality of the lecturing is important'; 'In the formal education setting, peer learning is not necessarily built in because people are participating for their own purposes, so if it occurs it is not intentional.'
- Councils dealing with a common concern, such as the insurance issue (described in Box 8 above), leading to the established of a formal structure for sharing and learning.

Where inter-council learning is the prime focus

- Impetus provided by state government.
- Often occurs in connection with reforms at the state level.
- Initiatives such as the Promoting Better Practice Review, white papers, introduction of Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R)

Taking the information further in the organisation

While respondents were encouraged to share their views on the ways in which information derived from other councils was taken further within their own councils, it was difficult to ascertain in sufficient detail how the embedding of learning 'looked' in a concrete sense.

The most concrete process was described by a respondent from a council which has an executive leadership team with representatives from across the organisation. She noted that 'any learning that comes from outside and is worked on by any team eventually has to come to this group, and if everyone is happy with the changes, it can become part of the policies and procedures.'

At a more general level, one respondent noted: 'As long as it works elsewhere, staff are willing to share it within their organisation, because then they can say that it's been tried and tested elsewhere.' One respondent, referring to inter-council learning that occurs with regard to local economic development issues, noted that the learning she was part of (both as giver and receiver in a co-production way) inevitably gets shared with others within the council, 'because economic development impacts on many other areas of council functioning.'

Mechanisms for taking information further in the organisation, as reported by respondents, included:

- 'Incorporation into plans, such as the Infrastructure Plan and the policies and processes to address it. Within that, one may explicitly reference ideas that have come from other councils.'
- 'We can't do anything that deviates too much from our work plans. But if the impetus for learning comes from the community, then it can be added to council operations, no problem. An example of this is that the community wanted to have a trades training centre in the area. They took the idea to the councillors, who asked for a method and model to be developed. The staff worked on this proposal, drawing on examples from other councils.'
- 'If rate payers' funds are being spent, it is normal that a written report would also be done. The bigger the learning, and the expense, the more such a report – widely circulated on the intranet and to councillors – is important and expected.'
- 'Rollout of the IP&R system¹ may help to formalise learning once it has taken hold, since it can then be included into Community Plans and other plans.'

According to the respondents, mechanisms for taking learning further in the organisation rested on the local government explicitly establishing itself as a learning organisation and/or aiming for continuous improvement. Two of the mechanisms identified by respondents were: benchmarking with other councils as a feature of service review; and joining networks such as LGBEN (Local Government Business Excellence Network) which also enables connections interstate, through, for example, organising conferences.

Several respondents saw organisational governance as an issue. They highlighted the importance of support of senior management (for example in the allocation of time) and of not promoting silo thinking within the council. In terms of the latter point, one respondent noted that 'If only one department takes on a new idea, it might not work. However, if there is an executive leadership team, the effects of the changes will eventually flow through to other departments.'

Several respondents said that learning was more likely to occur if it focused on specific work areas or units, and on specific program or problem areas, such as local economic development. Local government initiatives with regard to local economic development were described as 'cutting across several units in council'.

Respondents' comments on the barriers to taking information further in their councils included:

¹ Integrated Planning and Reporting system in NSW.

- ‘Rigid formalisation of approaches and mechanisms won’t work since learning is based on relationships and networks’.
- ‘Consider a continuum from parochialism to reciprocity. Those councils and personnel on the reciprocity side are more likely to be both givers and receivers of learning.’
- ‘Attitudes such as defensiveness, parochialism and self-interest are barriers to transfer within receiving councils. Fear may also be a factor – it sometimes requires taking a leap of faith to adopt something from another council, and people could be hesitant’.
- ‘The situation of cash-poor councils, especially those in remote areas, is a barrier to learning from other councils.’
- There may be interest in what is going on in other councils, but the levels of evidence provided as to the efficiency of approaches and programs may be patchy.

4.1.3 Views on benchmarking

Respondents’ views on the benefits of benchmarking as an inter-organisational learning mechanism were strongly divided and often ambivalent. As one respondent noted, ‘it’s a double-edged sword’ in terms of its usefulness as a learning mechanism. Comments on benchmarking included:

- ‘Benchmarking is only useful for improving processes, and when focusing on roughly the same challenges.’
- ‘Qualitative benchmarking is the winner, not quantitative. It’s about how you do things, not the adding up of what you do.’
- ‘It can seldom be about benchmarking a whole council to a whole council.’
- There is a level of benchmarking with ‘sister councils’ (this term was used to describe local governments in the same geographical area and type of locality/population/needs), but it was described as ‘often a case of why we’re different from them – benchmarking identifies how you are different.’
- The continuous risk improvement program involves some benchmarking, but ‘some councils don’t want to be benchmarked because they fear coming out poorly in comparison, while others want to be benchmarked because they are confident they will shine.’ The respondent who made this comment was nevertheless a supporter of benchmarking as a learning tool.
- One respondent had not seen much benchmarking happening. Instead, she noted that it was the council itself that operates from its own baseline (sets its own benchmarks) and then works towards improvement. However, there had been instances when a benchmark was provided from outside the sector – for example the disability sector – which had led to an interest in setting up interactive playground equipment across the state. This was subsequently incorporated into the council’s work plans.
- One noted that benchmarking does play a role, for example, the Department of Planning had put forward benchmarks that encouraged councils to compare and learn from one another with respect to development applications and planning issues.
- Some respondents felt that a process of ‘constant comparison’ with neighbouring councils takes place in several regional areas, although this was not strictly set up as a benchmarking process.

4.1.4 Views on mentoring

The views of respondents on mentoring as a mechanism for inter-organisational learning were overwhelmingly supportive. Many of the respondents freely pointed out that they themselves were mentors to peers in other councils, or had been mentored by peers from other councils. Only a few respondents did not know of examples of cross-council mentoring. Views expressed included:

- Mentoring is ‘good because it’s a safe way of learning’.
- ‘There was someone new to local government altogether and people were asked to help to get her on track. She spent time at [the council].’

- One respondent imagined that some form of mentoring occurs everywhere, because ‘there is much job-hopping amongst council staff.’ Working in local government is idiosyncratic, so mentoring amongst people who have been in the field for some time would be valuable.
- The director of infrastructure at one respondent’s council is very well known in the industry and often mentors people from elsewhere – there’s a ‘reputation effect’.
- One respondent had personally had several mentors from other councils, but the learning developed more on an informal level, and it was only for those who were ‘open to learning’.
- Learning through mentoring is perhaps more likely to occur when the focus isn’t on a council generally, but on a work team or role within that council. This is because ‘the professionals know what they’re talking about and what problems they’re dealing with, and are interested in learning from others about that specific area.’
- One respondent had been asked to mentor people working in local government in respect of business issues and also was the recipient of mentoring from people from other councils.
- One respondent reported serving as a mentor to planners from other councils.

A mentoring vignette is described next.

Box 11: Vignette - Mentoring

The value of mentoring

The respondent is strongly in favour of inter-council mentoring and she herself functions as a mentor to people in councils all over NSW. She noted:

My counterpart at [council in the same region] came to our Combined Leadership Team workshop to learn how to put together an Operational Plan. She had come from [another state] and needed a better understanding of the local context. She had an opportunity to see what happens, to participate, and to question any/all of the 73 staff present.

Others are referred and come to visit: one colleague came for a day to [her council] to learn about IP&R as it had just been included in her portfolio.

4.1.5 Longer term benefits

While there was discussion in the interviews of the longer term benefits of inter-council learning, many respondents made the point that all learning needed to be adapted to context. As one interviewee commented: ‘It’s more a question of adaptation, and not a straight translation from council to council.’ Another pointed out: ‘It is all about processes – you can adapt good practice that is occurring at one council across any area of practice provided it is understood that there is like for like.’

At the same time, there was recognition that learning can lead to the development of a policy in one council that is seen to be innovative or successful, and then it has an impact on the policies on councils in the region as a whole. One interviewee noted that innovation in one council ‘can and does definitely lead to changes in the sector as a whole.’

Changes within a receiving council that might result from learning derived from other councils were described as including:

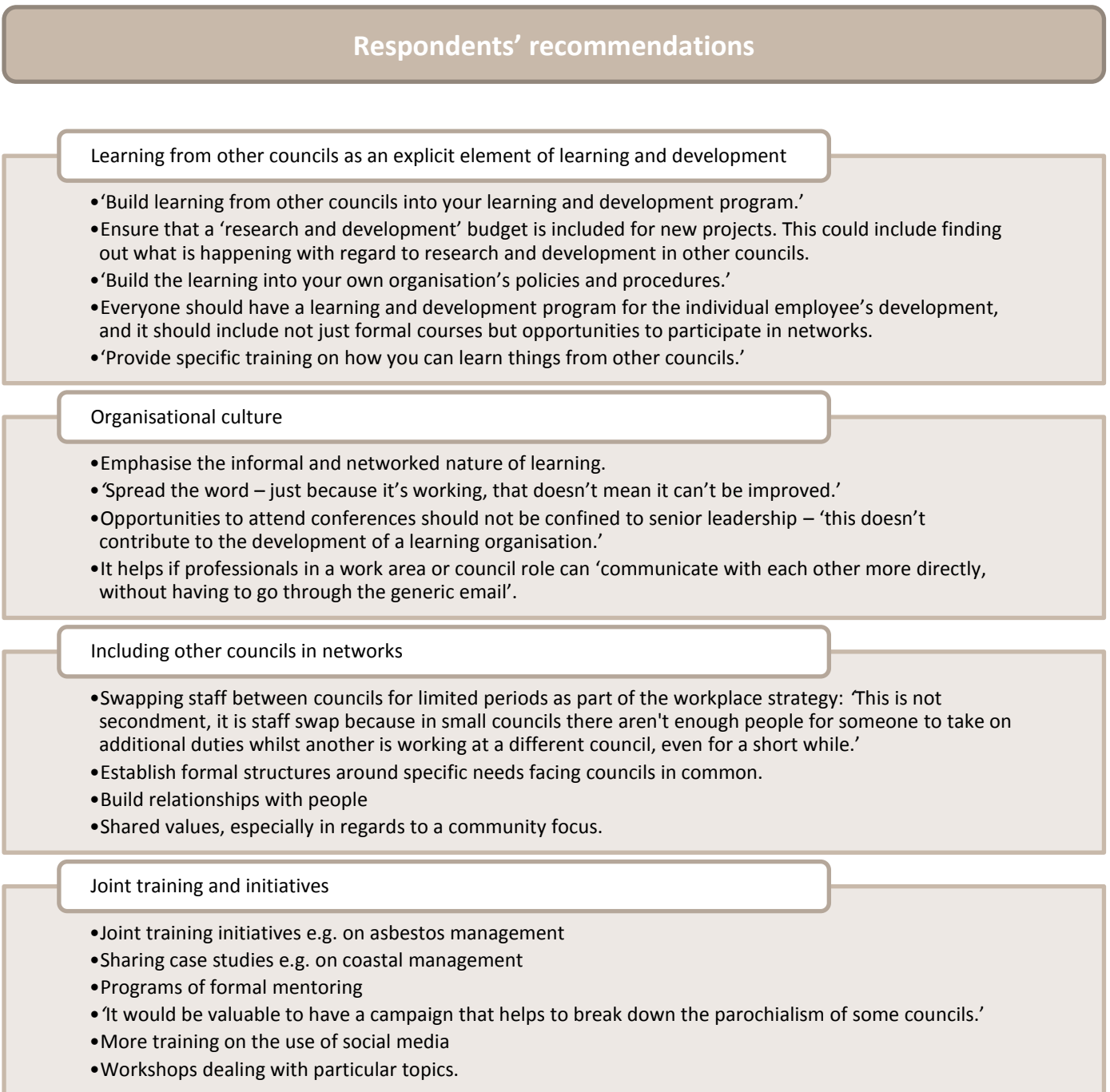
- concrete systems and procedures, such as the development of shared service models with councils in the (metropolitan) region
- any areas where cost savings can be brought about: learning from other councils was described as particularly useful around issues of purchasing and procurement, or ‘any area where council is expected to act like a business, and where more than public sector expertise is needed’

- development of ongoing forums where professionals (usually in specific roles) from various councils meet on a regular basis (usually quarterly) and also establish email connection and chats (this suggests a dovetailing of the processes and outcomes of learning)
- development of 'sister relationships', often between a metropolitan council and one in a regional area.

4.1.6 Recommendations

Respondents were asked to provide recommendations for how learning between councils could be enhanced and supported through capacity-building programs. Qualitative analysis suggests tentative support for the following recommendations:

Figure 6: Recommendations for enhancing learning amongst councils



4.2 Participants in LGMA Management Challenge

4.2.1 Description of program

The LGMA Management Challenge is a team-based professional development program coordinated by the Local Government Managers Australia National office in partnership with the New Zealand Society of Local Government Managers. The program has been running for over twenty years, and since 2010 has been designed and co-facilitated by the UTS Centre for Local Government.

The program format includes regional challenges, which are run in each state of Australia and in New Zealand, and the Australasian finals which are staged in Victoria. These one-day events comprise a competition between teams of six participants, each representing a council, or in some cases, two-council or regional teams. The Challenge has attracted over 100 teams each year since 2010, and therefore reaches over 600 professional council staff per year.

While not a primary objective of the program, the LGMA Management Challenge includes an inter-council learning component which operates through:

- task activities encouraging councils to compare approaches between councils, such as identifying strengths, lessons learned and opportunities to improve
- task activities which involve participants from two or more councils designing new solutions for common problems
- presentations in which teams describe programs, initiatives and opportunities to improve in their own councils
- teams participating in the challenge who come together from two or more councils, providing an opportunity to network and share professional experiences.

4.2.2 Invitation and participation

Three teams who had participated in the LGMA Management Challenge and the CEO of a local government which had produced a winning team from New Zealand were included in the 'Councils learning from each other' study. Two of the teams were from metropolitan Sydney (face-to-face interviews), and one was from a regional centre (conference telephone interview).

The teams agreed to participate in this study after being provided with information on its aims and methodology. They consented to share their experiences. A total of 12 respondents from these three teams were interviewed using an interview guide (see Appendix D). A group format was used for each of the three interviews, which took between 60 and 90 minutes to complete. Once the interviewees had responded to questions relating to the LGMA Management Challenge, they were also asked to contribute their views on general learning amongst councils in local government.

The CEO of a local government in New Zealand was invited to participate since he had valuable information to share on the preparation of teams and the ongoing integration of learning once the Challenge was over. The interview was conducted as a focused telephone interview.

The responses from these 13 interviewees with respect to their views on peer learning through participation in the LGMA Management Challenge are presented and analysed next.

4.2.3 Learning about other councils through participation

Agreement that they learned something about other councils

All respondents in each of the teams agreed with the statement that they had 'learned something about practice and/or policy in other councils while participating in the LGMA Management Challenge'. Only one participant said she would tend toward a yes/unsure response. She commented that the Challenge is

somewhat of a 'make-believe world, where everyone is competing – is what you hear about another council authentic?'

Situations, events or encounters in which learning occurred

Based on the insights described above regarding the 'formal-informal' continuum, responses are listed from most informal to those that were most likely to be linked to program design:

- Person-to-person contact: 'On the night before the challenge, people from other teams were in the same hotel, and informal contacts were made'; '...meeting up with another team from another state by chance in a restaurant at the National competition'.
- Networking over lunch (in the 2014 Challenge, this had been encouraged by the program designers).
- Listening to other teams' presentations.
- Some activities (such as a debate) that were reported as encouraging contact, but not learning. Other activities, especially those that involved reading, enabled learning, but the learning was not from other councils present at the same event.
- Tasks that specifically required finding out information from other teams.

Of all these tasks, the following was described as being the most useful for promoting learning amongst the teams.

Box 12: Vignette - Useful exercise

A task called 'Strategic Speed Dating', included in the 2014 Challenge, involved members of teams rapidly (over a maximum of ten minutes) connecting with members of three other teams, finding out information, collating it and then writing it up. The information that teams were asked to gain from other teams focused on the strategic management systems that are in place in other councils. This was described by participants as a really good means of finding out about another council, especially since it was the very first activity on the day.

The subject matter or content of the idea or information

- Finding out about **other places** e.g. city-rural differences.
- Finding out the **range of services** offered by other councils, described by one respondent as 'broadening your horizons about local governments throughout the state'. One respondent described this as 'the challenges that arise for local government from diversity'.
- Discovering the **range of resources** available to other councils e.g. consultants, Section 94 contributions.
- Finding out about **organisational processes and performance management**, such as service reviews e.g. Realised that something very specific had been learned from [another council], namely their use of a Business Excellence Model'; 'We have done it [service reviews], and we've been implementing it, useful to see substantial differences, check for advantages and disadvantages in the way others do it'.
- There was also general learning about **how the LGMA Challenge is used in the organisation**, including how teams were composed, culture of the organisational and the management emphasis.

Facilitators of learning

Factors that were described as facilitating learning included:

- Preparation: 'We were motivated to get the best out of the opportunity'; 'We'd run a local version of the challenge with 16 staff in four teams, so we were prepared for sharing and working with others'; Participation of all team members in an internal 'Corporate Leadership Cup', which prepared them for working in a competitive environment and helped them to build their skills; Having a personal (learning?) action plan in place.
- Person-to-person contact: 'Due to making a personal connection, I learned about special rate variation at [another council] and have spoken by phone to the colleague from there four or five times since.'

- All being in the same room doing the same task on the same day: ‘The motivation in being told to do it (in certain activities)’; Pressure of timing gets you to focus; The way especially the [speed dating activity described above] was set up; ‘The need to focus, because you had to write a report on it’.
- Support from the mentor, while at the same time ‘not having managers hovering around’.

Barriers to learning

Almost all respondents referred to the constraints brought about by the shortage of time to learn from participants in other teams, for example: ‘there could have been longer time for conversations’; ‘you don’t have the liberty to just go and chat’; ‘there is not enough time to absorb information – you may get inspiration, but can’t do much with it’; and ‘once the last activity is completed, it all just comes to an end’.

Most respondents reflected on the constraints to learning brought about by the competitive nature of the Challenge. As one noted, ‘the event is competitive, so there is not an emphasis on networking’. Others conceded that ‘still, the attitude of the competitors was open and positive’. One team, which had a reputation for winning, felt somewhat under pressure, as though the other teams were hesitant to engage with them: ‘no-one wants to talk to [council]’.

The need to produce a report was described as both a facilitator and a barrier to learning. A respondent pointed out that ‘you can’t produce a decent report in 45 minutes’.

4.2.4 Embedding the ideas or information within their councils

Respondents identified a range of mechanisms through which learning could be embedded within their own councils, including the following:

- Participation in the LGMA Management Challenge was part of the Leadership Learning and Development Program for each employee. After participation, they were encouraged to incorporate learnings into their practice. As one noted ‘I’m a better employee as a result’, but this was not due to learning from other councils; rather, it was due to participation within a team in competitive and challenging events.
- Team members at one council included their participation in the Challenge in their personal action plans – ‘so there is incentive to incorporate learning and run with it’.
- Organised debriefs were held after the teams had participated: ‘There was an organised debrief, which was a meeting with the mentor and General Manager. This helped us to make links with the learning and our personal work’; ‘When members of the team returned to Council, they had lunch and described the experience to the general manger and HR manager.’
- They were still expected to write up a report on the experience to the executive leadership team.

Members of a team which had participated in the Management Challenge in 2012 or 2013, that is, at least a year prior to the interview, nonetheless pointed out that they could not refer to the embedding of any learning gained from other councils within their councils in the subsequent period.

Respondents identified the following barriers to taking learning about other councils from the LGMA Management Challenge further in their own councils:

- the difficulty of sharing the enthusiasm of the Challenge beyond the team’s own members, especially since the Challenge proper only occurs on one day
- time is a big barrier; ‘the key thing is the timing – whether any learning can be incorporated at some time’
- position within council – not having the power to effect changes, especially since people may be from a range of units within their councils
- budgetary limitations.

4.2.5 Recommendations for enhancing the inter-council learning aspect of the program

Respondents were invited to recommend means by which a team-based program such as the LGMA Challenge could be enhanced to improve inter-organisational learning. Their recommendations were:

Figure 7: Recommendations for enhancing the inter-council learning aspect of the program

Recommendations for enhancing the inter-council learning aspect of the program

Having inter-organisational learning and sharing as an explicit goal of the program

- 'At present it's not conducive to learning, it's conducive to performing.'
- 'If the goal is sharing, it would probably not be limited to one day.'
- 'Changing the goals would ensure that there were other means that would encourage informal contact and informal learning.'

Making more of the pre-Challenge task

- Participants in all teams suggested that more could be made of the pre-Challenge task. Respondents pointed out that the task involved a lot of time and effort and helped bring members of teams together to work as a unit. They suggested exploiting the task to also get teams to understand each other better and work together. For example, it was suggested that the organisers could have a 'night' where people were brought together, sharing the processes they'd gone through in preforming the tasks, sharing their group dynamics, and sharing their emotions.

Change of activities

- Have the activities spread out, making them more assignment based, and not all on one day.
- 'You could have an activity where you need to go to see five councils and bring back the learning to yours'.
- Less report writing, or placing a focus on joint report writing with members from other teams.
- Many of the tasks were described by some respondents as 'too academic', in the sense that they did not suit all local government workers. 'There could be promotion of the principle that many more [council] departments should be included in each team.'

After-Challenge forum

- Have an after-Challenge forum for all teams where debriefing occurs.

4.2.6 Feedback from the CEO of a winning team

In keeping with the adoption of the case study strategy for this study, the information provided by the CEO of a local government in New Zealand is provided as a unit of analysis in itself, justified on the basis that it 'contains crucial elements that are particularly significant' (Walter 2006, pp. 316-7). The crucial element was the understanding that this council had built in the means for teams to integrate learning in a holistic way within the overall operation of the council. A précis of his narrative follows.

Box 13: Vignette - A CEO's view of the Management Challenge

Using the LGMA Management Challenge as an experiential opportunity for internal and cross-council performance enhancement

Around three years ago I looked at the organisation as a whole and felt it needed a lift in performance in key elements such as effective communication with staff and breaking down silos. I operate from the principle that it's important to 'raise the value proposition of local government within local communities'. I recognised that I needed to focus on the organisation's third tier management. It's important to have this tier on board, since it has a key role in ensuring communication between senior management and the frontline staff.

The outcome was a concentrated program of capacity building, including inviting inspirational speakers, providing training and involvement in the LGMA Management Challenge. The focus throughout was on integrating the performance management system into how the teams work together. The high performers from this process of internal development from each department were selected to form the LGMA Management Challenge team.

The Challenge was seen as part of a reward system, not just as an add-on, because it's my view that it's the cheapest, most effective management training a person can do. In addition, the Management Challenge runs in parallel with application of the Baldrige Business Excellence model at our council – the two dovetail perfectly as a means of management support and improvement. The third tier managers got together and performed 'challenges', similar to the activities carried out at LGMA Management Challenge events, with the staff.

Importantly, they took the Challenge to adjoining councils and promoted it as a management development tool. The result was that four teams ended up coming from [this region]. My team said that they would like to mentor the neighbouring teams in preparation for the Challenge. Mock 'challenges' were held. It took around five to eight days of preparation and presentation. A prime objective of this was to create relationships across councils. The value underpinning this is that 'being collaborative is a road to our survival'.

The outcome of this was that three of the teams they mentored came first, second and third in the New Zealand Challenge. Perhaps more importantly, they'd ended up building a resilient network among all the neighbouring councils in the region. Once the Challenge is over, it does not end there. For a year after the (winning) team came back from the Challenge, I met with them for lunch once every six weeks to have an informal chat. The enthusiasm and success became infectious around the organisation and has changed the way we work. We don't have the silo mentality we had three or four years ago. We place a focus on celebrating success, while being wary of creating an 'A' team. It has helped to build relationships across all the local governments in the area.

A concrete learning derived from participation in the Challenge was in connection with innovative means of addressing community engagement – the ideas the team returned with have become part of the operations of the council. We want to see if we can use the same processes in other difficult areas, such as engineering and customer services.

Lessons from this experience include:

- the importance of leadership and motivation from senior management, especially the CEO/General Manager
- a strategic focus on third tier management as the locus for change
- the valuing of an initiative such as the LGMA Management Challenge to break down silos within the organisation as well as to build a resilient network amongst the neighbouring councils
- putting effort into integrating the learning derived from participation in the initiative into council operations and culture in an ongoing way.

4.3 Peer learning from student presentations

University students (N=23) undertaking a subject on leadership in local government were included in the case study due to their being exposed to ideas and information from fellow students, and possibly being inspired to take information back to their own councils.

Students were informed about the 'Councils learning from each other' study and its rationale and objectives, and they agreed to take part in a feedback process that would be built into one of the teaching/learning sessions on leadership in local government. Some students were asked to each give a five-minute presentation on place-based leadership in their respective local governments. Other students were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What did I learn from this presentation about another council?
- Why did it strike me as interesting? What contributed to my learning?
- What could I do with these insights to further my learning or take back to my own council?

The written responses were gathered and collated. The feedback they provided on six of their fellow students' presentations is summarised in the boxes below.

Box 14: Student presentation - Initiative to deal with litter

Initiative to deal with litter

Description of initiative

The local government, with strong involvement from members of the local community, initiated a program whereby the council paid a rebate of five cents per glass container collected by local citizens. The containers were crushed and used to make footpaths. It was seen as a way to focus on problems of vandalism and garbage collection in the area, and as a way to focus on delivering cost-efficiency. Within two years, the initiative had collected 17 million containers. One outcome was that local government staff could concentrate on other areas of work. The success of the initiative led to policy and legislative changes beyond the LGA.

What did other students learn?

- > new information about the town
- > the impact of litter on a regional community; that it was a local government and community initiative program designed to resolve specific local issues of vandalism and garbage collection
- > the financial situation of the LGA, and the use of an innovative means to address local issues
- > the use of a 'bottom-up' approach involving wide community participation.

Why did it strike the listener as interesting?

- > It was inspiring in terms of the role and value of local government and a small idea grew into a wider policy, so 'it made me think that we could also be more efficient with our income'.
- > The project described was 'real', 'health based', 'outcome focused'.
- > 'It's a very isolated area, so why so many overseas migrants?'
- > Information about the town: 'Good things about the town'; 'diverse population with segregation and large transient community'; 'Despite its isolation, it's a vibrant community with plenty of events'. 'Its spirited community gets behind schemes'.

What could be taken back to own council?

- > how this 'could be applied locally, especially after noticing the daily litter on [local] river'.
- > the understanding that there is value in 'taking a longer term view in terms as to where a project might end up'.
- > 'small things or changes can make a difference'.
- > the value of 'putting ourselves out there' as a first point of contact for the community; the 'important role of local government in initiating community activities'; the importance of 'walking the talk'.
- > more efficiencies into council to use income more effectively.

Box 15: Student presentation - Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Toolkit

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Toolkit

Description of initiative

The council developed an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Toolkit. Amongst other objectives, the Toolkit was designed to be used in the assessment of development applications and was seen to be an appropriate response to the need to incorporate cultural planning in the planning process.

What did other students learn?

- > 'Learning is transferrable to all councils in NSW.'
- > There is a low volunteer base, so council takes on most activities, or they wouldn't happen.
- > How one council is dealing with issues of sustainability.

Why did it strike the listener as interesting?

- > 'We are moving towards incorporating Aboriginal heritage in our council's Development Control Plan.'
- > the mention that 'the place is undergoing an identity crisis'. It is shifting from being semi-rural to highly urbanised.
- > the value of considering Aboriginal values in any project.
- > that another council has developed a toolkit that can be shared with other councils.
- > rapid changes happening in the area, and how a local government is dealing with this.
- > the process: initiate projects – build the capacity to develop – aim for self-sustained change.
- > low rates of volunteering, compared with areas of metropolitan Sydney.

What could be taken back to own council?

- > 'What resources can we share and borrow to help us do things differently?'
- > 'Compare against our council's activities.'
- > 'Think of my place and its identity.'
- > the value of having an Aboriginal Cultural Toolkit; 'I want to have a look at the Toolkit to see if it helps to implement a consistent assessment of development applications'; 'I want to do more research and follow it up on [the LGA's] website'.

Box 16: Student presentation - Place leadership

Place leadership

Description of initiative

Description of social challenges facing the area, and the impact of leadership styles on developing initiatives with a focus on youth.

What did other students learn?

- > the importance of community development to build and strengthen communities
- > good insights into the views of a councillor
- > information on the city: 'Where [the city] is, also its issues'; it is a leader of multiculturalism; the population is getting older, while the number of younger people is decreasing; the high cost of living
- > the strong impact of political leadership on an area; 'leaders' influence on local direction'; the Mayor's role
- > more focus on the community services area of council activities helped to change issues with crime.

Why did it strike the listener as interesting?

- > one mayor, who is a good leader, was able to get non-cooperative councillors on board. 'He's left a huge legacy, but needs to be supported.'
- > the value of having a good knowledge of area; importance of data such as unemployment rates, percentage of people speaking other languages, percentage of people with university degrees
- > large Aboriginal impact in the community, juxtaposed with discussion of leadership styles – autocratic, closed, consultative, or the idea that 'Council knows best'.
- > despite a strong multicultural nature, 'the sense of community in [city] has not been strong.'
- > 'I grew up there and worked there previously – it's interesting to note the changes'.
- > the council is dealing with the same issues as other councils who need to 'bridge the cultural divide'.
- > there is public value in investing in community infrastructure, including street art.
- > generational change is approaching.

What could be taken back to your own council?

- > 'It's about portraying your community in a positive light.'
- > public value is vital; public value is about investing in community infrastructure
- > the mayor's support of an initiative; strong leaders can make a difference.
- > bigger visions
- > improve understanding of own council's social plan
- > constant review of strategies; advocate for the community
- > ensure local honesty.

Box 17: Student presentation - A city finding its identity

A city finding its identity

Description of initiative

The presentation was a general description of what is going on in [city], with a focus on its 'sense of identity'. The council had recently embarked on a holistic approach to obtaining community ideas regarding development of the city.

What did other students learn?

- > the importance of 'knowing your place'; the people of the community 'don't know their place'.
- > information about [the city]: it is older than [neighbouring, larger city]; it has country living with city access; it is a dormitory town; it has extremes of wealth and poverty; a large percentage of the population leave the community daily; it is known as 'struggle town'
- > there had been no place-based initiatives until recently.

Why did it strike the listener as interesting?

- > The central message of the presentation: The people in [city] seem not to 'know who they are'; what is their place?; it seems to be a city struggling with its identity; it is the poor cousin of [neighbouring city]; there are issues of wealth – poverty – survival and a cross-border mentality.
- > Community development is not well utilised.
- > 'That we are not that dissimilar'.
- > 'We need to break silos; teams should not be working in silos.'
- > The use of humour in the presentation.

What could be taken back to own council?

- > creation of a vision
- > 'I'm going to try to make changes to my job'
- > Know your community.
- > the importance of understanding the basic economics – are people leaving or staying in our LGA?
- > 'Since our council seems to operate similarly to [city], I could see ideas on what works for them – can try to make changes to my job'.

Holiday letting strategy

Description of initiative

Challenges arose for [the LGA] as a result of it being a prime holiday destination as well as a residential area. Hundreds of properties had recently been taken out of the residential rental market and made available for holiday lettings. There was a fear that within a few decades nobody would actually be able to live permanently in [the town]. The council engaged in a strategy to deal with the current and prospective future situation.

What did other students learn?

- > the impact of tourism on a place – lots of people visit and some don't leave; there has been a loss of the sense of community as a result of the volume of tourists; the preponderance of holiday letting led to housing affordability issues in [the shire]; the issue of 'greed' enticing residents to let out unsuitable properties to tourists
- > maximise public involvement in decision-making
- > the process of change is difficult
- > there are a myriad of views on 'the community'; the communities are spread out and have 'distinct places'; it is a very involved community.

Why did it strike the listener as interesting?

- > The council might attempt something and then it fails. 'Try again, collaborate with all key stakeholders.'
- > 'Lack of consultation led to failure of the draft planning controls.'
- > Social and economic impacts of holiday letting in the area; 'Holiday letting can get out of control'.
- > The use of an innovation zone to drive legitimacy.
- > 'You need to be honest about the difficulties in your local area.'
- > 'It is a party town.'
- > 'I have gained a different perspective on tourism that I had not considered before'.

What could be taken back to own council?

- > 'Compared to 'government', 'governance' is hard work.'
- > Look to find the middle ground – the 'innovation zone'; making use of the concept of 'innovation zone' to solve problems; 'it's about aiming for a win-win situation, not a 'winner takes all' situation'; understand the value of focusing on the innovation zone at the intersection of the community, the management and the political sphere.
- > Look at the impacts of 'a lack of affordable housing on our community.'
- > Each LGA is different and has different values, issues, visions and solutions.
- > It's important to gain insight into what 'community' actually is; Look at who makes up our community and look out for diversity in different communities. There are differences when it comes to the 'tourist community'.
- > Engage community and stakeholders early on in the process; it's important to get key people to the table.
- > The importance of building relationships with key stakeholders.
- > Examine whether the local government considers properly the community impact of its decisions.
- > If there is a continuous problem, look at ways to resolve and respond.

Box 19: Student presentation - Civic Centre Precinct

Civic Centre Precinct

Description of initiative

The communities of [city] were closely involved in decision-making that took place in connection with development of a new civic centre, which would incorporate the new council chambers. The council had sold [a council-owned business] and this had provided the basic funds for the project. The result was a successful 'Civic Centre Precinct'.

What did other students learn?

- > information on [city]: meaning of its name; it is 'a lovely country town'; it is centrally located in [state]
- > community consultation; place-based strategy; social planning
- > selling off of council assets
- > that the council is connected with its community.

Why did it strike the listener as interesting?

- > The use of a collaborative approach in developing a civic precinct; the collaborative/consultative approach taken was new to this council; 'Consultation down to the point of designing a new civic centre'; 'Community engagement articulated and created public value'.
- > civic pride: the impact a civic centre can have on a community; the idea of 'social fabric'; pride in heritage
- > The shift from an old style to a more consultative style, 'made easier with the large sum of money upon which the community had a say in how it could be spent'.
- > Presentation: humour and creativity – 'I like pictures rather than words'; 'good photos and quotes'.
- > The council had had a [council-owned business].

What could be taken back to own council?

- > Understand the community expectations of development.
- > Questions about the assets owned by council.
- > Involve the community; 'always consult with community'; 'build the trust of community through community consultations'; 'always consider the public'; include 'more innovation in decision-making'; 'more involvement of people in community initiatives'
- > The use of a civic centre as a focus for community activities; use of a Civic Centre Precinct to integrate cultural and administrative functions and facilities.

5 Synthesis of findings

In this section, findings from the several units of analysis of the study are synthesised and, where possible, compared and contrasted with findings in the academic literature.

5.1 Strong support for the value of inter-council learning

There is strong support for learning between councils as an important part of learning within local government. This finding is consistent across participants in all the cohorts included in this study and it is also consistent with findings from the literature.

5.2 Motivations and benefits

On the basis of participants' responses, the motivations for, and the potential benefits of, learning from other councils can be categorised as:

- the nature of the work in local government, which promotes comparison and sharing
- the need for continuous improvement within each local government as an organisation, often driven by a focus on specific issues and the 'how to' questions
- efficient use of resources (time, money, personnel) through 'not having to reinvent the wheel' (a phrase used by numbers of respondents)
- personal and interpersonal motivations, especially promoting professional contacts amongst people working in similar roles, which contributes to the personal gains for individual employees.

5.3 Content of learning

The content of inter-council learning focuses especially on issues of topical interest or of common concern to local governments, and includes finding out about:

- organisational processes and performance management, such as service reviews
- the range of services offered by other councils
- resources available to other councils and the ways in which they allocate budgets.

There is also a more general interest in subjects related to other localities, such as city-rural differences and interesting things that are happening in other parts of the country.

Findings from the study suggest that a link can be made between the preferred content of learning and the mechanisms of learning, and this link is further explored in Section 5.6 below.

5.4 Facilitators

Based on the responses provided by interviewees of this study, the following facilitators of inter-council learning are identified:

- The presence and operation of formal mechanisms such as networks, alliances and inter-council collaboration
- Leadership and organisational culture, particularly support from senior management and the council viewing itself as a 'learning organisation'
- Attitudes and behaviours of council personnel at the personal and inter-personal levels, including trust in the professionalism, and shared altruism, of peers; and the movement of employees from one council to another
- Professional and scholarly mechanisms (publications, teaching), and stories about local government in the media.

The facilitators of inter-organisational learning as expressed by the respondents show many similarities with factors that have been highlighted in the academic literature, as summarised in Section 2 above. Particularly

congruent is the finding in the literature that political and managerial ‘champions’ are important in encouraging learning and creating a culture supportive of change, which contributes to the overall organisational culture (see Downe, Hartley & Rashman 2004; Rashman & Radnor 2005).

Issues relating to leadership and organisational culture, as well as the personal and professional impetus referred to by several respondents, suggest that a ‘local governance’ focus contributes to inter-organisational learning. Some participants held the view that learning is facilitated when there is a focus on a specific topic, but this is worthy of further research.

5.5 Barriers

On the basis of participant responses, barriers to learning were divided into three categories:

- resources and opportunities (time, costs, distances)
- attitudes and organisational culture, especially an ‘inward’ focus
- the transferability of learning due to differences in localities.

These barriers exhibit strong correspondences with findings in the academic literature, particularly the ‘transferability’ issues linked to scale, local context and differing local priorities (Downe, Hartley & Rashman 2004); and workload pressures (Rashman & Radnor 2005).

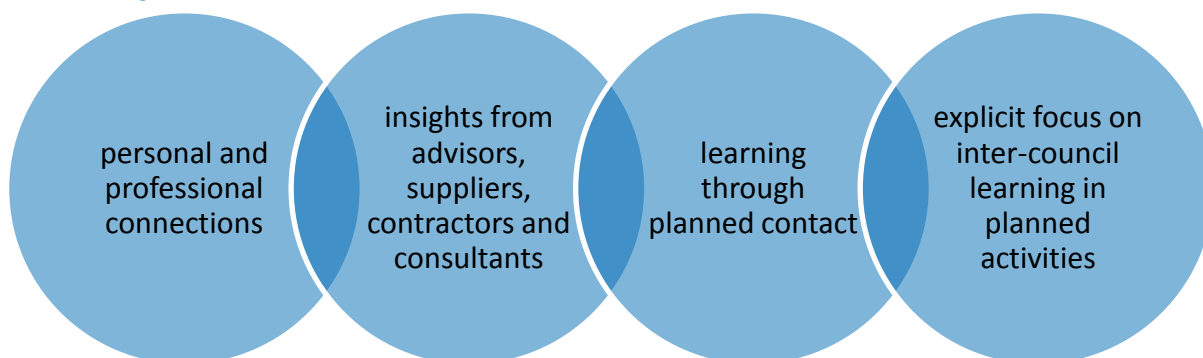
A few respondents suggested that the impetus for learning might be blocked for some local government staff if it were to be consistently concretised in a formal way, and suggested that some employees may prefer for the learning to remain at an informal or ‘organic’ level. Scepticism was also expressed by one respondent in ‘what people [in other councils] say they do and what they actually do’.

5.6 Mechanisms of inter-council learning

This exploratory case study has generated broad understandings of the mechanisms of inter-council learning that are worthy of more in-depth study.

A key theme in the respondents’ views on accessing information, ideas and/or inspiration from other councils was their focus on various ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ means of obtaining insights, ideas or information, and the difficulty in strictly separating these mechanisms. On the basis of the feedback from respondents, an ‘informal-formal continuum’ can be posited, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Accessing information from other councils on an informal-formal continuum



The methods of benchmarking and mentoring can also be located on this continuum (see for example the ways in which they are discussed as methods of inter-organisational learning in the works of Bowerman et al 2001; Feeney & Bozeman 2008, summarised in Section 2 of this report). They are mechanisms that rely on learning through planned contact, but also where inter-council learning is an explicit focus.

Data from this study suggest that there is strong support for mentoring as a means of inter-council learning. Several examples were provided of inter-council mentoring occurring on a regular basis in NSW. This is in

keeping with findings from the academic literature that mentoring is a worthwhile mechanism for knowledge transfer and mutual learning in local councils, particularly in a rural setting (Atterton et al. 2009).

Respondents were more ambivalent in their views on the inter-organisational learning benefits of benchmarking. This suggests that further research is needed on issues such as:

- the feasibility of benchmarking ‘a whole council to a whole council’, compared to benchmarking units or programs within councils
- the aims of benchmarking, for example whether it serves to identify how the organisation is different from, rather than similar to, the organisations it is compared with
- the methods of benchmarking, with some support being given to qualitative over quantitative benchmarking
- the need to consider the comparability of the challenges that councils face.

The ‘Local Governance Excellence Model’ (Bovaird & Löffler 2002), summarised in Table 4 of this document, applies benchmarking indicators to internal and external operations and uses this performance information to encourage innovation and learning at the levels of the individual, the organisation and the organisational network. This model can be tested in the Australian context.

Data gathered from students undertaking a leadership course at the Centre for Local Government provides evidence that structured presentations on what is occurring in one local government area to people working in other local government areas (which can be described as an example of ‘learning through planned contact’ in the continuum above) is a fruitful means of learning about other councils. These data provided further insights into the kind of thinking that may occur within the individual that would encourage her or him to pay attention to what is occurring at another council. These included:

- Listeners’ interest was aroused when they were able to find out something new about an area, locality or region, and possibly make comparisons with their own locality. It could be posited that people working in local government are attuned to features of ‘place’, and are open to learning when it expands their understanding of other places. They may seek inspiration about the role and value of local government in other places, including the value of ‘knowing your community’.
- Linked to the above, people working in councils may also be attuned to problems faced by communities, especially if they are the same problems faced by the listener or receiver of the information.
- Participants expressed interest in the ways in which local government leadership, both elected and appointed, manifests in other places, suggesting that learning may be encouraged when the information includes a focus on the ‘people’ of local government.
- Processes and procedures such as community consultation, place-based strategies and social planning and their use in other councils were especially of interest when they were described as explicitly introducing greater levels of efficiency into council operations.

This analysis, combined with data on the preferred content of learning summarised in Section 5.3 above, suggests that triggers which arouse interest in learning about local governments in other areas could be identified as a curiosity about ‘places’, ‘problems’, ‘people’ and ‘processes’. This is summarised as a tentative model of ‘triggers for interest in learning about other councils’ in Figure 9.

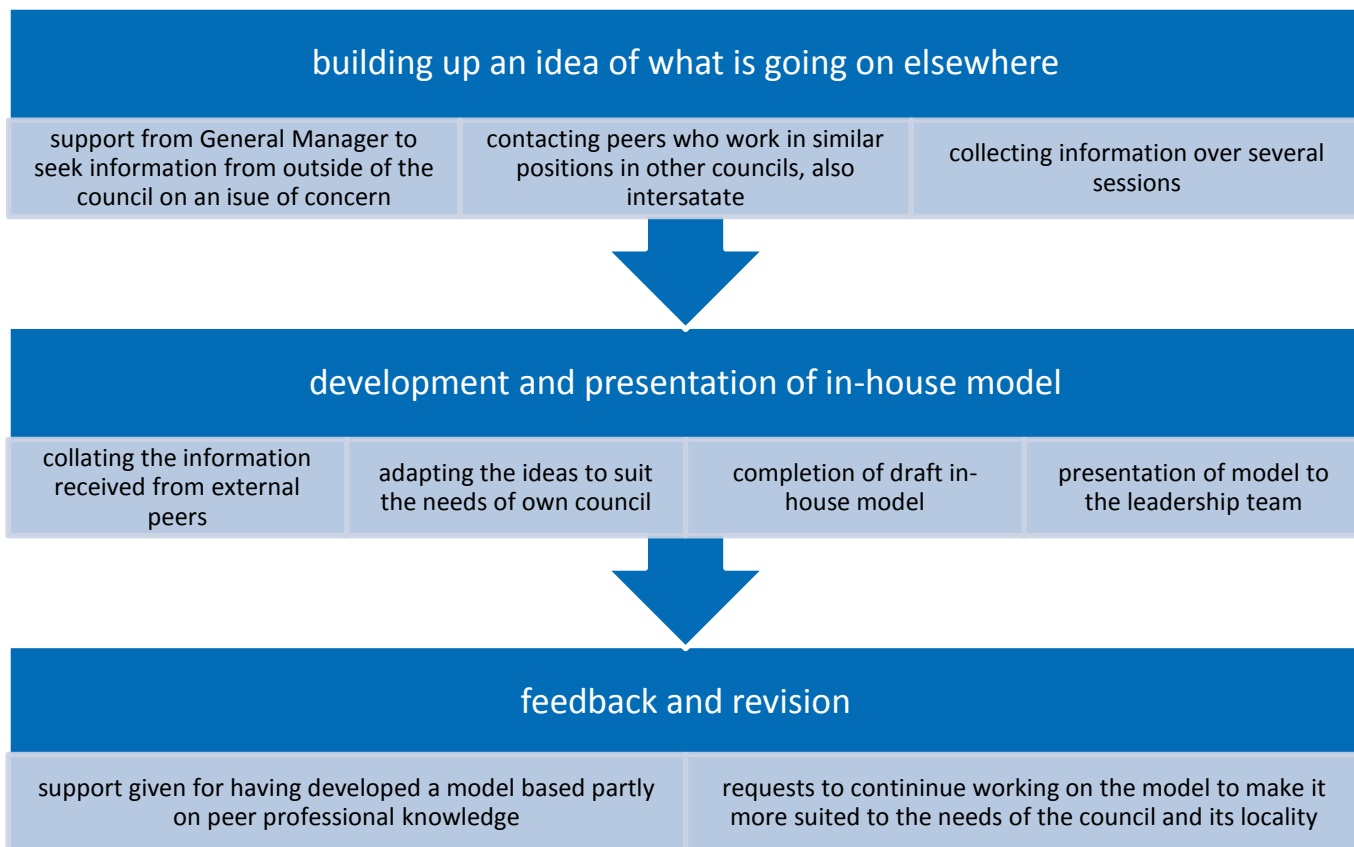
Figure 9: Triggers for an interest in learning about other councils



While respondents were encouraged to share insights into how information derived from other councils is taken further within their own councils, it was difficult when using the methodology of the current study to ascertain how this ‘looked’ in a concrete sense, and may require the use of observation or participant observation methods in future studies. This is in keeping with findings from the academic literature that knowledge dissemination strategies need to pay more attention to the recipient organisation and its capacity to apply learning, and that research should not focus exclusively on the provider of learning (Downe, Hartley & Rashman 2004).

Nonetheless, informative insights were provided by several interviewees. A process of model building, drawing on information received from professional peers in other councils, is illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Integration of external professional information through model building



Missing from the process presented above is the embedding of the model within the receiving organisation with, where appropriate, reference to the external sources that contributed to the in-house model.

Facilitating mechanisms for diffusing and embedding learning within the organisation include the local government explicitly establishing itself as a learning organisation and having specific organisational means for integrating the learning derived from other councils. As an integrative mechanism, an ‘executive

leadership team' or 'leadership team' was viewed positively as a facilitator for taking learning further within a 'receiving' council, namely through discouraging silo thinking within the council and instead sharing knowledge amongst the various units and departments, underpinned by support from senior management. There is also support for focusing on third tier management and finding means of invigorating the intra-organisational capacity building of these managers with networking opportunities, particularly in initiatives involving neighbouring councils.

It was considered helpful if a tradition developed which explicitly referenced in council documentation ideas that may have come from other councils; it was also considered helpful to keep a focus on the role of counsellors, who are responsible for policy formulation.

Drawing on the responses from participants in the Management Challenge, the suggested mechanisms included having participation in a team-based, task-focused activity as part of the organisation's leadership learning and development program and, for individual employees, including such participation in their personal action plan; and ensuring that the experience of participation does not end once the event is over, but continues to be celebrated and the learning integrated into council operations.

Several respondents said that parochial attitudes which prevented openness and reciprocity were barriers to taking information further within a receiving council.

5.7 Respondents' recommendations

Respondents' recommendations for enhancing inter-council learning include:

- Incorporate other councils into the organisation's governance networks, using formal mechanisms such as Regional Organisations of Councils and shared services was seen as a key locus for shared learning.
- Include learning from other councils as an explicit element of intra-organisation learning and development.
- Initiate joint training and initiatives.
- Develop an organisational culture that favours openness, collaboration and reciprocity vis-à-vis other councils.

Some respondents felt that caution should be applied to promoting the rigid formalisation of learning approaches and mechanisms, since so much of the learning is based on relationships and professional networks. As described earlier in this document, several email groups, and networks of people focusing on economic development in an entire region, are good examples of taking advantage of the best of both the informal and formal means of sharing and learning available to personnel working in local government.

Overall, these recommendations from the study respondents are congruent with a conclusion expressed in the academic literature:

Knowledge sharing and inter-organizational learning depend ... on the careful establishment of relationships of trust, curiosity and respect for diversity between people in different organizations, and the painstaking creation of the conditions necessary to cultivate, graft, transplant and fertilize the new thinking and the new practice that is appropriate to the specific context, conditions and conjunctures prevailing in that given organization at that moment in time (Hartley and Benington 2006, p. 107).

6 Conclusion and implications

This section draws on findings from the study to respond to the research questions put forward in Section 3.2 of this report.

What situations, programs and initiatives encourage personnel in local government to learn from each other?

Analysis of the qualitative data from this study suggests that local government employees regard learning from other councils as an important part of the overall learning that occurs within local government. Respondents identified a wide variety of situations, programs and initiatives that provide encouragement for them to seek out information and ideas from other councils. These situations, programs and initiatives occur when:

- There is an expressed need within a council to resolve a specific problem, and in resolving the problem, there is the search for inspiration from the activities of other councils (also internationally). Information on these activities can be pursued by using the internet, telephoning or following up on previous contacts.
- An issue is brought to the council's attention by a community member, and in the process of addressing the issue, information is sought on how other councils deal with that issue.
- Working relationships develop amongst professionals who perform similar roles in other councils, often beginning at an informal level such as a meeting at a conference, and the relationships are enhanced through membership of professional organisations.
- Planned initiatives and programs bring together personnel from various councils in order to focus on topical issues such as budgeting, insurance, community consultation, natural disasters, and special rates variation.
- Email groups for personnel working in specific areas in local government, such as property services, engineering and administration, are developed.
- Networks of professionals from several councils in a region focus on a specific aspect of local government work, such as local economic development or planning. Members of these networks tend to have regular contact with each other, and they may collaborate on cross-boundary activities, in which sharing is encouraged.
- A local government establishes itself as a learning organisation, within which learning from other councils is a feature of its overall learning and development program
- The impetus for sharing and learning is provided at the state level, such as when there is rollout of an initiative that impacts upon all local governments in that jurisdiction and they are encouraged to strive for best practice
- Sharing occurs within the context of ongoing formal collaboration amongst councils (such as in Regional Organisations of Councils in NSW).
- Learning occurs through participation in programs that bring personnel from councils together, such as in the LGMA Management Challenge and the Local Government Business Excellence Network.
- Public administrators find out about other councils when they participate in education and training activities, such as undertaking a course of local government studies at university.

The wide range of possible learning situations put forward by the relatively small sample of respondents in this study suggests that there are many more initiatives, programs and situations in which inter-council learning takes place in Australia. Support for this statement is also provided by the finding of the study that local government workers are motivated by a wide range of factors to learn from the experiences of other councils.

In other words, they are motivated by a range of factors including: the search for constant improvements in their own places of work; the need to stay on top of developments in the sector; the impulse to seek out

best practice based on trust in peers; and the desire to do the best for their communities. These motives encourage them to seek and take advantage of a similarly wide range of opportunities to learn from their peers in the sector.

What are the mechanisms of learning, and the facilitators and barriers of these mechanisms?

A key focus of this study was to explore the mechanisms of peer-to-peer learning in local government. As described in Section 3, this exploration was guided by insights gained from the literature, and it made use of a case study approach to explore views from a range of participants on the ‘trajectory of learning’. The trajectory of learning involved accessing information, ideas and/or inspiration from other councils and individuals taking this learning further in their own organisations.

While the methods used in the study are limited in their ability to demonstrate with certainty how information from one council becomes embedded in the work of another council, the insights are put forward as a tentative model that can be tested and modulated in further research in the Australian context. The conceptual framework put forward in Table 5 in Section 3 is used as a framework for responding to this research question, and is summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Mechanisms of peer-to-peer learning in local government

Phase of learning	Mechanisms	Facilitators	Barriers
Intuiting ideas and tacit or implicit knowledge	<p>A wide range of situations, programs and initiatives encourage local government practitioners to seek out information and ideas from other councils. The mechanisms can be placed on an informal-formal continuum that moves from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - personal and professional connections; to - the role of advisers, suppliers, contractors and consultants; to - learning through planned contact such as networking at the professional level, regional collaboration, formal training and conferences or workshops; to - an explicit focus on inter-council learning in planned activities. <p>Practitioners readily search for informal opportunities for sharing with peers within the context of more formalised mechanisms.</p>	<p>Personal and interpersonal factors such as personalities and the establishment of professional relationships</p> <p>Individual triggers for learning may relate to an interest in places (new information about a locality), problems faced by other communities, people (especially leaders) and processes used by local governments in tackling issues</p> <p>Professional and scholarly mechanisms and the media</p> <p>A focus on a specific topic or issue rather than local government as a whole, except for those at General Manager level</p> <p>Formal networks, alliances and collaborative efforts</p> <p>Leadership and organisational culture, especially support and encouragement from management</p>	<p>Lack of resources and opportunities for contact</p> <p>Attitudes and organisational culture, especially an inward focus</p> <p>The transferability of learning due to differences in localities</p> <p>Learning may be blocked for some personnel if the mechanism of learning is perceived as being too rigid and formalised</p>

Phase of learning	Mechanisms	Facilitators	Barriers
Interpreting ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation	<p>Individual 'learning and development' programs and/or 'personal action plans'</p> <p>Opportunities for debriefing and feedback on participation in events, conferences and workshops</p> <p>Reframing of the received information by individual professionals, working groups or teams</p> <p>Benchmarking, especially qualitative benchmarking focusing on 'how to' questions</p>	<p>Opportunities for ongoing contact between the councils that are giving and receiving the information</p> <p>The local government establishing itself as a learning organisation and/or aiming for continuous improvement</p> <p>Support from senior management, including allocation of time and resources</p> <p>Impetus from the community</p>	<p>Insufficient data is generated through this study, but barriers may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - incomplete or insufficient information - lack of trust in the information received from another council - insufficient resources and opportunities for sharing - attitudes and organisational culture such as parochialism ('we like the way we're doing things'), defensiveness and self-interest
Diffusion of ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation and its variation through replication in context	<p>Mechanisms include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - capacity building of the third tier management - counsellors - documentation - mentoring. <p>Further research is needed into organisational processes and interactions, and their underpinning values and attitudes.</p>	<p>Consistent leadership from senior management</p> <p>An Executive Leadership Team that ensures information crosses between departments and units</p> <p>Evidence that 'it works elsewhere'</p>	
Embedding ideas and/or knowledge in the organisation	<p>Insufficient data are provided in this study, but mechanisms may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - specifically referencing ideas gained from other councils in council documentation 	<p>Facilitators for embedding ideas are congruent with those described above.</p> <p>Insufficient data are provided through this study, but it may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - support from the state government 	

The framework has value in suggesting which mechanisms, facilitators and barriers have tentative support for operating within the Australian context. It is also valuable because it indicates which areas of learning would require more thorough investigation, especially as regards the embedding of learning in receiving organisations. It is recommended that such investigations include methods such as observation/participant observation and document analysis in order to better illustrate the interaction of structures, processes and attitudes.

What are the reported benefits of peer-to-peer learning for Australian local government?

The reported benefits of peer-to-peer learning were described by participants, and clustered on the basis of their responses, into the following categories:

- Intra-organisational benefits, especially for those councils with fewer resources. A strong focus was placed on the efficiency benefits and a common phrase used was that of 'not having to reinvent the wheel'. A few respondents noted benefits to councils in a region as a whole.
- Personal benefits, including those derived from professional networking and the establishment of professional contacts.
- Inspiration and models for problem-solving on specific issues.

The distinctions between the three are not always clear cut.

There was some discussion in the interviews about respondents' views on the longer term benefits of inter-council learning. Many respondents made the point that all learning needs to be adapted to the context in which it is applied. This also suggests that after a period of time, it would be difficult to distinguish between the learning derived from other councils and the learning derived from other sources, including the council's own dynamics of intra-organisational learning and development.

Respondents suggested that changes within the receiving council that result from inter-council sharing and learning include:

- concrete systems and procedures, such as the development of shared service models with other councils in a given region
- any areas of council practice where cost savings could be brought about, particularly around issues of purchasing and procurement
- participation in forums where professionals from various councils meet on a regular basis and also establish email connections and online chat forums, suggesting the dovetailing of both the processes and outcomes of learning
- the development of 'sister relationships', often between a metropolitan council and one in a regional area.

There is evidence from one of the LGMA Management Challenge teams that, after one or two years, they could not point to specific learnings that had been derived in the course of that program, and which had become embedded in the organisation. This may be due to many factors, such as the nature of that program itself, including its competitive and time-limited aspects. However, there is evidence that in one council at least, through the involvement of the CEO, learning from the Challenge continues to be integrated and is built into the culture of the organisation, founded on the principles of 'raising the value proposition of local government within local communities' and that 'being collaborative is a road to our survival'.

What implications do the data have for programs that are designed to support local government capacity building?

The respondents themselves pointed to the following as recommendations for capacity building in the sector:

- Incorporate 'learning from other councils' as an explicit element of learning and development within individual councils. This would include providing specific training on how local government personnel can best learn from the experiences of other councils, and the opportunity for personnel to participate in networks.

- Continue to work on the development of an organisational culture that favours openness and reciprocity. The question of the value of reciprocity vs. the value of parochialism was highlighted and may be a useful topic of debate in the sector.
- Include other councils in the governance networks of the council. This may include strategies such as staff swapping and establishing formal structures around specific needs faced in common by councils.
- Implement joint training initiatives. There is strong support for inter-council mentoring, and other means may include documenting and workshopping case studies of council practice, and other workshops dealing with particular topics, perhaps with the support of the state government.
- Be cautious when promoting the rigid formalisation of learning approaches and mechanisms, in acknowledgement that much shared learning is based on relationships and professional networks.

Specific recommendations were given by the participating teams for how to improve the inter-council learning aspects of a program such as the LGMA Management Challenge:

- Have inter-organisational learning and sharing as an explicit goal of the program.
- Make more of the pre-Challenge task to enable teams to understand each other better and find ways of working together.
- Change the activities, including less report-writing or more joint report-writing.
- Arrange an after-challenge forum in which all teams are involved in debriefing and the sharing of learning.

Further research is recommended to better understand the mechanisms of inter-council learning and the means by which this understanding can be employed to promote continuing learning and capacity development in the Australian local government sector.

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Appendix A. Table of evidence: synthesis of international studies

Table 7 below provides a synthesis of empirical studies conducted internationally since 2004 which have described and evaluated inter-council learning. The table includes:

- the program name and the researchers and country in which the study was undertaken
- the tools and methods used for facilitating learning amongst the local governments included in the study
- the findings of the study
- implications for understanding learning in local government, recommendations for further research and, where possible, implications for the current study.

Table 7: Table of evidence

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Beacon Council Scheme, UK Central Government</p> <p>Downe, Hartley and Rashman (2004); Rashman, Downe and Hartley (2005); Rashman and Radnor (2005)</p>	<p>Key processes included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nomination of high-performing councils • centralised dissemination of information through events and networks • a clear framework for learning, with a focus on both the receivers and the disseminators of learning. <p>Ideas from Beacon councils were disseminated and adapted in other local contexts.</p>	<p>The majority of people who attended a Beacon event had implemented a change in their council. Barriers to learning and change included workload pressures, resources constraints (especially financial constraints) and ‘transferability’. Transferability issues were linked to scale (smaller councils may be at a disadvantage in creating change); the different local contexts of councils; and different local priorities</p> <p>The following features were found to support inter-organisational learning and change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having a mixture of authorities by size type, political control and geography • having a blend of participants, including elected members • creating strong internal networks and structures designed expressly for the implementation of learning and the identification of named individuals or champions • having a clear framework for inter-organisational learning, with a focus on the processes of knowledge acquisition and application by both the receivers and the disseminators of learning. 	<p>The knowledge dissemination strategy needs to give more attention to the recipient organisation and its capacity to apply learning. There should not be a focus only on the provider of learning.</p> <p>Political and managerial ‘champions’ are important for encouraging learning and creating a culture supportive of change. In those cases where such champions worked effectively together, respondents reported that they were able to create substantial, rapid change in practice and to some extent in organisational culture.</p> <p>Programs of events need to be structured to aid knowledge acquisition and to develop the skills of recipients to transfer knowledge into their own context.</p> <p>There is a need for ongoing research, since the study of inter-organisational knowledge transfer in the public services, and in local government in particular, is underdeveloped.</p>

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Better Value Development Programme, UK Central Government</p> <p>Hartley and Allison (2002)</p>	<p>The program involved a network of 23 local authorities that met together with academics to share knowledge, understanding and experiences as part of the then government's agenda of modernisation and continuous improvement.</p> <p>The program was based on social interactions through which participants from the councils shared experiences, built tacit knowledge and made new contacts.</p>	<p>There was evidence that participants engaged in social interactions through which they shared experiences and built tacit knowledge. The respondents viewed the sharing of experiences as an important gain from workshops and it also encouraged them to engage in new ways of thinking about information. Making new contacts was a significant gain from the workshops.</p> <p>Numbers of respondents reported that comparisons across local councils were an important gain from the network. This was in addition to combining knowledge within each council.</p> <p>Participants internalised learning through processes such as debriefing, discussing, raising items in meetings and putting people in touch with each other, which were found to be more valuable than just circulating reports.</p>	<p>The research identified several channels of learning that start with the individual, but then move beyond to address aspects of inter-organisational learning and knowledge transfer.</p> <p>Converting explicit knowledge from one source to explicit knowledge within a receiving organisation through the reconfiguring of existing knowledge is an important mechanism.</p> <p>Simply engaging in social interaction and the sharing of experiences is not sufficient. Such experiences have to be subjected to challenge, reflection and comparison if the lessons arising from those experiences are to be made explicit in the receiving organisation.</p>

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Independent evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge, UK by the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff University</p> <p>Local Government Association (2014)</p>	<p>Local government officers and councillors, supported by an LGA peer challenge manager, voluntarily spend their time as peers at a council with which they have no direct association. They contribute to improvement and learning in the visited council by facilitating interviews and discussion while onsite; sharing knowledge and experience; demonstrating examples of best practice from their own experience; and challenging inappropriate processes and behaviours.</p> <p>The peer team delivers a feedback presentation and comments on the draft feedback developed by the challenge team.</p>	<p>By March 2014, councils had contributed more than 2,500 days of senior councillor and officer time to challenge teams, equivalent to millions of pounds worth of consultancy.</p> <p>Respondents were pleased with the way the program is tailored to each council's needs and agreed that it was important to get the scope and timing right and to ensure ownership across the council.</p> <p>Feedback and reports were seen as offering challenging, constructive and honest insight; had been widely communicated within the organisation; and more than three-quarters said their council had developed an action plan in response to the report. The program had a positive impact on their capacity to take responsibility for their own improvement; had contributed to an increase in the self-confidence of the council, and enhanced their engagement with regional and national initiatives.</p> <p>The program encouraged councils to agree on clear priorities and integrate strategic management with resource planning.</p>	<p>The program is achieving its aim of being a process delivered by the sector on behalf of the sector which supports councils to take responsibility for own improvement.</p> <p>The five key impacts are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater self-awareness, based on an independent check of performance • improved external reputation, including the council's role in the region • behaviour change, including improvement in working relationships between councillors and senior officers • organisational change, including priority setting, councillor development and partnership working • new ways of thinking about familiar problems and new approaches to tackling them. <p>It is difficult to establish a direct causal link between the impacts of the program and better outcomes for service users and citizens.</p>

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Rural Excellence Mentoring Scheme, UK Improvement and Development Agency</p> <p>Atterton et al (2009)</p>	<p>Teams of staff from 13 rural councils recognised for leading practices were paired with other councils to mentor and exchange ideas on rural development.</p> <p>Activities included events, visits to share best practice between councils, bilateral discussions and workshops.</p>	<p>Knowledge transfer and mutual learning occurred in a majority (11 of the 13) of participating councils.</p> <p>The process was especially beneficial because it prompted staff to reassess the nature of the problems they were encountering.</p> <p>Some teams set up events involving participants from the mentored authority's partner organisations, and one-to-one interactions.</p>	<p>Mentoring is a worthwhile mechanism for knowledge transfer and mutual learning in rural local authorities.</p> <p>The effects of mentoring are only likely to become apparent in the medium to long term since they focus on changing processes, mind sets and ways of working. This has implications for measuring outcomes.</p>

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Comparative Performance Assessment, Tilburg University, Netherlands</p> <p>Van den Dool, van Hulst and Schaap (2010)</p>	<p>The procedure that was developed incorporated three basic steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-evaluation by the municipality, in which it writes a report on its own functioning • an additional, independent investigation in which researchers write a report on each of the seven participating municipalities on the basis of interviews, document reviews and a community survey • formation of a series of 'visiting committees' which were made up of members of other municipalities as well as academics. <p>The use of a comparative approach, based on a partly-shared environments and similar characteristics, was not intended as a means to rank the municipalities on a scale.</p>	<p>For the right balance of self-evaluation and external evaluation, it was an advantage that there was no higher authority involved. The suspicion that the visiting committee had a political agenda for amalgamation quickly abated.</p> <p>Visiting committees were designed to include a mix of skills. Each site visit included a number of internal and external meetings and culminated in the formulation of conclusions and recommendations. The committee aimed to facilitate organisational learning, and the reports mostly focused on asking questions about dominant assumptions.</p> <p>Self-assessment cost the municipalities more time and effort than they had anticipated.</p> <p>Discussions among committee members and researchers led to a set of general research questions for judging governance capacity which in principle were applicable to all local governments.</p>	<p>Thorough and systematic comparisons can lead to a greater awareness of other ways of working.</p> <p>A key benefit of the approach is the ability it affords participants to question dominant assumptions, leading to organisational learning.</p> <p>Where willingness to participate in such a scheme is not shared by enough of the key members of a council, it is unlikely that the results of comparative assessments will be accepted in that council.</p>

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Trans-national municipal partnerships</p> <p>Van Ewijk (2011)</p>	<p>Evaluation of partnerships that had developed over more than a decade between Dutch municipalities and counterparts in Turkey and Morocco.</p> <p>With a focus on citizenship and integration, these initiatives were designed to support co-development and the enhanced involvement of migrants in their destination countries.</p>	<p>Benefits from participating in the partnerships included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practical improvements to management systems, co-operation on key projects and sharing of information • enabling staff to put their own challenges into perspective when exposed to a different working environment • learning to handle diversity, through recognition and appreciation of difference. <p>Despite inequalities in financial resources, most respondents felt that there was an open exchange of knowledge, especially among peers working in similar positions.</p>	<p>The two main building blocks to learning are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the existence of sufficient professional similarities between partners to establish a basis of genuine dialogue and trust • the existence of sufficient differences between partners to have something to share.

Program Name and Researchers	Learning Tools and Methods	Findings	Implications
<p>Benchmarking and leadership development – Dublin to Chicago</p> <p>Eitel (2012)</p>	<p>An international leadership development program developed in Ireland led to a total of 59 participants travelling to the United States on ‘benchmarking and leadership’ visits.</p> <p>The program was designed to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benchmarking of local officials • panels by local government administrators • discussions with the public • attendance at social functions with local guests • presentations by faculty from the participating universities • team project briefings • - mobile workshop of urban neighbourhoods. 	<p>The most lasting beneficial leadership component of the international study trip was shadowing elected and appointed public officials, and as a result, benchmarking their functional areas. This was found to be a learning tool that enabled participants to witness how various policies and practices were handled in a similar yet distinct political environment.</p> <p>Participants rated the usefulness of the international study on leadership development as high (3.875 out of 4), and 66% considered the level of usefulness to be ‘very useful’ or ‘of great benefit’.</p> <p>When asked how their leadership skills improved as a result of the visit, responses included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘I am more confident with policy and decision-making’ • ‘Increased my confidence to make some changes at high levels’ • ‘Prompted me to look for solutions from a more global perspective’. 	<p>Recommendations for similar programs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust the design and delivery of sessions to focus on a facilitating and co-learning style. • Plan for frequent interactive sessions with participants. • Make use of adult learning methods. • Arrange for several sessions for faculty and participants to share joint findings. • Use highly experienced practitioners in similar fields as speakers and panellists. • Consider benchmark visits of two days and mix organisations on day two. • Exchange personal background data in advance between participants and those officials shadowed. • Focus on options for participants to use the new information once they are back at home.

Appendix B. Case study as a research strategy

B.1. Understanding Case Studies

A case study is a research strategy (Yin 1981, p. 58) that enables ‘detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships’ (Dooley 2002, p. 335). The social science literature is drawn upon to highlight key features of this research strategy.

B.1.1. Purpose

According to Dooley (2002), the purpose of most case study research is ‘to answer the why and how questions’. Case studies focus on relationships and social processes in a natural setting to discover interconnections and interrelationships, and how the various parts are linked. Rather than focusing on outcomes and end-products, therefore, they provide the opportunity to explain why certain outcomes might occur (Hall 2004, pp. 81-3; Walter 2006).

B.1.2. Features

The case study is the preferred approach in examining contemporary events when the relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated (as would be the case in an experiment). Its unique strength lies in its ‘ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations – beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study’ (Yin 2003, p. 8). Drawing on the literature (Yin 2003; Hall 2004, pp. 81-3; Walter 2006; Eisenhardt 1989; Crasnow 2011), the key features of case studies are summarised next.

As a research strategy, the case study is a form of empirical inquiry that investigates a **contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context**. It focuses on just one or a few instances of the phenomenon that is being researched and allows for an in-depth study. The researcher has little or no control over the occurrence of the events studied.

Case studies are especially useful when the **boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident** and when researchers want to learn more about the contextual conditions that are especially relevant to the phenomenon under study.

Case studies provide **evidence for causal relations**, and they provide **evidence for use**, that is, clues about the limits of inferences from generalisations. As noted by Crasnow (2011, p. 47), case study research ‘develops attention to and respect for specific circumstances and thus an awareness of relevant differences (the extent to which a general theory may not pertain) as well as relevant similarities (the extent to which it does).’

Case studies draw on a **range of methods of data collection**, including direct observation, interviews, archival records, documentary analysis and questionnaires. The evidence may be qualitative and/or quantitative.

In summary, case study inquiry, according to Yin (2003, pp. 13-14):

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

B.1.3. The role of theory

Decisions need to be made as to whether and how to use theory to help complete the essential methodological steps, including developing the research questions or defining the relevant data to be collected (Yin 2012, p. 9). A case study can attempt to build on or test perspectives that are already present in the literature – ‘a case study that starts with some theoretical propositions or theory will be easier to

implement that one having no propositions' (Yin 2012, p. 9). The desired theory need not be considered with the formality of 'grand theory' in social science, but should provide a blueprint for the study, for example by developing a hypothetical story about how and why acts, events and structure occur (Yin 2012, p. 28).

Theory developed from case study research is likely to have important strengths, such as novelty, testability and empirical validity (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 548). Creative insight often arises from the juxtaposition of contradictory or paradoxical evidence. While some researchers and commentators have claimed that case study research is an important part of the theory building process (see e.g. Dooley 2002), others have challenged the assertion that case study research can contribute to the goal of evaluating general theories (Sinkler 2007, p. 1). This is linked to the problem of generalisability, briefly discussed below.

Eisenhardt (1989, p. 536) suggests that theory building research should be begun as close as possible to 'the ideal of no theory under consideration and no hypotheses to test': investigators should formulate a research problem and possibly specify some potentially important variable with reference to available literature, but 'they should avoid thinking about specific relationships between variables and theories as much as possible, especially at the outset of the process'.

One of the strengths of building theory from cases is that the research is likely to generate 'novel theory', which often arises from the juxtaposition of contradictory or paradoxical evidence (Cameron and Quinn, cited in Eisenhardt 1989, p. 546).

B.1.4. Types of case study

Case studies can be used for the **exploratory** phase of an investigation, as a thorough **description** of a phenomenon in its real-life context, or as an attempt to **explain** a phenomenon (Yin 2003, pp. 6-8).

A major problem with exploratory case studies arises when investigators wrongly use the data collected during the exploratory phase as part of the ensuing case study – 'you could then be accused of having conducted a case study in which you found what you were looking for' (Yin 2012, p. 29). Consequently, an exploratory study should be conducted as a separate task.

Descriptive studies are especially useful when covering situations not normally accessible to researchers (revelatory cases); instances of successful ventures (exemplary cases); one-of-a-kind cases (unique cases); extreme conditions (extreme cases); or ordinary conditions (typical cases) (Yin 2012, p. 49). Many case studies have description as their main objective and call for the use of theory to guide the setting of priorities for data collection (Yin 2012, p. 39).

Descriptive studies typically fail to specify at the start the critical ingredients of the phenomenon to be described; data collection can then 'ramble' as a result and the case study may contain undesirable, circular reasoning (Yin 2012).

Explanatory case studies are useful for examining 'how' and 'why' theories, as opposed to 'factor' theories which investigate correlations between independent and dependent variables. The more complex and multivariate the explanatory theory, the better, since 'case study analysis can then take advantage of pattern-matching techniques' (Yin 2012, p. 45). In such studies, the presence of explanatory theories can facilitate theory testing with a rich and extensive data collection effort. An explanatory case study consists of (Yin 1981, p. 61):

- an accurate rendition of the facts of the case
- some consideration of alternative explanations of these facts
- a conclusion based on the single explanation that appears most congruent with the facts.

B.1.5. Disadvantages

Disadvantages of a case study approach include:

- > Negotiating access to case study settings can be difficult.
- > It creates vast amounts of data that can be overwhelming. Because the context is part of the study, there will always be too many variables for the number of observations to be made.
- > It requires high investments of time and energy.
- > The observer effect may operate when those being studied might act differently from normal (Walter 2006; Yin 1981, p. 59).

B.1.6. The problem of generalisability

Although case studies aim to 'illuminate the general by looking at the particular' (Denscombe, cited in Walter 2006, p. 315), the difficulty of generalising from one case to another is a common criticism levelled at case studies as a research strategy. As Sinkler (2007, pp. 1-2; emphasis in original) notes, case studies are an 'indeterminate' research design because they do not provide enough information to weight the relative importance of different causal factors across a large number of cases: 'they do not enable us to assess the relative importance of different casual variables *in general*'.

Case studies are not good tools across a large number of similar empirical units 'precisely because they do not involve comparing large numbers of similar empirical units' (Sinkler 2007, p. 10). Since case studies typically involve looking at one or a small number of cases in detail, but by drawing a conclusion from a few cases, or perhaps just one, they risk being seen as 'bad inductive reasoning. This is the problem of the small *n*' (Crasnow 2011, p. 28).

The crucial task for the researcher is therefore to identify significant features on which comparisons with others in the class can be made, and to show how the case study compares with others in the class in terms of these features (Denscombe, cited in Walter 2006, p. 317). A 'fatal flaw' when doing case studies is to conceive of statistical generalisation as the method of generalising the results of the case study. This is not possible, because the cases are not 'sampling units' (Yin 2003, p. 32).

Instead, the mode of generalisation is 'analytic generalisation', in which a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare empirical results of the case study. If two or more cases are shown to support the same theory, replication may be claimed (Yin 2003, pp. 32-3). Means to accomplish this are discussed in greater detail next.

B.2. Steps in case study research

B.2.1. Defining the question(s)

Determination of the research question or questions is the first step of the research process (Dooley 2002, p. 339). It is probably the most important step to be taken in a research study (Yin 2003, p. 7).

B.2.2. Defining what the case is

The tentative definition of the unit of analysis, and therefore of the case, is related to the way the initial research questions have been defined. If the questions are too vague or too numerous, it may lead to difficulty in favouring one unit of analysis over another. Cases can be individuals, groups, communities, decisions, programs, an implementation process or organisational change (Yin 2003, pp. 22-4). Put differently, a case is generally a 'bounded entity' such as a person, organisation, behavioural condition, event or other social phenomenon, but the boundary between the case and its contextual conditions – both spatial and temporal – may be blurred (Yin 2012, p. 6).

Once the general definition of the case has been established, other clarifications of the unit of analysis become important. If the case is about local services in a specific geographical area, for example, decisions need to be made about those services whose district boundaries do not coincide with the area (Yin 2002, pp. 25-6). Specific time boundaries are needed to define the beginning and end of each case. The previous literature can be a guide for defining the case and unit of analysis (Yin 2002, p. 26).

B.2.3. Selecting cases

A decision needs to be made as to whether the case study will consist of a single or multiple cases. There are also designs in which there are embedded sub-cases within an overall holistic case. This leads to four different case study designs (Yin 2012, p. 8):

Figure 11: Basic types of design for case studies

	Single case study design	Multiple-case study design
Holistic	single unit of analysis in a single case design	single unit of analysis in a multiple-case design
Embedded	multiple units of analysis in a single case design	multiple units of analysis in a multiple-case design

When selecting cases, the concept of a 'population' is crucial, because the population defines the set of entities from which the research sample is to be drawn (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 537).

The most common justification for selecting a particular case, whether it is a single case or one of a number cases, is that it represents a typical instance, and the intention is that the findings would be able to be generalised to the whole class (Walter 2006, p. 316). A common multiple-case design might call for two or more cases that 'deliberately tried to test the conditions under which the same findings might be replicated' (Yin 2012, p. 8; emphasis in original). The comments of these authors suggest that the issues relating to generalisability, discussed earlier, are seldom far from view in the case selection process.

Cases can also be selected for the purposes of 'theory testing' and 'theory building' (discussed earlier). The goal of theoretical sampling is to choose cases which are likely to replicate or extend the emergent theory (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 537). The justification for selecting a specific case is that it contains crucial elements

that are particularly significant, and the assumption is that the researcher should be able to predict certain outcomes if the theory holds (Walter 2006, pp. 316-7).

Criterion-based sampling establishes the criteria, bases or standards necessary for units to be included in the research study (Goetz and LeCompte, cited in Sharp et al. 2012, p. 39).

A case might also be selected for the pragmatic reason that it is convenient, for example because it presents the fewest difficulties in gaining access, the least travel or the least expense (Walter 2006, p. 317). A good case is generally taken from real life and includes a setting, the individuals involved, the events, the problems and the conflicts. Ideally, the cases that are selected should represent good and bad practices, and failures as well as successes (Dooley 2002, p. 337).

B.2.4. *Crafting instruments and protocols*

Good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence, which may include:

- making direct observations in a field setting (focusing on human actions, physical environments or real-world events), taking field notes and creating a narrative
- open-ended conversations with key participants to ascertain how they think about situations or how they 'construct reality'
- analysis of archival records, with recognition of the biases and shortcomings of such data
- documents, such as newspaper articles and reports
- participant observation – where the researcher is identified as such, but also fills a real-life role in the scene being studied
- physical artefacts (Yin 2012, pp. 10-13).

A key issue is recognising the value of triangulating evidence from multiple sources – the aim is to establish converging lines of evidence, which will make the findings as robust as possible (Yin 2012, p. 13).

B.2.5. *Collecting case study evidence*

A feature of research to build theory from case studies is the frequent overlap of data analysis with data collection (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 538). Field notes, which can be described as 'an ongoing stream-of-consciousness commentary about what is happening in the research, involving both observation and analysis', are an important means of accomplishing this overlap (Eisenhardt 1989, pp. 538-9).

It is legitimate to alter and even add data collection methods during a theory-building study because investigators are trying to understand each case individually and in as much depth as is feasible – 'flexibility is controlled opportunism in which researchers take advantage of the uniqueness of a specific case and the emergence of new themes to improve resultant theory' (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 539).

B.2.6. *Analysing evidence*

Principles

In order to ensure that the analysis is of the highest quality, the following principles should be followed:

- The analysis should attend to all the evidence, including the development of rival hypotheses. The analysis should show how it sought as much relevant evidence as was available.
- The analysis should address all major rival interpretations.
- The analysis should address the most significant aspect of the case study, preferably defined at the outset of the case study.
- The researcher should use prior, expert knowledge to demonstrate awareness of current thinking and discourse about the case study topic (Yin 2003, p. 137).

Strategies and techniques

Three general strategies may be used (Yin 2003, pp. 111-5):

- *Relying on theoretical propositions* – a theoretical orientation can guide the case study analysis and helps to focus attention on certain data while providing a standard upon which to ignore other data.
- *Thinking about rival explanations* – positing rival explanations is important and may include considering whether the observation is the result of chance circumstances, investigator bias, an intervention other than the target intervention, a theory different from the original theory or social trend, or not due to a particular force or intervention at all.
- *Developing a descriptive framework for organising the case study* – used when it is difficult to make either of the other approaches work.

Specific analytic techniques are summarised in Table 8.

TABLE 8: Techniques for analysing case study data

Analytic technique	Description
Pattern matching	A pattern-matching logic compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one or with several alternative predictions. If the patterns coincide, the results can help in strengthening the internal validity of the case study.
Explanation building	Mainly relevant to explanatory case studies. The goal is to analyse the case study by building an explanation about the case. To explain a phenomenon is to stipulate a presumed set of causal links about it and in a case study, the eventual explanation is likely to be a result of a series of iterations.
Time-series analysis	This is directly analogous to the time-series analyses conducted in experiments and quasi-experiments. The essential logic is the search for a match between a trend of data points compared to a theoretically significant trend specified before the onset of the investigation, versus some rival trend, also specified early, versus any other trend based on some threat to internal validity.
Logic models	Especially useful in doing case study evaluations, the logic model deliberately stipulates a complex chain of events over time.
Cross-case synthesis	If the case study consists of two or more cases, the synthesis can incorporate techniques such as displaying the data from the individual cases according to some uniform framework.

Source: Yin (2003, pp. 116-37)

Within-case analysis

Within-case analysis typically involves detailed case study write-ups for each site so as to allow the unique patterns of each case to emerge before pushing ahead to generalise patterns across cases (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 540). Structural analysis examines the data to identify patterns inherent in discourse, text, events of other phenomena; reflective analysis involves a decision by the researcher to rely on his or her own intuition and personal judgment to analyse that data, rather than explicit category classification systems (Dooley 2002, p. 343)

Cross-case synthesis

Things to avoid in the search for cross-case patterns include:

- leaping to conclusions based on limited data
- being overly influenced by more elite respondents

- ignoring basic statistical properties
- inadvertently dropping disconfirming evidence (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 540).

‘The key to good cross-case comparison is counteracting these tendencies by looking at the data in many divergent ways’ (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 540). Tactics include:

- Select categories or dimensions and look for within-group similarities coupled with intergroup differences – these dimensions can be suggested by the research problem or by existing literature.
- Select pairs of cases and list the similarities and differences between each pair. This forces researchers to look for the subtle similarities and differences between cases.
- Divide the data by data source; for example, one researcher might comb observational data, while another reviews the interviews. When a pattern from one data source is corroborated by the evidence from another, the finding is stronger and better grounded. When the evidence is conflicting, the researcher can sometimes reconcile the evidence through deeper probing of the meaning of the differences.

Shaping hypotheses or building explanations

In exploratory studies, tentative themes, concepts and relationships among variables begin to emerge. The next step in this iterative process is ‘to compare systematically the emergent frame with the evidence from each case in order to assess how well or poorly it fits with case data’ (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 541). This can be described as a ‘hypothesis-generating process’ (Glaser and Strauss, cited in Yin 2003, p. 120).

The ‘sharpening of constructs’ method is described in the box below.

Box 20: Sharpening of constructs method

Sharpening of constructs

This is a two-part process which involves refining the definition of the construct and building evidence which measures the construct in each case.

This occurs through constant comparison between data and constructs so that accumulating evidence from diverse sources converges on a single, well-defined construct.

The researcher is attempting to establish construct validity, but in theory-building research, the definition and measurement emerge from the analysis process itself rather than being specified *a priori*.

Source: Eisenhardt (1989, pp. 542)

It is important to verify that the emergent relationship between the constructs fits with the evidence in each case. The underlying logic is replication, namely the ‘logic of treating a series of cases as a series of experiments with each case serving to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis’ (Yin, cited in Eisenhardt 1989, p. 542). The qualitative data are particularly useful for understanding why (or why not) emergent relationships hold.

In explanatory case studies, it is important to engage in ‘explanation building’ (see Table 1). Although mostly conducted in narrative form, the better case studies are those in which the explanations have reflected some theoretically significant propositions (Yin 2003, p. 120). The iterative process could be as follows (Yin 2003, pp. 121-2):

- Make an initial theoretical statement or an initial proposition about policy or social behaviour.
- Compare the findings of an initial case against the statement or proposition.
- Revise the statement or proposition.
- Compare other details of the case against the revision.
- Compare the revision to the facts of a second, third or more cases.
- Repeat this process as many times as needed.

It is important to entertain other plausible or rival explanations with the objective of showing ‘how these explanations cannot be built, given the actual set of case study events’ (Yin 2003, p. 122).

Comparing with extant literature

The emerging concepts, theory or hypotheses need to be compared with those evident in the current available literature. This involves asking what the similarities and contradictions are, and putting forward suggested reasons for this (Eisenhardt 1989, p 544).

B.2.7. Reporting

According to Yin (2003), issues to consider in respect of reporting include:

- There is value in initiating the drafting of the report before data collection and analysis have been completed.
- Choices need to be made regarding the anonymity of the case – that of the entire case and of individual persons within a case or cases. The most desirable option is to disclose the identities of both the case and the individuals.
- The draft report should be reviewed not just by peers but also by participants and informants.

In order to avoid a case study report being a lengthy narrative that follows a predictable structure and is hard to write and hard to read, it should be built on a clear conceptual framework (Yin 1981, p. 64). One means to achieve this may be to replace the narrative with a series of answers to a set of open-ended questions (Yin 1981, p. 64).

Characteristics of high quality case studies put forward by a recognised expert in the field, Robert K Yin, are summarised in Table 9.

TABLE 9: Characteristics of exemplary case studies

Characteristic	Discussion
Significance	The case or cases are unusual and of general public interest. The underlying issues are of national importance, either in theoretical terms or in policy or practical terms.
Completeness	The boundaries of the case, that is the distinction between the phenomenon being studied and its context, are given explicit attention. The researcher expended exhaustive effort in collecting the relevant evidence. The study should not end only because resources were exhausted or the investigator ran out of time.
Consider alternative perspectives	Seek those alternatives that most seriously challenge the design of the case study, such as alternative cultural views, different theories, and variations among the people or decision-makers who are part of the case study.
Display sufficient evidence	Judiciously and effectively present the most relevant evidence, so that a reader can reach an independent judgment regarding the merits of the analysis.
Engaging	The report should be engaging and one that constantly entices the reader to continue reading.

Source: Yin (2003, pp. 161-5)

Appendix C. Interview guide for council staff

1. Understanding the preference to learn from other councils

The following questions focus on your general views on inter-organisational or peer-to-peer learning in local government:

- Do you believe that people working in local government have an interest in learning from other councils?
- What in your opinion motivates an interest in inter-organisational or peer-to-peer learning in Australian local government?
- What in your opinion are the benefits of learning from other councils?
- What in your opinion facilitates the spread of information and ideas between councils?
- What in your opinion hinders the spread of information and ideas between councils?
- What are the policy, organisational and/or service changes that you believe result when councils learn from each other?

2. Examining mechanisms of inter-organisational learning

- Please describe the situations, events or encounters in which you believe learning occurs. These situations, events or encounters could include:
 - through informal social interaction with workers from other councils
 - sharing experiences amongst councils in a formal program activity
 - listening to a presentation from someone from another council
 - the experiences of other councils being presented as good examples to follow in formal educational or professional development activities.
- In your opinion, is the situation, event or encounter that leads to learning generally built into the design of a program or does it tend to be an unintentional outcome of participating in events where staff from various councils interact?

3. Exploring a particular situation

If possible, can we focus on a particular situation, event or encounter where you believe learning has occurred.

- Please describe the situation, event or encounter.
- What led to believe that learning was occurring in this situation, event or encounter?
- What was the subject matter or content of the shared ideas or information, for example:
 - obtaining information/advice/inspiration for specific issue(s) affecting communities (if so, which issue or issues);
 - obtaining information/advice/inspiration for organisational issues (if so, which issues?);
 - obtaining information/advice/inspiration focusing on the participants as a local government practitioners (if so, which aspects?)
- What facilitated learning in this situation?
- What were the barriers to learning in this situation?
- What did you do with the learning?

4. In your opinion, are personnel able to learn from other councils through:

- **benchmarking processes** (comparison of one organisation, or the function, processes, and results of that organisation, with another; commonly used to identify, study, and imitate best practices or to compare an organisation with its peers or the leading agencies in its field);
- **mentoring processes** (transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support that entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience [the mentor] and a person who is perceived to have less [the protégé]);

If so, please describe.

5. Longer term benefits of learning

- How do you seek to spread the learning you have gained within your council?
- In your opinion, what encourages you or your colleagues to share ideas or information within your council?
- In your opinion, what hinders you or colleagues from sharing ideas or information within your council?
- In your opinion, has the learning gained and shared amongst councils led to changes in the local government sector? If so, please describe. For example: changes to councils' routines, systems or rules; debate and changes at the level of policy; research and evaluation; development of networks.

6. Recommendations for capacity building

Based on your experiences, do you have other recommendations for capacity- building programs to promote peer-to-peer or inter-organisational learning in local government in Australia?

7. Other

Is there anything else you would like to add that you believe may benefit the study?

Appendix D. Interview guide for program participants

Learning within the context of the program in which you participated

We have included the LGMA Management Challenge in the study because it is a team-based, task-oriented program that also makes use of methods designed to promote comparison between the experiences of a number of councils.

- Did you learn anything about practice and/or policy in other councils while you were participating in the program?
- Please describe the situation, event or encounter in which learning occurred for you.
- What was the subject matter or content of the idea of information?
- What facilitated your learning in this situation?
- What were the barriers to learning in this situation?
- Have you done something with the ideas or information within your council?
 - If yes, what facilitated this process or these processes for you?
 - If yes, what were the barriers of this process or these processes for you?
- Can you make connections between the learning you derived from other councils through participation in the program and learning you may have derived from other councils through other means – for example through benchmarking, mentoring and/or participation in other programs and events? If so, please describe.

General views on councils learning from other councils

The following questions focus on your general views on inter-organisational learning in local government:

- Do you believe that people working in local government have an interest in learning from other councils?
- What in your opinion motivates an interest in inter-organisational or peer-to-peer learning between local governments in Australia?
- What in your opinion are the benefits of learning from other councils?
- What in your opinion facilitates the spread of information and ideas between councils?
- What in your opinion hinders the spread of information and ideas between councils?
- What are the policy, organisational and/or service changes that you believe result when councils learn from each other?
- How could the design of team-based, task-oriented programs be improved to support inter-organisational learning in Australian local government?
- Based on your experiences, do you have any recommendations for capacity- building programs to promote peer-to-peer or inter-organisational learning in local government in Australia?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you believe may benefit the study?



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