

Harnessing innovation, fostering collaboration: the Young Emergency Planners Workshop

A report by the Australian Emergency Management Institute

We [emergency management leaders] can't, as a group, sit around the table and come up with new thinking and get better at what we do, without really considering who's coming up behind us. What should be the future of this space? It needs some significantly different thinking into the future.

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Introduction

As emergency planners face a future where the frequency and severity of disasters, both natural and human-caused, continues to increase, the need for innovative and flexible solutions becomes more prevalent. This requires increased creativity and collaboration across the sector, with a greater working knowledge of emergency management counterparts in different jurisdictions, particularly their capabilities, perspectives and resources. Similarly, developing and maintaining networks across agencies and jurisdictions is the key to maintaining and enhancing the capability to respond to disasters now and in the future. To help mitigate some of these challenges, Emergency Management Australia (EMA) developed and hosted the Young Emergency Planners Workshop as a way to harness innovation and foster crucial networks among the future leaders of the emergency management sector.

The workshop brought together 25 emergency planners, aged 35 and under, with a minimum of three years experience in emergency management, from across all levels of government and the not-for-profit and private sectors. The main aims of the workshop were to:

- achieve innovation in crisis and emergency planning
- provide a professional development opportunity to explore cross-sectoral planning issues and challenges
- facilitate networking opportunities
- establish a self-initiated mentoring arrangement between young planners and experienced emergency management personnel
- provide the basis for a post-workshop paper discussing innovation in emergency and disaster management.

Format

Held in Canberra in July 2015, the workshop combined scene-setting presentations with group discussions and exercises. These formats were designed to broaden participant knowledge and encourage them to think creatively in identifying and addressing challenges faced by the emergency management sector. The varied presentations included environmental challenges, innovative ways to build community resilience, and decision-making in a crisis. These presentations exposed young planners to initiatives and decisions being made at higher levels within the emergency management sector.

The workshop included a scenario-based desktop exercise that allowed participants to consider flexible and innovative solutions to a real-life situation. Facilitated by a representative from Emergency Management Victoria, the exercise threw additional challenges at group members mid-way through their discussion. This was meant to resemble the real-world experiences of emergency planners who need to respond quickly and effectively under pressure.

Throughout the two days, participants also engaged in discussion exercises where they were encouraged to consider significant challenges facing the sector, develop innovative solutions for how these challenges could be addressed, and consider practical implementations. Participants worked in four groups (guided by experienced emergency management personnel) to develop solutions and prepare a presentation for the end of the workshop. The group facilitators are also available as ongoing mentors to participants.

Observations

Tangible vs intangible outcomes: discussion groups

One of the workshop's main objectives was for participants to apply their shared experiences and think creatively in small groups to devise innovative solutions to common problems facing emergency management planners. This was facilitated through the discussion groups.

The diversity of backgrounds and experiences among the young planners widened the group conversations, broadening the knowledge of participants and exposing

them to new ideas and initiatives. This was beneficial not only in providing a professional development opportunity for participants, but also in building an appreciation of the challenges associated with high-level collaboration and innovation.

As a result the final presentations showcased the tangible solutions that had been devised and reflected the intensive working and decision-making processes that the groups undertook. This provided valuable experience in strategic collaboration and fostering innovation.

One participant commented, 'It was really interesting to hear the different ideas raised by participants during the discussion groups. Even though agencies largely agreed on current and inevitable challenges facing the sector, the workshop really highlighted the difficulty with trying to agree on solutions across parties. This reinforces the importance of forums such as this to bring planners together to collectively and creatively tackle these issues.'

Additional feedback indicated that the ability to broaden the working knowledge of emergency management issues and gain exposure to ideas and initiatives occurring in other jurisdictions was one of the most valuable aspects of the workshop.

'It was fantastic to gain an understanding of other people's issues in the emergency management space, including everyone's past experience,' commented one participant.

'I feel the value is more than what the objectives sought—meaningful dialogue, robust discussion, education, realisation of cross-sector issues. A really thought-provoking workshop!' said another.

Horizon scanning: the scenario-based exercise

The scenario-based exercise gave participants the opportunity to practise their decision-making in the context of a real-life disaster. In working through the exercise, participants reflected on Iain Mackenzie's earlier presentation on horizon scanning. 'That's where you will rightfully be questioned,' he told participants, speaking about royal commissions and the need for forward thinking in disaster management. 'The community has an expectation that we are prepared to handle anything, and they've got a right to think that,' he added.

Participants were encouraged to keep this in mind as they worked through the exercise, looking forward to anticipate potential risks, as well as thinking reflectively in order to justify their decisions. This particular exercise facilitated detailed operational discussions about the various challenges associated with responding to a specific natural disaster. This allowed participants to build their working knowledge of the different approaches and priorities across the variety of agencies and jurisdictions represented.

'[It] really opened my eyes to collaboration processes on large scale issues,' commented one participant. Another reflected, '[It was] very beneficial for us to meet and to discuss ideas with others across the spectrum of emergency management.'

Building connections

Both the discussion and scenario-based exercises provided the foundations of a professional network to aid young planners in their careers. Iain Mackenzie reflected on the importance of the workshop in achieving this aim.

'It's great to see and talk to a group where I don't recognise anyone,' he commented. 'We are talking to the next generation of people who, in 15 years or less, will be at the pinnacle, will be sitting on that chief officer's strategic group and making decisions.'

In order to further enhance these professional networks, each participant was given the contact details of their group facilitator, all of whom are experienced emergency management planners. Kate Fitzgerald, Director of the Planning and Engagement section within EMA's Crisis Coordination Branch and workshop facilitator said, 'These networks give participants an ongoing source of support and professional development as their careers unfold. Not enough value can be placed on the benefit of forging strong connections and working relationships across the sector.'

Conclusion

The Young Emergency Planners Workshop aimed to harness innovation and foster networks among future leaders of the emergency management sector. Overall, participant feedback was positive and indicated that the aims were met. The new ideas and experiences presented, combined with the opportunity to build new networks in the sector, were noted as being the most valuable aspects of the workshop.

For the workshop facilitators, some of the observed benefits extended beyond the direct aims of the workshop. The broader understanding participants gained of how their colleagues in other areas operate, their insights into innovative work currently being undertaken, as well as their first-hand experience in driving innovation and collaboration across agencies and jurisdictions, were regarded as being as valuable as the stated aims of the workshop.

EMA looks forward to seeing how this network of young planners develops as a group, and how they apply the learnings of the workshop in their respective organisations.