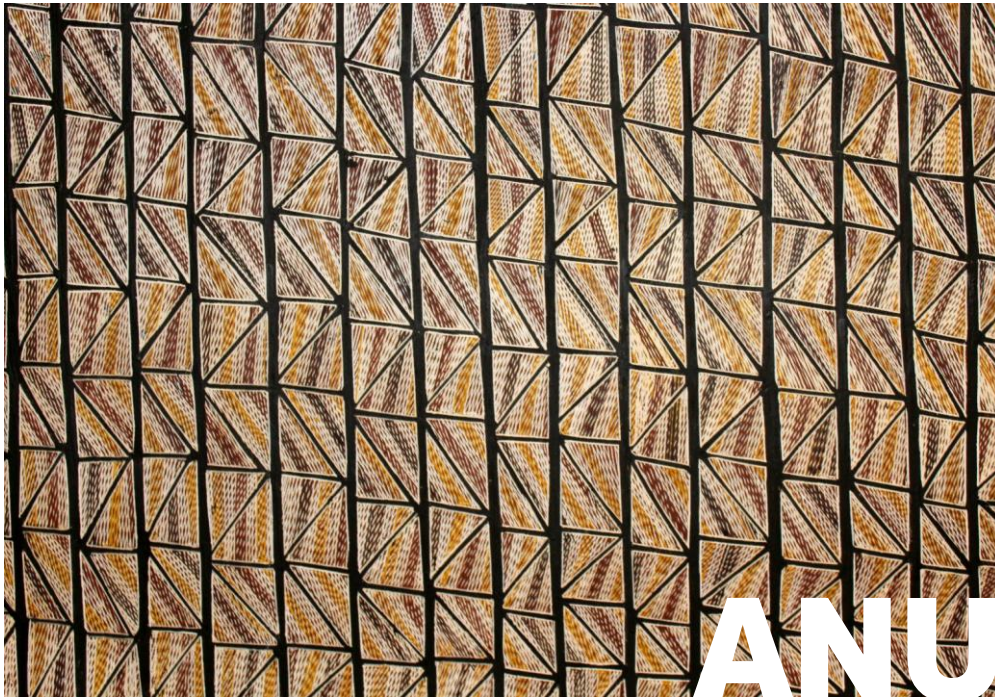




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THE 'ELDER' ORGANISATIONS: RESILIENT  
ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE AS AN INDIGENOUS  
CAPABILITY FOR RENEWAL AND LONGEVITY

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# The ‘Elder’ organisations: Resilient adaptive governance as an Indigenous capability for renewal and longevity

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## Abstract

To be completed

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## Acronyms

ACA Act	<i>Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976 (Cth)</i>
ACNC	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission
AGM	Annual General Meetings
AICD	Australian Institute of Company Directors
ANU	Australian National University
ASIC	Australian Securities & Investments Commission
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CATSI Act	<i>Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (Cth)</i>
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects (scheme) (Cth)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
FPIC	free, prior informed consent
ICG Project	Indigenous Community Governance Project
ICN	Indigenous corporation number
IGA	Indigenous Governance Awards
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MWG	Muntjiltjarra Warrgumu Group
NGO	non-government organisation
NNI	Native Nations Institute
NSW	New South Wales
ORIC	Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations
PBC	Prescribed Bodies Corporate
RNTBC	registered native title body corporate
SDG	Self-Determination and Governance (Framework)
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threat
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNPFII	United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

## Foreword

In late 2020, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) commenced an exciting partnership with several First Nation partners, in a two-year applied research project – *The Indigenous Governance of Development: Self-Determination and Success Project* (IGD Project) – to explore the ways First Nations in Australia are strengthening and exercising their collective self-governance so they are in the driver's seat for their development agenda.

The first year in 2021 was an extremely productive one for the Project. A high-calibre multi-disciplinary research team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers was assembled, and the Project established a foundation of partnerships with First Nations and their representative organisations. Our research teams are working alongside local communities, native title holders, leaders and their representative organisations. With the ongoing pandemic conditions, we have been sensitive to the major COVID-19 pandemic stresses that continue to be faced by our First Nation partners. That has led to many conversations and collaborative innovations in how we do our research work together; we may be becoming adept at zoom yarns, but are also meeting locally 'on country' when we can, to share experiences and insights.

At a time of great uncertainty and policy change in the national political environment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups face major challenges in rebuilding their own governance in practically effective, culturally strong ways. This Discussion Paper is part of an IGD Project series, which presents evidence and analyses from the IGD Project's collaborative case studies. Our aim is to make this research count for First Nations, their leaders and community organisations across Australia, so they can use it for their own local purposes. The important matters raised in the papers also have direct relevance for industry and governments, who need to rebuild their own internal capacity and policy frameworks to better support Indigenous self-determined efforts to govern development.

This series of IGD Project Discussion Papers is a taste of the remarkable home-based solutions First Nations and their organisations are designing for their collective self-governance and futures. The papers capture a rich sample of changes, resilience and resurgence, describing examples where Indigenous practices of self-determined governance are being strengthened, and where development *with culture and identity* is a priority. We understand that the challenge on the road ahead is not merely to take control and put self-determination into practice, but to govern well and fairly on behalf of all the members of a First Nation. That way, chosen development has a better chance of delivering sustained outcomes.

We would like to thank the AIGI Board and staff, the CAEPR project team and staff, and the participating Indigenous nations and organisations who are working in partnership with us to carry out this applied research project. We believe our collective efforts will make a difference in informing constructive First Nations solutions for self-determined governance of development in Australia, and contribute to the formulation of more enabling government policy and industry engagement.



Professor Valerie Cooms  
Director  
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research



Valerie Price-Beck  
Chair, Board  
Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

## Contents

Series note	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Acronyms	v
Foreword	vi
Introduction	1
Incorporation and governance	3
A conceptual framework for understanding the longevity of Elder organisations	5
Resilient adaptive governance and management: A capability function	8
Organisational life cycle or life course?	9
Indigenous organisations: Life course and tipping points	12
Research methods	14
Incorporation database analysis: National/state and territory	19
The online survey and interviews: Data analysis	26
What works: Organisations' tips and strategies for longevity	40
Synthesised insights from the data and analyses	46
A survival capability: Resilient adaptive governance and management	55
Conclusions and policy implications	56
References	60
Appendix A Survey Questions	70

## Tables

Table 1	Sample frame of organisations by data source and 'Elder' status	16
Table 2	Legal organisation of IGA Elder organisations	20
Table 3	Description of Elder organisations	21
Table 4	Multiple linear regression coefficients for models predicting the number of years an Indigenous corporation has been registered, with 95% confidence intervals in square brackets	24

## Figures

Figure 1	Governance factors that most supported organisational leadership to adapt and renew next to governance factors that most supported organisational leadership through a crisis (N = 23)	28
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Figure 2	Combined data comparing Indigenous cultural factors that most supported organisational leadership during an opportunity, and in a time of crisis	31
Figure 3	Biggest problems that leadership experienced steering the organisation during an opportunity, compared with in a time of crisis	34
Figure 4	Actions organisational leadership took to resolve barriers during an opportunity, compared with in a time of crisis	38

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## Introduction

Incorporated Indigenous organisations in Australia operate in a complex intercultural environment. They face competing expectations from their Indigenous members, the public and private sectors, and the market economy, at the same time as dealing with frequent changes in government policy and funding frameworks. Over the last decade, organisations have also experienced growing pressure to perform, not only in the context of global crises such as pandemics, floods and bushfires, but also owing to opportunities arising from the land rights successes of their constituents, and the growing recognition that local service delivery is best done ‘for mob, by mob’ (see e.g. Drieberg et al., *in press*; Howard-Wagner, 2021; Memmott et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2022; Sullivan, 1998, 2010; Tsey et al., 2003; Williamson, 2022). The intercultural position of organisations also produces specialised qualities to their governance, management and staffing operations and capabilities. For instance, many demonstrate a sophisticated ability for what Arturo Escobar (2008, p. 268) calls ‘articulatory politics’ where they act as influential advocates within the wider nation state, and their Indigenous board directors and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) operate as ‘boundary riders’ (Nowotny, 2005) to negotiate valued resources, funding, expertise and support from diverse external sources.

The diverse functions of organisations range from the political representation of group rights in land and sea ownership, the provision of essential services, education, employment and training, health and wellbeing, aged-care and youth services, family welfare and child-care, arts and cultural heritage, through to community development, land and environmental management, business enterprise and economic development (see overviews in AIGI, 2014, 2016, 2018; Bauman et al., 2014; Ganter, 2011; Holcombe & Sullivan, 2013; Smith, 2011; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Some hold significant community assets and generate substantial income from enterprises and agreements (ORIC 2017 Top 500). And community-controlled organisations across the same industry sector (such as health, child welfare, law and justice) have joined together at regional levels to form larger-scale alliances, and state and national peak bodies. The result is a vast network of interconnected and influential organisations across the country.

As a consequence, when an Indigenous organisation fails, for whatever reasons, the damaging repercussions are felt far and wide across their local community members, other organisations and entire regions. Equally, when an organisation survives and excels, the flow-on benefits extend well beyond its own boundaries. This paper looks at the Indigenous organisations who have survived the longest – the ‘Elder organisations’ – to identify the positive factors at play in their longevity. Particular attention is paid to the practical ways they have strengthened, adapted and mobilised their own capabilities for governance and administration, at times of tumultuous change.

Our focus is on a subcategory of these incorporated organisations – the ‘Elder’ organisations, meaning they were established some time onwards from 1976 when the first incorporation legislation was passed,<sup>1</sup> up until December 31, 1999, and are still operating in 2022. Our research<sup>2</sup> hypothesises that in volatile intercultural environments, the sheer longevity of ‘Elder’ organisations is significant, suggesting they have accumulated valuable survival expertise, which enables them to weather the storms and periodically renew themselves. It also suggests they may act as welcome points of stability, respected governance, reliable service delivery, trusted information and advocacy for their member communities. We have paid attention to identifying the diverse crises and opportunities that might generate survival tipping points for these well-established organisations. But

<sup>1</sup> The earliest organisations were incorporated under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* (Cth) (ACA Act). The CATSI Act was passed by the Australian Parliament in October 2006. It began on July 1, 2007, replacing the previous legislation.

<sup>2</sup> This research is part of a wider project – *The Indigenous Governance of Development: Self-Determination and Success Project* (IGD) – commenced in 2021 between the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI), in partnership with First Nation partners. The project’s aim has been to explore the ways Indigenous land-owning collectivities (‘nations’) in Australia are strengthening and exercising their self-governance in order to pursue a self-determined development agenda.

specifically, we focused on uncovering the capabilities and solutions they brought to bear on such junctures, in order to remain viable over the longer term.

Interestingly, while much has been written about Indigenous organisations, there seems to be a noticeable gap in the research about this cohort of long-established organisations. Hence one aim is to contribute to that research gap, and build on the small literature base about what works well in Indigenous community-managed organisations (AIGI, 2014, 2016, 2018; Bauman et al., 2015; Finlayson, 2007; Hunt et al., 2008; Kelaher et al., 2014; Moran & Porter, 2014; Moran et al., 2016; Morley, 2015; Sullivan, 2010, 2018; Tsey et al. 2012). In doing so, an intention of this paper is to provide an overdue counter to the entrenched deficit narrative that circulates publicly about Indigenous organisations in Australia. While organisations certainly face many obstacles in their life course and some have failed very publicly, a deficit lens does not help us to understand how many organisations nevertheless have remained viable and effective. One way to do that is to instead consider the particular organisational capabilities that enable sustainable performance over the long haul, and especially during times of major change. Accordingly, in this paper we deliberately adopt a lens of real-world practice that could be called a 'capability-based, problem-solving' frame.

Within this context, our paper considers these questions:

1. How have Elder Indigenous organisations successfully navigated change (whether that be brought on by crises or opportunity) and so continued to operate over the long term, when others haven't?
2. What governance and other capabilities seem to have best supported their longevity?
3. Are different capabilities and strategies mobilised during times of opportunity as opposed to crises?
4. Are there common factors at play which might usefully inform other organisations facing major changes, whether they be long or newly established?

To explore these questions, we benefited from being able to adopt an interdisciplinary research lens, using a mixed-methods set of tools. There are pros and cons to this mixed-method approach which are discussed in Section 7 below. Before proceeding to that, we first present an overview of the general characteristics of incorporated Indigenous organisations in Australia. Then we define our foundational concepts – 'organisation', 'institution', 'governance', 'management', 'life course', 'capability' and 'resilient adaptation'. We then employ these to construct a new conceptual framework by which to better understand the longevity of some Indigenous organisations.

The paper next moves into data presentation and analyses. First, we present a context-setting quantitative analysis using data collated from the main national regulatory body of Indigenous organisations – the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) – which has been cross-referenced with data extracted from the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). That is followed by a quantitative analysis of the responses by Elder organisations to an online survey we administered, where they ranked enabling factors involved in different circumstances of change. The 'thicker' qualitative insights from our Zoom interviews with organisational leaders are integrated into the survey analysis, to highlight the actual practice conditions and experiences on the ground. From these evidentiary analyses, we next identify common themes and learnings about the kinds of capabilities that appear to promote organisational sustainability in times of change. We conclude that Elder Indigenous organisations demonstrate a specialised capability function for resilient adaptive governance and management that significantly contributes to their renewal and longevity. With these matters in mind, in the paper's conclusion we draw out implications and recommendations for government policy and organisational practice.

## Incorporation and governance

Under a policy of self-determination from the 1970s onwards, Australian governments actively encouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and polities to establish legally incorporated organisations, across a wide range of geographies, scales and industry sectors. As a consequence, today there are thousands of such organisations incorporated under a diverse range of legislative and regulatory regimes across Australia. The majority (3355<sup>3</sup> currently registered as at June 2021 (ORIC, 2021, p. 23)) are incorporated under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* (Cth) (CATSI Act),<sup>4</sup> which makes them subject to regulatory administration by the federal government's ORIC. Within this category there are also over 226 (Markham et al., 2020) Registered Native Title Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs) whose incorporation under the CATSI Act is required<sup>5</sup> by the Australian Government, and which are also subject to statutory processes under the *Native Title (Prescribed Bodies Corporate) Regulations 1999* and the *Native Title Amendment Act 1998* (Cth). A smaller unknown number of other organisations have chosen to incorporate under the jurisdiction of their own state and territory legislative regimes, rather than the national legislation.<sup>6</sup> These are not included in the analyses here as it is extremely difficult to extract data owing to the unfortunate lack of Indigenous identifiers in the state and territory databases.

The persistent growth of incorporated organisations in Australia over the last 45 years has been partly the result of government departments actively funding their creation, by making incorporation a requirement for receiving government program funds, holding particular kinds of assets and delivering services.<sup>7</sup> But the growth has equally been the direct product of Indigenous agency and choice, as groups, communities and their leaders have sought greater local control over their affairs by establishing their own organisations. It may also be that the absence of treaties, legislated self-determination and constitutional recognition for Indigenous peoples in Australia has fuelled their interest in incorporation as a pathway to greater autonomy.

There are several consequences of this incorporating zeal. Firstly, for the Australian public, organisations and their leaders are seen as the contemporary face of Indigenous politics and governance. Secondly, for many Indigenous people, organisations have become the indispensable lifeblood of their communities and are often considered to be concrete expressions of collective local identities. Today, such organisations not only act as influential governing formations in their own right, they are intimately locked into a broader landscape of Indigenous networked polities (Smith, 2007), and to government and industry stakeholders (Bourne, 2017; Drieberg et al., *in press*; Howard-Wagner et al., 2022). They have been called the new 'corporate tribes' (Sutton, 1998 and we can validly invoke Charles Perrow's (1991) insight about the growing organisational persona of North American society, to highlight a trajectory for Indigenous Australia as 'a society of organisations' in which organisational governance plays a significant role.

Another consequence of incorporation is that a particular kind of governance work is being undertaken by Indigenous organisations; and it is substantial. The CATSI Act places a wide range of Western corporate

<sup>3</sup> ORIC Yearbook 9 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> The CATSI Act was passed by the Australian Parliament in October 2006. It began on 1 July 2007, replacing the ACA Act.

<sup>5</sup> Once a PBC is entered on the National Native Title Register it becomes a registered native title body corporate (RNTBC). Each is required to incorporate under the CATSI Act if they are determined by the Federal Court to hold native title rights and interests.

<sup>6</sup> There are no publicly accessible, collated government data collated on the number of Indigenous organisations incorporated under state and territory regimes as those databases do not have Indigenous identifiers. The different legislative regimes are the: *Associations Incorporation Act 1991* (ACT); *Associations Incorporation Act 1984* (NSW); *Associations Act 2003* (NT); *Associations Incorporation Act 1981* (Qld); *Associations Incorporation Act 1985* (SA); *Associations Incorporation Act 1964* (TAS); *Associations Incorporation Act 1981* (VIC); *Associations Incorporation Act 1987* (WA).

<sup>7</sup> This was accelerated from July 1, 2014, when all Indigenous organisations receiving government program grants of \$500 000 (excluding GST) or more in any single financial year under the Australian Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy were required to incorporate under the CATSI Act. Indigenous organisations that were already incorporated under the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth) were exempted from this requirement (PMC, 2015).

governance, management, administrative and financial standards and requirements onto organisations. It stipulates, for example, that:

- organisations must adopt ORIC internal governance rules (referred to as 'the Rule Book') that stipulate membership rules and rights, directors and other officers' roles and responsibilities, decision-making and meeting processes, functions, dispute resolution and conflicts of interest procedures, financial accountabilities, complaints processes, and so on – and changes to the Rule Book must be approved by the Registrar
- an organisation's Rule Book (constitution) is an ORIC proforma that sets the minimum standards of governance, and must be approved by the Registrar
- all organisations are categorised by ORIC according to size and income which in turn activates requirements for different kinds of reports to be lodged with the Registrar every year within six months of the end of the financial year, and
- organisations must seek approval from ORIC for any amalgamations.

The CATSI Act provides measures to ensure the majority of directors and members are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And while the Rule Book can take into account Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander customs and traditions, such changes remain subject to the Registrar's approval. The Registrar also has substantial powers under the Act to scrutinise and intervene in the operations of incorporated organisations; including being able to legally place an organisation under 'special administration'. This is when the Registrar appoints an external person or company (a special administrator) to take control and oversee the running of the organisation until such time as it is judged by ORIC fit to recommence its operations. The ORIC website notes that the 'Registrar regularly intervenes to examine the records and documents of the corporation in order to detect and prevent the corporation from breaking the rules of the Act and the rule book of the corporation'.

In other words, the CATSI Act, its related regulations, proforma and rule book are powerful tools for governmental control and intervention in the running of Indigenous organisations. Nevertheless, once established, organisations also become specialised and locally customised around their membership and community needs and values. For example, they develop culturally-centred ways of putting their governing arrangements and organisational vision into practice, and design purposeful mechanisms for allocating roles, responsibilities and resources into work structures that align and respond to local conditions.

The intercultural engagement involved in governing such organisations is substantial, with challenges compounded by particular demographic factors. For instance, the current Indigenous population estimate is 983 000 people in 2022 (Andrews & Markham, 2022). Of that total, one-half of all Indigenous people are adults aged 24 or older years (ABS, 2022). At a general level, this suggests a high representative function is being undertaken, on the basis of there being one incorporated organisation for every approximately 300 Indigenous people aged 25 or older. It also indicates that succession planning is a real and immediate issue, with a large cohort of younger people already questioning the kinds of governance roles they might play in organisations (AIGI, n.d.).

This raises the consequential issue of high workload pressures, which in turn have direct relevance for the adaptive capability of organisations in times of major changes. For example, ORIC regulations allow for a maximum of 12 governing directors on the board of an organisation, with numbers varying in reality. Our data collated from the public ORIC website indicate the mean was 5.4 directors per organisation, with the average director sitting on the boards of 1.2 organisations. Without double counting individuals who hold directorships on multiple boards, this means there are approximately 17 500 Indigenous Board Directors doing the work of governing incorporated organisations. Furthermore, the practical work of governance runs from the board through its executive and senior management levels, whose contribution and workload are not included in this estimate.

The propensity of Indigenous leaders to sit concurrently on the governing boards of several different organisations suggests that the estimate above of the total number of directors nationally might be less. On the other hand, the fact that the same men and women also sit on the governing bodies of a multitude of informal (non-incorporated) community structures such as working groups, committees and reference groups (see Smith, *in press*) equally suggests it may be greater. Furthermore, Indigenous accounts of their own governing experience suggest there is a burden on those who have governance and leadership experience, and so are highly sought after and invited onto multiple boards<sup>8</sup>. It suggests some leaders governing organisations are potentially over committed, have a high workload, and are being spread thinly.

Overall, the picture is one of a high level of governing responsibility being undertaken in organisations by Indigenous men and women across the country; a job made all the more challenging in its daily pressures owing to the intercultural dynamics of the governance environment in which leaders and organisations operate. These dynamics and pressures have implications for organisations during times when unsettling changes occur.

## A conceptual framework for understanding the longevity of Elder organisations

Before presenting the research evidence, we need to explore some of the concepts that are in common use but which can take on culturally-specific meanings and practice. By **'organisation'** we mean a purpose-driven group of people who come together to pursue agreed objectives, goods and services that would otherwise be unattainable as individuals, or that would be attainable but only with significantly reduced efficiency and effectiveness (Cheema, 1997, p. 14; Dawson, 1996). An organisation organises – they create, plan and implement processes, practices and mechanisms for work, people, systems and activities, and arrange them into suitable work routines that can be assigned to individuals to achieve an agreed objective. These arrangements can operate short or long-term, and be informally or formally structured. Our focus is on legally incorporated organisations in Australia that are established with the intention of surviving over the long term and have formally structured governance.

When we use the term **'institution'** it is not to refer to organisations, but rather to the 'rules of the game' – the cognitive, normative and regulative systems of rules, constraints and norms that provide structure, stability and meaning for the people's behaviour (see Cheema 1997, p. 13; Menard & Shirley, 2005; Smith, 2006). Informed by our earlier research on Indigenous community governance (Hunt et al., 2008), we take **'governance'** to mean the evolving ways and means by which a group of people, community or society organise themselves to express their collective will, to manage their own affairs, make decisions and hold their leaders accountable, in order to get the things done that matter to them. This means governance is as much about people, relationships and power, and the way groups make decisions together and take responsibility, as it is about formal structures and corporate technicalities.

**'Organisational governance'** then is the system of structured decision-making authority, direction, control and accountability exercised by particular people to accomplish the overall vision of an organisation. **'Management'** operationalises such systems. In this organisational context, management involves the process of administration, planning, organising and deployment of resources (including human) in line with the organisation's institutions (its policies, plans, rules, systems and guidelines) to achieve its objectives. Over time, the concept has fragmented

<sup>8</sup> Indigenous leader, Marjorie Anderson, summarised this impact when speaking at an Indigenous Leadership Forum in 2006 when she noted that: '... leaders in the Aboriginal community are often burnt out through the pressures of doing all with nothing ... Leaders in the Aboriginal community have to be strong, resilient, moral and highly skilled in both Aboriginal and mainstream politics. ... as you have to get support from both the community and government to get things done.' AIGI Forum, 'Leadership: An Aboriginal perspective', April 7, 2006, Sydney). See also Smith, 2021, 329–334; Williamson, 2021.

into numerous sub-components, such as risk management, conflict management, human resources management, strategic management, financial management and so on.

In our earlier research with Indigenous organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Drieberg et al., *in press*), we extended Sen's (1980, 1992, 1999) concept of 'capability' from its usual focus on the individual, to organisations, in order to explore how they governed the impacts of the pandemic. Below we further extend this approach, suggesting what matters for the stability and long-term viability of organisations, has to do with how they handle opportunities *to be and do*, that arise over the course of their life. In other words, the extent to which they can continue to strengthen, build and effectively mobilise the kinds of capability functions that are valued by them. We propose that governance and management are 'whole-of-organisation' capabilities critical to longevity, and are cultural and context-specific.

Institutions, governance, management and capabilities are not culturally neutral concepts and so reveal underlying systems of values and beliefs about how things should be done. People within an organisational setting can become vested in its survival, for reasons that extend beyond its instrumentality, to include their own values and interests (Scott, 2008, p. 21). They can also become increasingly committed to its purposes, and the organisation can become a part of their own networks. This is particularly so with Indigenous organisations (see below and Drieberg et al., *in press*; Howard-Wagner, 2021; Smith, 2011, pp. 203–234) which are deeply embedded within wider networks. Over time, organisations can be transformed by their own institutional 'worldview' and develop a character and identity – their own internal culture – which is susceptible to being forged and reformed by powerful individuals (Schein, 1992, pp. 212–213; Smith, 2008).

Intersecting processes of continuity and change are an integral part of the workings of all formally structured organisations. A key issue informing this paper is how *desired* patterns of organisational identity and practice persist over time, while others change significantly, and what role capability functions such as governance and management, and the agency of individuals, play in the balancing of such continuities and changes. This becomes especially critical during periods of turbulence, when an organisation's responses (or nonresponses) to economic, political, technological or other shifts can have direct consequences on their continued viability (Baba, 2020).

Organisational crises and opportunities are high-impact situations where the viability of an organisation can be threatened, across all or partial aspects of its operation. So what is it about the 'Elder organisations' that has enabled them to survive the unpredictable dynamics of change, and sustain themselves over decades? In this paper we draw upon and extend the concepts of 'resilience' and 'adaptation', integrating them into a cohesive frame to explore and better understand the long-term viability of the Elder Indigenous organisations. Below we examine some of the relevant components of these two concepts, and make a link between them and 'capability'.

'**Viability**' refers to the quality or ability to live, grow, sustain and develop. A common public impression of Indigenous organisations is that they regularly lose their viability and fall apart, sometimes dramatically so. And yet, the ORIC data show that a large number of Indigenous organisations have managed to remain viable over several decades. Study of the two concepts of resilience and adaptation has been carried out across discrete fields and generated a multitude of definitions, some of which are relevant to the class of problems being addressed. Since the 1960s–70s, both concepts have been examined in the fields of ecology, environmental planning, psychology, business and 'new' public sector management, and currently have a strong presence in applied research about the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and disaster planning (see Bracci & Tallaki, 2021; Edua-Mensah, 2020; Shen et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2004).

Most people have an intuitive understanding of '**resilience**' as the capacity to sustain a shock, recover and continue to function, and generally to cope with change (Walker et al., 2004); what Davoudi (2012, p. 301) aptly called 'Bounce-Back-Ability'. The oft-cited work is that of Holling (1973, p. 17) who described it as 'the persistence

of relationships within a system and ... a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables and parameters, and still persist'. These early approaches emphasised a quality of homeostasis; that is, the ability of a system to withstand external shocks and major change without losing its core character and functions (Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2011).

However, within social science disciplines which focus on interactions between people, institutions and environment, 'resilience' has evolved as a lens for understanding how complex systems self-organise and change over time. Thus Carpenter and Brock (2008) described resilience as a 'broad, multifaceted, and loosely organized cluster of concepts, each one related to some aspect of the interplay of transformation and persistence'. Seen this way, resilience does not necessarily result in a return to pre-existing normality or equilibrium, but rather may lead to transformations by responses to uncertainty, stresses and strains (Carpenter & Brock, 2008; Davoudi, 2012; Berkes & Folke, 1998, p. 12). Capacities for awareness, adaptation, agility and transformability are seen as integral components of resilience (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2011).

We propose that '**adaptation**' is a core component of resilience, and is more than simply the sum of individual capabilities, or the structural parts of an organisation. Rather we take it to refer to the *overall ability* of the organisational system to effectively cope with shocks. There is a well-documented survival need (be it for organisations, governments, businesses, groups or citizens) for adaptation in order to cope with the high-pressure uncertainty and impacts of disasters and crises (Dayton-Johnson, 2004; Kuntz, 2021; Zukowski, 2014). We have previously researched this issue with Indigenous organisations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and suggested that '**adaptive capability**' refers to an organisation's overall systemic and institutional ability to recognise and adjust to potential risk or harm, to take advantage of opportunities, or to effectively cope with change and its consequences. Within Indigenous organisations we concluded that adaptive self-determination positively enabled the valued core identity of the organisation to be maintained not just for its own sake, but as a foundation for directed change (Drieberg et al., *in press*).

We take '**agility**' to be another capability component of resilience. This concept has figured in recent Western approaches to new public management and industry competitiveness, where the ability to speedily evolve and implement new business models and services are seen as a major competitive advantage; especially in the context of staggeringly fast changes in digital technologies. Agility (also described as 'pivoting') has been shown to be a critical organisational capability during the pandemic crisis (Drieberg et al., *in press*; Stephan, 2022). Its common-sense meaning is relevant here: the ability to move quickly and easily; to think and understand quickly, with dexterity and nimbleness. Early research by Luftman et al. (1993) into business agility defined it as 'the ability to change direction on the environment, and respond efficiently and effectively to that change'. Goldman et al. (1995) further noted that agility is required not only to accommodate change, but also uncertainty. According to Christopher (2000) a key characteristic of an agile organisation is flexibility, and Gong and Janssen (2010) emphasised that entails an innovative response to unpredictable changes. The rapid evolution of digital technology means that new modes of communication and work can either enable agility or impede it, depending on an organisation's disposition and ability to act (McGaughey, 1999).

In examining the refinement of the concept of agility over time in different disciplinary fields, Luna et al. (2015, p. 103) synthesised its meaning as,

*...the ability of human societies to sense, adapt and respond rapidly and sustainably to changes in its environment, by means of the coordinated combination of agile and lean capabilities with governance capabilities, in order to deliver value faster, better, and cheaper to their core business.*

A common thread is its reliance on an organisation's '**iterative learning**' wherein 'knowledge sharing has a positive effect on organisational agility, and knowledge sharing and organisational agility have a positive effect on

organisational performance' (Salehzadeh et al., 2017, p. 354; see also different contexts for this in Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Nelson et al., 2007; Tooranloo & Saghafi, 2018; Walker et al., 2006). Agility in organisations rests then on flexibility, context awareness, responsiveness, and sharing of information and knowledge in order to make informed decisions and take timely action (Weerakoon, 2020).

'**Transformability**' has been described as another component of resilience, in the context of social–ecological systems where it is said to refer to the capability of a system to reorganise into a new system when it can no longer cope in its existing form – essentially creating 'untried beginnings from which to evolve a new way'; 'a new stability landscape' (Walker et al., 2004, p. 5). It has been quickly adopted into understandings of 'digital transformation' for industry, business and governments, where the timely take-up of Information and Communication Technologies is said to be critical if they are going to 'reinvent themselves digitally to thrive' (KPMG n.d., 2007)

While Walker et al. (2006) emphasise the outcome of transformation in a social-ecological context is to produce a fundamentally new system, for organisations it may be more nuanced. For instance, transformation may occur partially or incrementally; suddenly or over longer periods of time. As an organisation adapts, it transforms; in minor and major ways. If we refer to the set of shared values, vision, institutions (rules for ways of doing things) and relationships of a particular organisation as its 'identity', then in this paper we take transformability to mean an organisation's directed ability to strategically change its identity at times of crises or opportunities, by creating novel untried beginnings that aim to introduce new stabilities and ensure its ongoing viability.

Clearly, all these capabilities are intimately intertwined, forming an interdependent capability function that we refer to as 'resilient adaptation'.

## Resilient adaptive governance and management: A capability function

Nearly two decades have passed since Dietz et al. (2003) linked the concept of adaptation to governance, and formally coined the term 'adaptive governance', and 15 years since Folke (2007, 2016) described adaptive governance as a strategy for mediating social conflict in the management of complex ecosystems. That concept has slowly been incorporated into diverse disciplinary and business models, into policy and economic frameworks, and proposals for climate change, crisis management and digital transformation (see Chaffin et al., 2014; Djalante, 2012). More recent research further extends the concept to 'complex adaptive governance' as a framework for understanding the intersection of multi-level institutions, organisations, and people in socio-ecological systems and nation-state initiatives (May, 2022).

In this paper, we argue that as capabilities of organisations, resilience and adaptation are mutually imbricated – they are different sides of the same coin, a holistic capability set that cannot easily be separated (except for analytic purposes). '**Resilient adaptation**' is a dynamic interplay and pattern of persistence and transformation, which we couch firmly within a human capabilities framework in organisational settings.<sup>9</sup> We propose that two core areas of organisational performance can enable (or disable) the extent to which resilient adaptation is mobilised; namely, the organisation's governance and management. The capability does not simply reside at the top in governance, but intersects across both governance and management systems. For the purposes of this

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this interplay aligns strongly with the ontological foundations of Indigenous society: 'The paradox (and achievement) of the Dreaming is that it facilitates personal creativity and individual autonomy within an ontological framework that disguises the process of change under a consciousness of permanence and the veneer of conservatism. ... Nevertheless, ... in everyday life there is a fluid 'here and now' quality in which behaviour and events are actively interpreted, negotiated and manipulated...' (Smith, 2002, 15). And where governance agency is characterised: 'Today, [by] powerful Indigenous governing nodes, especially pre-eminent leaders and organisations, [who] form superstructural networks and operate as a particularly powerful discursive field of interpretation and authorisation in intercultural encounters with the state. On occasions, they engineer realignments and interpretations of Indigenous governance that are reproductive of prevailing patterns and practices. At other times, they initiate significant experimentation and innovation in governance arrangements' (Smith, 2011, 348).



research, we define resilient adaptation as the capability function to pursue the aim of an organisational activity in an uncertain and fluctuating environment; to withstand pressures, including unanticipated ones; to recognise and adapt in order to manage setbacks or change; to flexibly shape novel solutions and strategies that are fit for new purposes; and to learn from the experience for next time.

Extending on our earlier research with different organisations during the pandemic (Drieberg et al., *in press*), we hypothesise that organisational governance and management must be capable of working daily in collaboration, from a basis of trust and open communication, in order for this capability to be harnessed to positive effect for the organisation as a whole. We further argue that this capability function is not always named or overtly apparent, but rather is potential and episodic, becoming evident at times of crisis or opportunity, calling for observation and reflection, more rapid experimentation and growth, drawing upon the divergence and convergence of views and strategies, and when new solutions are incrementally embedded as institutions (i.e., translated into policy, rules, systems) (Assche et al., 2022; Seidl, 2007, 2016). Furthermore, it is likely that the more the capability is harnessed and used, the more confident an organisation will become in deploying it in the future. As an aside, we suggest that during a time of major change or crisis, an organisation will focus less on compliance with often highly technical rules or laborious reporting procedures, than on nimbly devising new shortcut rules and applying established procedures in truncated form, to achieve the best possible outcomes in the circumstances.

This framework and hypotheses usefully directs our attention to the practical agentive conditions under which the capability function for '**resilient adaptive governance and management**' is activated. It encompasses an organisations' recognition and assessment of their self-organising abilities during times of uncertainty, crisis, unexpected or directed change. The framework will enable us to unpack the contexts and practical role played by its constituent parts, and in particular the:

1. awareness of and ability to cope
2. flexibility or openness to change while retaining core identity and vision
3. adaptive ability to modify, adjust and rework
4. agility in responding and designing responses
5. learning from previous episodes of resilient adaptation, and harnessing the insights into confident bases for the future.

Next, we consider this capability set within the context of the wider research debates on organisational 'life cycles', and what we prefer to call the 'life course' of a long-established Indigenous organisation.

## Organisational life cycle or life course?

The combination of capabilities needed to govern any organisation well are likely to change over time as it responds to changing priorities, opportunities or crises. Problems addressed at one point in time may re-emerge and have to be reconsidered. Established governance or operational arrangements may need to be fine-tuned or replaced under changed circumstances. New solutions may produce unintended consequences and so have to be readjusted. In other words, what worked well to govern and run an organisation at one point in time may not be fit for purpose down the track.

This is not necessarily a problem. But it can become one if an organisation's governing board, managers and staff do not recognise their operating environment has changed and their way of governing is no longer as effective, or if they have become stuck in a collective 'comfort zone' of 'that's the way we do things', and are unwilling or unable to adapt. For example, governing leaders or managers may hold on to outdated policies and ineffective procedures to protect their fiefdoms, which can be a sure sign that stagnation and inflexibility are taking hold.

Such an organisation could be said to have low resilient adaptive capability. These predispositions are starkly revealed during periods of crises and opportunity.

It may well be that organisations need to mobilise different capability components of resilient adaptation at different times and transitions in their operations – agility may be apt in one context, but incremental transition is more effective in another. This raises the long-debated issue of organisation 'life cycles' and their link to longevity and capability functions (for excellent reviews of the evolving research debate about life cycles see Greiner, 1998; Ford, 2016; Jirásek & Bílek, 2018; Tam & Gray, 2016).

Economist Kenneth Boulding (1950) pioneered the study of organisational life cycles in *A reconstruction of economics* where he used biological metaphors to argue that organisations progress through the common stages of birth, maturation, sometimes renewal, eventual decline and death. The basic argument goes that just as living organisms grow and decline in predictable patterns, so do organisations have predictable patterns and face a unique set of challenges at each stage, which can result in foreseeable internal crises and the in/ability to respond. Each stage is said to encompass transitions and transformation that have different capability requirements. Preparing for and dealing with each new stage and its attendant demands can determine whether an organisation is able to move to the next phase of its development. The conclusion shared by many is that the extent to which an organisation takes a proactive approach to its life-cycle challenges has a significant impact on whether it makes a constructive transition from one stage to the next, and on its success or failure.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, scholars and consultants have proposed many versions of the life-cycle model. The similarity in most is their aim to predict the results of handling critical issues at each life-cycle stage, and so identify the capabilities and other interventions that deliver desired outcomes for transformability. For all the research debate, the differences are slight, emphasising one stage over another as being the most influential for viability, or one set of capabilities as more relevant to effective transitions, or stressing greater impacts from either internal or external factors.

Over time, there has been increasing research sophistication in consideration of the range of variables involved (Lewis & Churchill, 1983) and significant refinement to the overall framework; for example, by introducing insights from personality development theory incorporating cognitive dimensions (Lippitt & Schmidt, 1967); European psychology directing attention to the role of employee wellbeing (Greiner, 1998); behavioural theory and the recognition that organisations do not have to die but can resurrect themselves (Adizes, 1979); and from learning pedagogies, to argue organisations critically need to manage and share knowledge (Phelps et al., 2007). These perspectives have in turn been linked to the 'absorptive capacities' of organisations to take in new information and ideas (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), and a focus on 'tipping points' (Gladwell, 2000) or critical junctures (Vohora et al., 2004) that arise when problems become overwhelming as a consequence of organisational growth or changes in its broader operating environment. More recent research examines the relative merits of collaborative, hierarchical and decentralised structures at different stages (Billinger & Workiewicz, 2019; Kolbjørnsrud, 2018; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Burton et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the common element underlying theories in all their iterations is that an organisation's 'life' parallels that of living organisms.

Stage 1: A Birth event – that signifies the establishment of an organisation and the start of its development. Foundational conditions may set up pathway dependencies for the future.

Stage 2: Growth/Survival – where organisations look to pursue growth, establish their performance and develop capabilities. Here the organisation either grows or fails.

Stage 3: Maturity – where organisations consolidate and are often associated with greater complexity of structure and expansion of functions. The challenges encountered are stagnation, bureaucratisation and failure to innovate.

Stage 4: Renewal – where organisations may experience a revitalisation in their structure of governance and management, which encourages new creativity and flexibility.

Stage 5: Decline – where growth and innovation slow. This stage initiates the death of an organisation. It may be marked by a focus on internal politics and a preoccupation with personal objectives, instead of the objectives of the organisation itself. This slowly destroys the functionality and viability of the entire organisation. But it may also be marked by a 'natural' ending where the organisation has achieved what it set out to.

One of the principal limitations of the life cycle/stages metaphor as applied to organisations is that it suffers from being linear, unidirectional, sequenced and deterministic – implying an inexorable positive progression through stages to a point of 'arrival'; becoming almost a paradigm of structural and economic evolution. Insights from social complexity theory (the study of self-organisation and emergence in material and social systems) have been applied to organisations (Koliba et al., 2022; Nowotny, 2005) to argue that cycles are not linear and progressive, but rather extremely dynamic, emergent and often unstable. Today, the blurring of industry boundaries, diminishing geographical barriers, and pervasive new technologies makes even the distinction among 'stages' less evident. The explosion in use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) over the past two decades is said to be causing organisational cycles that once lasted years or decades to now pass in months, enabling organisations to even leap-frog stages that they would have previously gone through and, in some cases, decline faster.

Research thinking appears to be moving away from the idea of a linear evolutionary sequence of growth stages, to a more multidimensional concept of an organisation's 'life course' (Aldrich, 1999). Under this lens, it is recognised that organisations may evolve independently from the variables of size, structure and income, to follow diverse pathways and assume a variety of configurations. There is also acknowledgement that the same 'crises' or an influential issue can reoccur throughout the life of the organisation, and may be responded to differently each time. In responding to criticisms of the life cycle model, some authors have adopted a perspective based around 'experienced problems'. Survival and growth in dynamic environments brings with it a range of governance and management challenges<sup>10</sup> that can become 'problems' if left unattended, and the sophisticated application of capabilities is required. Accordingly, in this paper we adopt a 'complexity approach' to an organisation's dynamic 'life course', enabling us to focus on the nature of critical junctures or tipping points that occur over an organisation's life course, and how they go about handling such real-world challenges. Within that approach, this paper is informed by examining the following understandings:

- that organisations evolve through their own unique series of stable and unstable states
- at the same time, there are also common problems any organisation may be susceptible to – managerial problems, governance problems, externally imposed problems, naturally occurring problems
- there are tipping points or critical junctures where a problem/issue reaches a threshold level and must be addressed
- that organisations periodically must undergo a transformation (on relevant dimensions) in their design characteristics, to enable them to face new challenges, tasks or opportunities
- the notion of 'recognition of', 'readiness for' and 'openness to' change
- the role played by absorptive capacity and knowledge sharing in outcomes

<sup>10</sup> Common problem areas experienced across diverse types of organisations include: governing, external governing environment, strategic vision setting, planning, formalisation of rules into policies and procedures, decision making, accountability and responsibility, clientele and members, service delivery and market access, communication internal and external, rewards and incentives, knowledge sharing and application, information management, people management, access to funding and resources, financial administration, internal identity and culture, leadership, and fit-for-purpose structure.

- what we call 'organisational plasticity', where there are diverse solutions for the same problems
- the role of influential individuals as agents of both transformation and stagnation, and
- that resilient adaptive capabilities are critical to all the above and can make a significant difference to outcomes.

We have taken the above insights as matters for consideration and testing in our research with the Indigenous organisations who are well-established in their own life courses – the 'Elder' organisations.

## Indigenous organisations: Life course and tipping points

Given the staggering amount written on Indigenous organisations in Australia, there is surprisingly little literature that provides insight into their overall life courses and the related issues involved in their transformability and longevity. There is even less research into which specific capabilities are influential at which times, and what kind of solutions are 'fit-for-purpose' at different points in an organisation's life (the exceptions are Bourne, 2017; Drieberg et al., *in press*). This gap requires deep ethnographic, longitudinal research with organisations.

Our own professional research experience working with Indigenous organisations over many years suggests to us that their life courses are certainly not characterised by neat linear, sequential progressions, but rather are dynamic, involving periods of sometimes tumultuous recycling through establishment and re-establishment, decline and re-emergence, with occasional moments of Zombiehood.<sup>11</sup> It is also clear that many incorporated organisations have gone through long gestation periods leading up to their formal establishment (AIGI, 2014, 2016, 2018), and that their transition from an informal community-based initiative into legal incorporation is a deeply profound transformation in itself. There is virtually no research literature on this gestational, nascent phase of Indigenous organisations. Memmott et al. (2017) provide one of the few examples, in their account of how the Purple House dialysis services were delivered for several years before people decided to incorporate.<sup>12</sup> Another story of deliberate non-incorporation is told by the Muurdi-Paaki Regional Assembly in western New South Wales (NSW)<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, there is very little information about why it is that some groups deliberately choose not to incorporate at all. Though for those that have provided anecdotal insight, such as the Muntjiltjarra Warrgumu Group (MWG), a compelling reason appears to stem from the desire to retain self-determination and collective control: 'We see not being an incorporated body gives us a lot of freedom to work in our own way that suits us and is determined by us' (cited in AIGI & Reconciliation Australia, 2016, p. 83).

The dynamism of Indigenous organisations comes with its own vulnerabilities that can transform into tipping points. Hundreds of government reviews, consultancy and research papers have been written about the challenges and perceived 'failures' of Indigenous organisations. All of these have the potential to generate the critical juncture of a tipping point for an organisation. Several factors have been commonly reported to be at play; some are internal to an organisation, others come from the external environment in which they work. The wider operating environment of Indigenous organisations is uniformly characterised by a debilitating fragmentation of government policy initiatives, and stop-start program funding administered by a multiplicity of siloed departments lacking coordination with each other. Organisations are consequently vulnerable to the unpredictable government changes in policy initiatives, and the high flow of public servants through programs leading in turn to poor departmental 'downward accountability' to communities. This is at the same time as organisations are required to provide substantial 'upwards accountability' to governments via separate program reports required under departmental grants. The combined effect is to undermine the time and energy that organisations have for their

<sup>11</sup> In political economy, a zombie company is an organisation that is barely performing its function, and generating just about enough cash to service its debt, and so unable to continue standing on its own feet without one or several forms of financial support. The organisation can limp along, it can survive and pull through, but urgent attention is needed to avoid the catastrophe of multiple failures.

<sup>12</sup> See also <https://www.purplehouse.org.au/our-story>

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.mpra.com.au/our-history>.

own self-determined agenda-setting, internal review and monitoring (see summaries for particular contexts in Hunt & Bauman, 2022; Smith, *in press*; Howard-Wagner, 2021; Howard-Wagner et al., 2022; Hunt, 2013; Moran & Porter, 2014; Moran et al., 2016; Morley, 2015; Tsey et al., 2012).

Perversely, a related obstacle on the ground comes from the cloning by the Australian nation-state of its own departmental architecture into Indigenous communities and organisational structures – so that the working of local community governance and administration comes to mirror the patchwork of departmental service delivery and program functions, performance indicators, timeframes, funding cycles, and service delivery priorities (Howard-Wagner, 2021; Smith, *in press*).

The internal challenges arising within organisations mirror many of the external conditions mentioned above, with the addition that the intercultural positionality of organisations also draws in cultural and community-based factors. ORIC's most recent research on organisational failure (ORIC, 2010) reports that:

- a clear majority of Indigenous corporations failed (67%) because of poor management or poor corporate governance (Finding 11)
- there are three common symptoms of corporate failure – poor financial accounts, not holding annual general meetings and poor record keeping of members' records – that were prevalent in most cases (between 75% and 81%) (Finding 7)
- problems involving pecuniary interests and conflicts of interest were identified in 50% of Indigenous corporations that failed (Finding 8)
- insolvency was identified in 30% of Indigenous corporations that failed. Most of these corporations were wound up (Finding 9)
- fraud is not associated with public funding in the cases of Indigenous corporate failure (Finding 10)
- over 40% of Indigenous corporations were returned to members' control after external administration – this increased to 70% when liquidation-only cases were excluded (Finding 12), and
- the largest cases of corporate failure involving people's intentions and behaviours, relate to disputes within and between corporations (ORIC, 2010, pp. 5–6).

Other factors exacerbating the vulnerability of community organisations include the well documented historical lack of adequate infrastructure and essential services from Australian governments. The remoteness of many organisations means they lack access to the diversity of human capital that usually underwrites successful socioeconomic development (such as financial management and business skills, financial literacy, ICT management). Many organisations in remote and rural locations are far from markets, have high transportation costs, small populations and low economies of scale, and face routine difficulties in bringing dispersed governing members together for board meetings and community members together for Annual General Meetings (AGMs). This means it can be hard to secure and retain experienced professional staff, leadership and management, making them vulnerable to loss of corporate knowledge, erratic practice, and exploitation by individuals (see e.g., Martin, 2003; Martin & Finlayson, 1996; Moran, 2014; Moran et al., 2016; Smith, 1995).

The list of causal factors that can lead to tipping points cited in the research literature is daunting. And our fieldwork experience indicates that organisations experience many of them simultaneously, compounding the difficulty in finding solutions. However, it must be remembered that many of these obstacles hold true not just for Indigenous organisations, but for other Australian organisations and businesses. Also, some statements are only partial explanations, some are more important than others, and some are beyond the direct control of the organisations themselves. Taken together, they simply emphasise there are numerous factors that have the potential to

undermine the governance and management viability of organisations. In this volatile environment, it is all the more extraordinary that some organisations have not only survived over long periods of time, but have prospered.

Interestingly, the same dynamic environment has also been identified as a source of strength and agency within organisations (see AIGI, 2014, 2016, 2018; Dodson & Smith, 2003; Finlayson, 2007; Holcombe & Sullivan, 2013; Martin & Finlayson, 1996). Yet there is far less information available about this than there is focus on the deficit challenges. Leah Armstrong, an experienced Indigenous CEO and board member of several organisations refers to this positive quality as 'restless renewal' (cited in Smith, 2008). In other words, the dynamic life course of Indigenous organisations may be a catalyst for a capability for resilient adaptive behaviour to be nurtured from the earliest days of their establishment. An Elder organisation presumably has been able to mobilise this capability function effectively at different times in its life.

Arguably then, Indigenous organisations can be described more accurately as complex self-organising, networked systems with non-sequential dynamic life courses, each having their own experience of stable and unstable phases, each striving to develop internal capability to direct transformational change (Smith, 2011, pp. 205–212). Drawing on this insight, our paper next explores how particular organisations are navigating critical juncture of tipping points (both positive and detrimental); and the role of resilient adaptive governance and management organisational agency at these times. But first, an account is provided of the mix of methods deployed for the research.

## Research methods

A noteworthy feature of the research is its combination of quantitative methods and analysis of an online survey and organisational registration data, alongside qualitative interviews and literature analysis. The research has benefited from adopting an interdisciplinary research lens promoted by a research team who bridge disciplinary divides across Indigenous studies, human geography and demographics, anthropology and community development, all of whom have previously worked with Indigenous organisations. This trans-disciplinary, multi-method approach is an oft-stated goal of Indigenous studies research, but infrequently attained.

Unfortunately, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic precluded our doing lengthy ethnographic fieldwork with individual organisations. In general, such ethnographies with Indigenous organisations are rare, and there is much that could be learned in the future from a closer understanding of the life course of individual organisations. Our method was informed by Covid-19 constraints and realities of the stress, time pressures and workload experienced by Indigenous organisations. Given it was not feasible for us to travel or meet with people face-to-face, we administered an online survey through SurveyMonkey and then held follow-up yarns (semi-structured conversations) by Zoom with consenting participants where we discussed their survey responses and organisation stories in more depth.

The research approach quickly segued into mixed methods where we linked the research questions into an interconnected set of methods to provide a layering of perspectives. This enabled us to encompass a bigger contextual picture of the national and federal circumstances of Elder organisations, through to a comparative sample of survey responses, and locally specific examples. To produce a robust rounded account, we triangulated evidence by:

- undertaking a literature review to elicit key debates and trends
- designing a conceptual framework around capabilities and organisational life course to test survey and interview responses
- collating an original database for Elder organisations from ORIC and ACNC data

- producing an original quantitative analysis of those databases against a range of variables
- carrying out an online survey with Elder organisations
- undertaking a small number of semi-structured qualitative Zoom interviews with survey respondents who gave consent
- analysing qualitative survey and interview information according to a common matrix of key variables, and
- producing a synthesised account that referenced the issues and questions raised in the conceptual, and against the context of the national quantitative overview.

In this way we hoped to overcome the lack of detailed ethnographic evidence, and draw on insights arising from diverse disciplinary and Indigenous perspectives. The follow-up interviews were invaluable in giving a ‘flesh and blood’ reality to the survey responses and quantitative data. It is important to note the caveat that in light of our small online and interview sample, we have been cautious in drawing ‘too long a bow’ in our conclusions about some issues. We suggest our analysis throws light on crucial matters that were ranked or identified in stories told by the organisations themselves, and hope further research can be undertaken on these.

The research approach was approved under a robust university ethics process. Accordingly, all survey and interview participants were provided with a ‘Participant Consent Form’ and ‘Information Statement’ outlining the aim and process, confidentiality, information use, voluntary participation, research team and contact details. Those who agreed were later provided an additional Participant Information Statement and a second written consent form prior to the interview. This constituted a double-consent procedure for each organisation who participated in both the survey and Zooms. In terms of confidentiality, it was agreed that the survey responses of individual organisations would not be identified. In the follow-up online interviews, the interview consent form asked people how they would like quotes attributed. In the interests of sometimes sensitive discussions, we have maintained a uniform anonymity for individuals and organisation. Interview participants were subsequently also provided with a cleaned copy of their Zoom interview transcript, to which they could provide corrections or any additional information. Several interview participants provided additional non-confidential documents related to the issues they discussed. Final quotes included in the paper were also provided back to interview participants for the opportunity to review and approval for inclusion.

Below we outline the different methods used for the quantitative and qualitative components of the research. For such a small survey, and given the oft-cited limitations of phone interviews as opposed to face-to-face (Hunter & Smith, 2002), the strategy of combining online survey and Zoom discussions proved to be a remarkably effective method. Particularly when that evidence was further contextualised by the quantitative picture at the national and state/territory levels.

### **The incorporation database – collation method**

Because every state, territory and the national government has their own regulatory regimes, there is no single source database on Indigenous incorporated organisations in Australia. Anecdote suggests that the great majority currently incorporate under the national regime, however currently there are no collated data to test this. Accordingly, we compiled our database of ‘Indigenous Elder Organisations’ by combining two different data sources; namely, including in our list all organisations nominated for the Reconciliation Australia and AIGI’s Indigenous Governance Awards (IGAs) in the years 2005–2018, and the database of all Indigenous Corporations ever registered – either under the CATSI Act, or its predecessor the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* (Cth) (ACA Act) – now maintained by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC).

Considerable manual sifting and cross-tabulation of information across several government agency databases was required.<sup>14</sup>

Because ORIC publishes a public register of all organisations incorporated under the CATSI Act ('ORIC organisations'), we were able to obtain a complete database of Elder ORIC organisations. Between April 2021 and June 2021, we downloaded the ORIC Registry Extract for every organisation ever registered under the CATSI Act or the ACA Act. This allowed us to both identify all Elder ORIC organisations on the basis of registration date, registration status and deregistration date, as well as to develop a database of organisation characteristics.

For those Indigenous organisations which submitted applications for the IGAs<sup>15</sup> and were not incorporated under the CATSI Act ('IGA organisations'), details regarding the organisations' legal form (i.e. whether or not it was incorporated, and if so, under what statute and regulator) and its current registration status were extracted by searching the public register run by the Australian Securities & Investments Commission (ASIC). For IGA organisations that are registered charities, organisation details were extracted from the public register published by the ACNC. For non-charities, details were sourced from the organisations' websites. Elder IGA organisations were identified as those registered before the year 2000 and which were not deregistered before January 1, 2021.

This search strategy is somewhat unbalanced, in that all Elder organisations registered under the CATSI Act or ACA Act were identified, whereas only those Elder Indigenous organisations with other legal statuses who were nominated for the IGAs were included in our overall database. This misses non-IGA nominated Elder organisations who are incorporated under a different governance structure such as the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth), the state-regulated systems for incorporating associations or co-operatives, or organisations incorporated under specific statutes such as the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW). The continuing lack of an Indigenous identifier in state and territory regimes makes it almost impossible to accurately identify Indigenous organisations, let alone 'Elder' ones. As such, our sample of organisations tends to be overly weighted towards ORIC registered organisations. As Table 1 shows, only 52 Elder organisations were identified from the list of IGA nominees that were not on the ORIC register (less than 5% of all identified Elder organisations). By contrast, 92 Elder organisations identified from the list of IGA participants were ORIC organisations, with a further 899 Elder ORIC organisations identified from the ORIC registry alone. This gives a total of 1043 Elder organisations with details available in either the ORIC register of Indigenous Corporations or the ACNC register of charitable organisations – in other words, 30% of all organisations in the sample frame were 'Elder' organisations.

**Table 1** Sample frame of organisations by data source and 'Elder' status

	organisations (n)	Elder organisations (n)
ORIC register only	3193	899
IGA nominees on ORIC register	162	92
IGA nominees not on ORIC register	107	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>3462</b>	<b>1043</b>

The ORIC public register includes the corporation's name and Indigenous corporation number (ICN), date of registration, name and address of the contact person or secretary. It also shows key public documents, such as

<sup>14</sup> We would like to acknowledge the hard, systematic work undertaken by Olivia Freund, Aurora Intern in culling through the ACNC public database to extract Indigenous corporate organisations listed there. Her extracted data was cross-checked with the ORIC database to ensure we have included all possible 'Elder' organisations (with the exception of course, of those registered under state/territory jurisdictions).

<sup>15</sup> The IGAs are a continent-wide, biannual process for celebrating and rewarding Indigenous-led governance excellence in categories of unincorporated projects or initiatives as well as small to medium and large incorporated organisations. Judging is based on the five key areas of innovation, effectiveness, self-determination, sustainability, and cultural legitimacy. The awards are run in partnership by Reconciliation Australia and AIGI.



the corporation's rule book, held by ORIC for a corporation. Corporations may request that personal information on these documents be amended or not be published electronically. If they have a justifiable concern, the Registrar may agree to the listing being removed from the website or modified as requested by the corporation. The ICN is not related to ABN, ACN, ARBN or ARSN numbers<sup>16</sup> used by some corporations for other purposes. ORIC's online register shows a list of and link to key public documents held by ORIC for any corporation.

An organisation's extract report on the ORIC register provides the following current information and a list of documents held on the public register about a corporation registered under the CATSI Act, such as:

- current and previous name<sup>17</sup>
- ICN
- principal activities
- size
- contact details
- current officers' details, such as details about the current contact person/secretary, directors
- names of members – from the most recently-registered list of members (some of which may be suppressed)
- information from annual reports from the last three years.

There are no aggregate, publicly accessible ORIC data on 'administration events' as described earlier in this paper that can be linked to particular organisations over time, let alone broken down to types of organisational characteristics. So we are unable to explore what is clearly an important 'tipping point' for organisations that has implications for their future viability. ORIC does report that 40% of total organisations nationally returned to Indigenous governance from being administered by ORIC, suggesting that 70% did not – either still being in administration or wound up.

Our final collated database was analysed in respect to key demographic, socioeconomic and organisational characteristics by national, state and territory, section of state variables. We also used a linear regression to understand the correlates of ORIC organisation longevity, including all ORIC organisations that were active from 2007–08 onwards, the year when ORIC's electronic record keeping for detailed variables began. These models can be used to identify which variables are correlated with ORIC organisational longevity, while holding other variables constant. This quantitative analysis gave us an important broader context within which to situate the results of the online survey and interviews we undertook.

### **The online survey: Design, implementation and analysis**

We next drew on the extracted set of Elder organisations from our collated database as the sample frame for a short online survey. Our criteria for organisations to be included in the survey sample were: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, incorporated prior to December 31, 1999, currently operational, and having a publicly available valid email address. After removing those with no available email address, or that were no longer operational, the final sample size for the survey was 799 Elder organisations (766 incorporated under ORIC and 33 incorporated under ASIC or state legislation).

<sup>16</sup> ABN=Australian Business Number, ACN=Australian Company Number, ARBN=Australian Registered Body Number, ARSN= Australian Registered Scheme Number.

<sup>17</sup> It is possible that an Indigenous corporation may trade under a business name, instead of its registered name.

The survey questions focused around organisational change sourced in crisis, and arising as a positive opportunity (the survey tool is provided in Appendix 1). We were intent on keeping the survey instrument short and 'do-able', given the workload of organisations. Questions covered five topics which were common across both crisis and opportunity:

1. Governance
2. Culture
3. Barriers
4. Actions
5. Other strategies.

These key topics were identified from the experience of the general field-based research experience of the authors with many Indigenous organisations; from our recent previous online survey in which we investigated the issues impacting upon organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic; from earlier AIGI reports on organisational success and challenges; AIGI tools for evaluating governance and organisational effectiveness; as well as from evidence of the CAEPR led five-year Indigenous Community Governance project.

Similarly, the factors which were listed for each survey question were identified through a systematic process of identifying governance aspects commonly identified in the literature, and own research and experience as contributing to the relevant issues each question asked about.

For topics 1–4, 10 factors were listed, and participants were asked to rank in order of importance. The order of factors was randomly assigned and appeared differently to each participant. There was an open comment box after each ranking question. For topic 5, an open comment box was provided for participants to share any strategies or tips for organisational longevity that were not covered in earlier survey questions. In addition, the survey included one question requesting consent to participate and a second eliciting expressions of interest to be contacted for a follow-up interview via Zoom or phone call.

We developed the survey instrument on SurveyMonkey and piloted it twice with AIGI staff and board, CAEPR staff and organisations who had participated in a previous survey on 'Governing the Pandemic' (see Drieberg et al., *in press*). Revisions were made to improve comprehension and reduce length, in line with feedback. An information statement appeared at the start of the survey which covered research aims, intended outputs, data security, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and identified the researchers and their contact details.

We distributed the survey to the 799 organisations on November 2, 2021 via email. Instructions requested that only one person from the organisation at the executive level (board director, CEO or senior manager) complete the survey. A 'Governance Goodies Bag' of AIGI merchandise was offered to the first 10 organisations to complete the survey. The survey remained open until March 31, 5 months in total. Recurrent reminder notices were sent via email during this period. We received 23 complete responses. This is a low response rate and one reason why we kept the survey open for longer than anticipated (e.g. it was lower than for the online survey with organisations about the pandemic we did several months earlier). We attribute this to the prolonged, debilitating impacts of the pandemic on organisations and their community members across Australia, on top of already heavy workloads, leaves organisations with little time for things such as online surveys. Also, Indigenous people and organisations are wary of being over-researched, having their operations scrutinised, and the uses to which research data are put.

Data analysis was multi-staged. First, survey responses were collated for each question. The SurveyMonkey function automatically provided statistical summaries for quantitative questions. For qualitative comment

responses, the research team reviewed responses and grouped them under common themes linked to the variables used in the survey questions. Secondly, results were then reviewed to identify which factors had the most impact. These were identifiable by high-ranking scores, or frequent reference in open comment boxes. Third, we drafted commentary around survey findings and insights. Fourth, we integrated survey findings with those arising from Interview conversations.

### **Interviews: Survey design, implementation and analysis**

Follow-up interviews were then carried out with six organisational leaders via Zoom (and in one case, fortuitously, in person) to explore survey responses in more depth. These organisations work in industry sectors of youth support, health and community services, art and material culture, housing, PBC, education; located across four states. Four of the respondents were CEOs of organisations and two were Board Directors; (1 female and 5 male; 3 Indigenous and 3 non-Indigenous). All participants signed a consent form prior to their interview and confirmed how they would like to be identified in research outputs.

The interviews were open-ended, focusing on the same set of issues and factors in the survey, but exploring in greater detail the comments briefly provided in the survey. A key aim was to explore the kinds of crises and opportunities that were actually experienced by participants, and to identify practical examples of the specific actions and strategies they used in those situations. Some talked about crises or opportunities in the past; while for other organisations they were occurring at the same time as the interview. Again, we set a limit on the time we asked of people, giving participants the option to finish the conversation at the end of an hour or continue if they chose to. Transcripts were created using Otter.ai, and clean transcripts sent to all participants for their opportunity to revise or identify content to be excluded from the research.

The Zoom interview transcripts were reviewed and organised into spreadsheets based on theme. Themes included responses that linked to the 10 survey questions, as well as a number of additional topics, including strategies or approaches recorded as having worked for the interviewees' organisations, as well as those that have not. These insights have been used to contextualise the survey findings. Any new themes that arose solely in the course of the interviews were also drawn out. In the few instances where different narratives emerged between survey and interview results, these have been included as 'additional insights' with commentary to draw out any nuances which emerged from the data.

## **Incorporation database analysis: National/state and territory**

### **Characteristics of the Elder organisations**

The 52 Elder IGA organisations included into our overall data drawn from ORIC database utilised a wide variety of legal structures (Table 2). The most frequent type of structure was an incorporated association (18 organisations), a structure which is regulated differently between states and territories. Companies, regulated at the Commonwealth-level by ASIC, were the next most common structure (14 organisations), followed by Land Councils (13 organisations) and Co-operatives (7 organisations). There were no Elder IGA organisations identified in Tasmania.

**Table 2** Legal organisation of IGA Elder organisations

State	Co-operative	Company	Incorporated association	Land council
ACT		1		
NSW		2	7	11
NT			1	1
Qld	2	7	2	
SA		1	2	1
Vic	5	2	3	
WA		1	3	
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>

Some of the characteristics of the 1043 identified Elder organisations registered with ORIC and/or ACNC are described in Table 3. Relative to the Indigenous population, Elder organisations are more likely to be located in Western Australia or the Northern Territory, with these two jurisdictions having almost 60% of the Elder organisations, despite accounting for just 18% of the Indigenous population in the 2021 Census. Further discussion of this is set out below for the regression analysis. In contrast, Victoria has just 2% of the identified Elder organisations while accounting for 8% of the Indigenous population in 2021. This may be a reflection of federal government Indigenous affairs policy focusing on remote regions in the 1980s–1990s – but that is likely open to other interpretations.

Elder organisations cover a wide range of functions, with many organisations reporting multiple types of activities to ORIC and the ACNC. Health and Community Services was the most frequently identified type of activity (22% of Elder organisations), with Land Management (18%) and Housing (14%) the next most frequently identified activity. However, it is important to note that over half of all organisations reported also undertaking unclassified 'Other' activities. This is not surprising as many Indigenous organisations routinely appear to undertake a range of community welfare and other support functions in addition to their funded government program service delivery (Drieberg et al., *in press*; Howard-Wagner, 2021; Howard-Wagner et al., 2022).

Most Elder organisations' boards had 4–7 directors, with a median of 6 directors, which is close to the overall ORIC median for all organisations. Gender parity is now the norm among Elder organisations, with a fifty-fifty gender balance at the median. Half of all Elder organisations had between 38% and 71% of female board members. This level of Indigenous gender equity at the board level is more advanced than for non-Indigenous corporate organisations. For instance, the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) statistics on Board diversity within mainstream companies in 2021 reports that 'latest percentage of women on ASX 200 boards is 34.2%, with women comprising 41.8% of new appointments to ASX 200 boards (AICD, 2021). Given the number of board directors who undertake their roles with no salary (apart from sitting fees), this governance contribution is significant.

For ORIC Elder organisations, the median number of organisation members was 33, with one-half of all organisations having between 16 and 76 members. Most Elder organisations reported no employed staff, with three-quarters of organisations having seven or fewer employees. Again, this points to significant governance and management workload falling on a small number of board directors and staff.

Many of these characteristics were shared with younger ORIC organisations (i.e. Indigenous Corporations registered from January 1, 2000). These organisations also had a fifty-fifty director gender balance, although they had one fewer board members on average. However, younger ORIC organisations had fewer members (a median

of 14) and fewer staff (three-quarters of organisations having at most one employee). The seemingly low level of staffing generally in the majority of Indigenous organisations, leaves open the fundamental question of the extent to which they have to rely on Indigenous volunteer labour from their communities.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, most Elder organisations reported very modest financial resources. The median Elder organisation had an annual income of just \$12 400 and assets – net of liabilities – of just \$52 300. However, there was a great deal of heterogeneity within Elder organisations, with organisations at the 75th percentile having an annual income over \$1 million and an asset base of close to \$2 million. However, these financial reports are likely to be low, given that some Elder organisations may have a separately incorporated commercially-focused subsidiary, or – at the other end of the spectrum – may have their financial matters auspiced through another organisation (e.g. native title PBCs who auspice their financial affairs through a native title representative body or service provider).

Elder organisations reporting an annual income of greater than \$1 million were more likely to report that their principal activities were health and community services or education, whereas Elder organisations reporting no income were more likely to report land management or 'Other' as their principal activities. Younger ORIC-registered organisations had a similar profile in terms of sectors of operation, although they were far less likely to be undertaking housing activities, and marginally more likely to be undertaking land management.

**Table 3** Description of Elder organisations

	Elder organisations (n)	Elder organisations (%)
<b>State</b>		
NSW	186	18
Vic	26	2
Qld	184	18
SA	19	2
WA	338	32
Tas	8	1
NT	278	27
ACT	4	> 1
<b>Principal activities</b>		
Health and Community Services	231	22
Land Management	190	18
Housing	148	14
Personal and Other Services	101	10
Employment and Training	87	8
Education (including child care)	86	8
Art Centres	78	7
Municipal Services	44	4
Shops	33	3

<sup>18</sup> There is little research available on this critical issue. Old data from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (Smith & Roach, 1996) following the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey, for example, suggest that Indigenous Australians engaged in voluntary work in their communities and organisations more than non-Indigenous Australians (participation rate of 26.9% and 19% respectively for those aged 15 and over engaged in voluntary work). See also Kerr et al., 2001.

	Elder organisations (n)	Elder organisations (%)
Communication Services	27	3
Construction	15	1
Mining	3	< 1
Wholesale Trade	1	< 1
Transport and Storage	1	< 1
Other	538	52
	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>
<b>Directors, staff and members</b>		
No. of directors	6	4–7
% Directors female	50%	38–71%
No. of members	33	16–76
No. of staff (headcount)	0	0–7
<b>Financials</b>		
Annual revenue	\$12 414	\$0–\$1 072 223
Net assets	\$52 315	\$0–\$1 968 014

Notes: Principal activities were categorised on the basis of the ORIC registry, with ACNC activities manually coded against the ORIC categories. The gender of directors was identified by their salutations (e.g. Mr, Ms, etc.) when given, or imputed by first name when no salutation was provided. Gender was imputed using the United States social security database, imputing the gender to directors that was noted for most holders of that first name in the database. Consequently, a small number of directors may have been misgendered, including for all gender non-binary directors. The number of members was only available for corporations under the CATSI Act.

### Correlates of organisational longevity

We used linear regression to understand the correlates of ORIC organisation longevity, including all ORIC organisations that were active from 2007–08, the year when ORIC's electronic record keeping for detailed variables began. These models can be used to identify which variables are correlated with ORIC organisational longevity, while holding other variables constant. Because this model is identifying associations rather than causation, it is unclear whether a statistically significant correlation indicates that a factor is *driving* organisational longevity or if it is a *result* of organisational longevity.

Three linear regression models with the number of years an organisation was registered as the outcome variable are reported in Table 4. Model 1 includes predictor variables for: state/territory of registration, the number of directors, the percentage of directors who are female, the natural logarithm of the number of members, whether the corporation is a native title prescribed body corporate, the number of employees of the corporation, and the logarithm of the corporation's income and assets. Model 2 includes all predictor variables as Model 1, but adds to this the indicators of the sectors in which the corporation is principally active.

Because Elder organisations tend to have been registered in earlier years, the correlations in Models 1 and 2 may partly reflect historical trends in incorporation patterns rather than an independent association with organisational longevity *per se*. Consequently, Model 3 introduces a variable indicating the year the corporation was first registered. This means that the remaining associations in other variables are more likely to indicate a true correlation with longevity rather than indicating something about incorporation patterns in the year of registration.

Models 1 and 2 suggest that corporations registered in the Northern Territory and Western Australia are likely to be 4.7 and 5.7 years older, respectively. However, Model 3 suggests that this relationship derives from historical patterns of incorporation, in which corporations registered in earlier years were more likely to be based in those jurisdictions. This may be partly due to a relatively high level of use of the ACA Act in remote Indigenous communities in the 1980s, and may also reflect ongoing patterns of demographic change which have seen the Indigenous population grow much faster in NSW, Victoria and south-eastern Queensland over recent decades than remote parts of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. After adjusting for the year of registration variable in the model, the only significant geographical pattern in longevity is that corporations based in Victoria are likely to be registered for 0.8 years less than other Corporations.

In Models 1 and 2, the percentage of directors who are female is positively associated with corporation age. However, the magnitude of this association is very small, suggesting that any effect is small and likely to make little practical difference to corporation longevity. After adjusting for year of registration (Model 3), this association is no longer statistically significant. Corporations with more members tend to be older in Models 1 and 2, but not in Model 3, suggesting that more recently incorporated organisations are less likely to be set up around a mass membership base.

Corporations which exist to act as a native title prescribed body corporate (PBC) tend to be around eight years younger than the average Elder Indigenous corporation (Models 1 and 2). However, this may be due to the relative recency of native title determinations. Model 3 shows that PBCs are longer lived than similar corporations registered in the same year. This is unsurprising given that the CATSI Act forbids the Registrar from deregistering an RNTBC under s546.15, given the perpetual nature of native title, but it is also likely relevant that many continue to receive administrative support from their regional native title representative body.

Curiously, Models 1 and 2 suggest that older corporations have lower revenue levels. However, this dissipates in Model 3, suggesting that this is a period effect rather than a true driver of longevity. Put differently, it seems that the types of corporations registered in earlier years are less likely to draw an income, but this does not impact on their longevity. A similar pattern – but in the opposite direction – is evident for assets. This suggests that many of the earliest Indigenous corporations were established as vehicles for holding collectively owned assets, such as land. These assets may not necessarily have been income producing, or it may be that a separate legal entity outside of the sample scope (e.g. a private company regulated by ASIC) was separately established to undertake commercial activities using that collectively-owned asset.

Finally, several activities are associated with the number of years that corporations are registered. Specifically, housing organisations are likely to remain registered longer than other similar corporations, as are organisations involved in land management. It seems that organisations that exist to hold large, physical assets such as land or houses tend to have staying-power, which is unsurprising given the longevity of the assets they hold. Conversely, corporations involved in employment and training are likely to have been registered for shorter time spans. This latter finding could relate to the abolition of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, which saw a number of former CDEP organisations become deregistered.

**Table 4** Multiple linear regression coefficients for models predicting the number of years an Indigenous corporation has been registered.

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
(Intercept)	4.3 ** [1.7, 7.0]	4.5 ** [1.8, 7.2]	1963.6 *** [1949.4, 1977.7]
<b>State/Territory</b>			
NSW	1.4 [-1.2, 4.1]	1.2 [-1.5, 3.9]	-0.3 [-0.9, 0.3]
NT	4.7 *** [2.0, 7.4]	4.6 ** [1.9, 7.4]	-0.0 [-0.6, 0.6]
Qld	0.6 [-2.0, 3.3]	0.8 [-1.9, 3.4]	-0.4 [-1.0, 0.2]
SA	-1.8 [-4.6, 1.1]	-1.7 [-4.6, 1.2]	-0.5 [-1.3, 0.2]
Tas	1.6 [-3.1, 6.4]	1.5 [-3.1, 6.2]	-1.1 [-2.4, 0.2]
Vic	-1.3 [-4.1, 1.5]	-1.1 [-4.0, 1.8]	-0.8 * [-1.5, -0.0]
WA	5.7 *** [3.1, 8.4]	5.8 *** [3.1, 8.5]	-0.0 [-0.6, 0.6]
No. of directors	-0.2 ** [-0.4, -0.1]	-0.2 ** [-0.4, -0.1]	0.0 [-0.0, 0.1]
% female directors	0.0 *** [0.0, 0.0]	0.0 *** [0.0, 0.0]	0.0 [-0.0, 0.0]
log (no. of members)	2.4 *** [2.1, 2.7]	2.3 *** [2.0, 2.7]	0.1 [-0.0, 0.1]
Corporation is PBC	-8.4 *** [-9.6, -7.2]	-8.4 *** [-9.6, -7.2]	0.4 *** [0.2, 0.5]
No. employees	-0.0 [-0.0, 0.0]	-0.0 [-0.0, 0.0]	-0.0 [-0.0, 0.0]
log(annual income)	-0.4 *** [-0.5, -0.3]	-0.4 *** [-0.5, -0.3]	0.0 [-0.0, 0.1]
log(assets)	0.7 *** [0.6, 0.8]	0.7 *** [0.6, 0.8]	0.0 [-0.0, 0.0]
<b>Principle activities</b>			
Health and Community Services		-1.0 * [-1.8, -0.1]	-0.0 [-0.2, 0.2]
Housing		5.8 *** [4.4, 7.3]	0.5 *** [0.2, 0.8]



Land Management	0.3	0.3 **
	[-0.5, 1.1]	[0.1, 0.4]
Education including child care	-0.0	-0.2
	[-1.3, 1.2]	[-0.5, 0.2]
Construction	-1.7	0.4
	[-4.8, 1.4]	[-0.2, 0.9]
Employment and Training	-2.3 ***	-0.4 **
	[-3.3, -1.4]	[-0.7, -0.1]
Municipal Services	3.8 **	0.3
	[1.1, 6.4]	[-0.1, 0.7]
Art Centres	-0.7	0.2
	[-1.9, 0.6]	[-0.1, 0.5]
Shops	-2.1 *	-0.2
	[-3.9, -0.2]	[-0.7, 0.2]
Wholesale Trade	3.7	-1.6
	[-0.6, 8.0]	[-4.5, 1.3]
Transport and Storage	-0.2	0.2
	[-4.9, 4.5]	[-1.3, 1.8]
Mining	-3.9 **	-0.4
	[-6.6, -1.2]	[-1.5, 0.7]
<b>Year corporation registered</b>		-1.0 ***
		[-1.0, -1.0]
N	3577	3577
R <sup>2</sup>	0.2	0.3
		1.0

Notes: 95% confidence intervals indicated below estimate in square brackets. Standard errors are heteroscedasticity robust.  
 \*\*\* p < 0.001; \*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.05.

In summary, the analysis paints a picture of an evolving and diverse ecology of Elder Indigenous organisations. While some are very large and command considerable resources, many, indeed most, are much smaller affairs, with few staff and little income. Many Elder organisations appear to exist as entities for the collective ownership and management of important assets such as land and housing, and these organisations appear to have considerable longevity, despite their relatively low incomes. Health and community services is a particularly important activity for Elder organisations, as it is here that many of the high-income longstanding organisations focus. In terms of governance, relatively little can be gleaned from the administrative data analysed here. However, it is significant that Elder organisations (and indeed Indigenous organisations more generally) appear to have reached gender parity when it comes to board membership. In this regard at least, Indigenous organisations governance might be considered considerably more advanced than non-Indigenous organisations.

## The online survey and interviews: Data analysis

In this section we present the statistical results and analysis of the online survey emailed out to Elder organisations, in conjunction with a series of insights gleaned from follow-up interviews. The survey was completed by 23 organisations. The 10 participants (43%) who filled out the online responses were Board Directors, and 13 (57%) were CEOs or Managers. From these 23, 6 went on to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted with members of the research team via Zoom.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, despite the high number of Elder organisations identified as being located in the Northern Territory, we were unsuccessful in obtaining an interview with any organisational leaders in this part of Australia.

### SurveyMonkey results: A holistic approach

As we were interested in understanding how different factors most impacted upon or supported organisations through a time of actual change, multiple survey questions required participants to rank a list of factors in order of importance. The survey was designed so that every factor had to be ranked before the participant could move on to the next question. For each of this type of question, between 1 and 5 participants commented that a ranking system was problematic. A variety of different reasons were provided. Firstly, some organisations noted that, in their experience, all the factors were *equally* important:

*...[E]ach of the listed governance factors support equally our ability to adapt and renew. An individual factor or a couple of those factors by themselves are not enough to achieve the outcomes we require (Participant 19, Survey).*

In a similar vein, others felt that it was the *combination* of factors that was really important (rather than a hierarchy). In contrast, further organisations reported that some factors did not apply at all to their scenario or had minimal impact. In addition, one organisation noted that they were in fact still in the midst of a crisis, and not yet at a point where they could reflect on what clearly had or had not been a supportive factor.

### Interview findings: Kinds of change

While survey participants focused mainly on the issue of change by giving examples of opportunity, in their follow-up interviews, they also discussed crises. Crises for organisations spoken about across the interviews can be grouped into three broad categories. First, are what we describe as 'internal' crises; these ranged from organisations finding themselves on the brink of insolvency, lack of resources and capacity (at board, management and staffing levels) to meet their organisation's objectives, and conflict among board members and with CEOs. The second category is 'external' crises – those beyond the immediate control of the organisation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and difficulties experienced with government agencies. The final, and unanticipated, category of crisis spoken about by interview participants is what might be described as 'crises of purpose': these are the crises that interviewees spoke about as the reason their organisations exist. These included working to resolve housing shortages for their constituents, high rates of unemployment within their communities, and the need for culturally appropriate youth support services.

Finally, some crises spoken about straddle categories; as both internal and external in nature. For example, one organisation spoke about being ill-equipped in their governance arrangements and under-supported to make the transition from being the native title claim group, to having their rights and interests recognised through a positive determination, and suddenly having to manage these rights and interests as a PBC. In this instance, the

<sup>19</sup> Of the 6 organisational leaders to participate in follow-up interviews, 3 identified as Indigenous; 4 were CEOs, and 2 were board directors. One was female and 5 were male. Their organisations included PBCs, youth support, education and training, health and community services, art, and housing and were based across several states, including Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia.

interviewee described the realisation of being 'left out in the cold' without direction or assistance, or experience to guide them to 'where next':

*...They get everyone together, and then it's like, 'congratulations, you've got your native title'. And then they step away. And it's like, 'who's supposed to deal with all the governance now? And all the arranging meetings and all the compliance?' (son of Participant 18, Interview).*

In part, this category of crisis may be described as *internal* as it relates to experience and capacity issues. Conversely, there is a concrete external component to the circumstances that this, and many other, PBCs find themselves in. That is, the same system which decrees that a PBC must be formed to manage native title rights and interests, is simultaneously unwilling or unable to provide adequate support for groups to navigate the pressures that come with being a newly formed corporation.

When opportunities were discussed in the follow-up interviews, they too were often identified as having both an *internal* and *external* element. However, unlike with times of crisis, opportunities were not discussed in terms of an organisation's purpose. In one particularly bold opportunity discussed, the organisation successfully negotiated with their big business industry partners to fulfil a long-held community aspiration, to not only own, but also take over the day-to-day running of the community's airport. The internal factors stated as making a difference in this case included having an ambitious and supportive board that could work well with the executive, and alignment between the organisation and their membership of their entrepreneurial vision. External factors included a series of well-negotiated partnerships ranging from funding to operational and management expertise transfer.

In another scenario discussed, upon being appointed CEO for a small community not-for-profit, the organisational leader recounted how their first act of business was to conduct a forensic audit of the organisation's funding contracts. Here they identified an *internal* opportunity of a 'blank canvas' to build the organisation into what the community wanted and needed, and to 'make it from the voice of the community' (Participant, Interview 16). This task was considered by the board and approved, and the organisation promptly set about implementation. Another opportunity discussed focused on the benefits of working with philanthropists as a financial diversification solution to the challenges associated with government-based agencies and their funding cycles, emphasising the external elements of opportunity identified and harnessed in this circumstance.

Together, these examples demonstrate the diversity in the kinds of change that confront Indigenous organisations, in what can be complex operating environments. They point to change being both internally and externally driven, but oftentimes by factors outside of an organisation's direct control. However, even in such cases, the way an organisation responds can have the most significant impact on their ongoing viability and indeed vitality. To a large degree, it is about their capability to respond adaptively when changes are being imposed on them. In the following sections we move through the survey questions in order to discuss particular results in more detail. These are contextualised with insights gleaned through the follow-up interviews.

## **Questions 1 and 2: The governance factors that support organisations through opportunity and crisis**

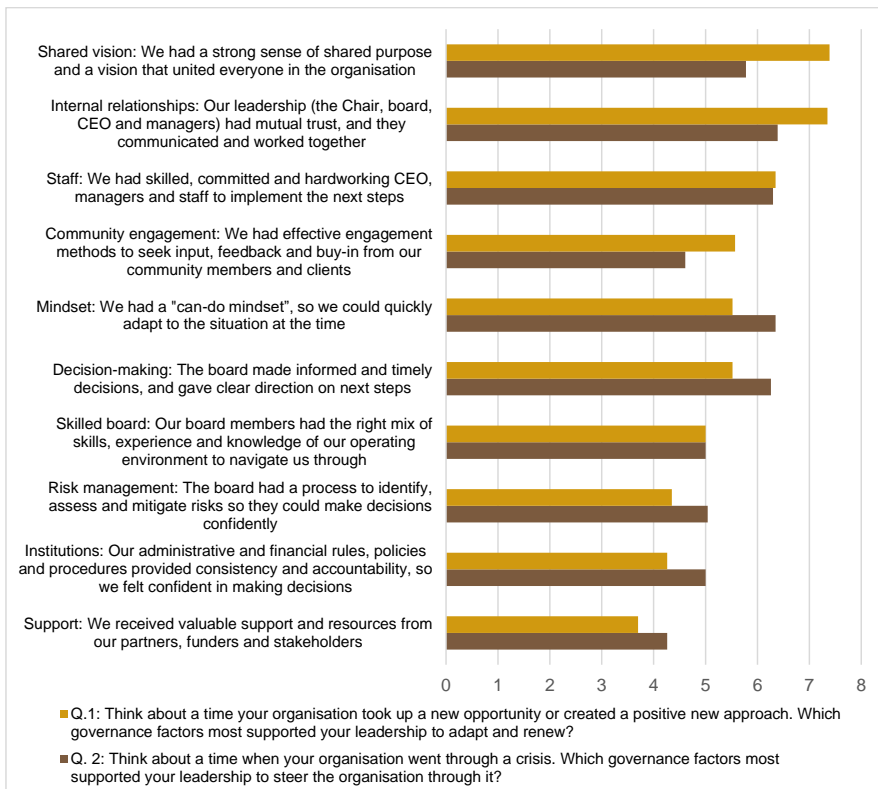
Survey participants were asked to rank a list of 10 Governance Factors from 1 (most supportive factor) to 10 (least supportive factor). Responses were weighted to create a score out of 10 for each Factor.

A shared purpose and vision, trusting and effective internal relationships, and skilled staff were ranked the top 3 governance factors which support an organisation to take up an opportunity. Conversely, trusting and effective internal relationships, a can-do mindset, and skilled staff were ranked the top 3 governance factors which support

an organisation to navigate a crisis (Figure 1). Several other factors were closely ranked, reinforcing the view of several participants that many factors are interconnected.

Interestingly, support and resources from partners, funders and stakeholders received the lowest score of all the listed governance factors contributing usefully in times of opportunity and crisis (Figure 1). This could mean that the support they did receive wasn't helpful or that they didn't receive it. It is perhaps worth noting that there were several comments made later on in the survey about problematic external relationships negatively impacting organisations, their strategy and capacity.

**Figure 1** Governance factors that most supported organisational leadership to adapt and renew next to governance factors that most supported organisational leadership through a crisis (N = 23)



Source: Survey responses to questions 1 and 2 (Appendix A).

**Q.1 and Q.2 Survey results contextualised**

By way of additional comment in response to Question 1, one participant identified what made their organisation's 'shared vision' unique, was that it was for the long term, focusing on '50-year, two generational change[s]' (Participant 8, Survey).

An interview participant provided additional insight into this factor, stating:

*Some of them are really Big Ideas [in the strategic plan]. But you know, as I said to the board, they need to be realistic goals. So we've been able to tick off some of those achievements over the last three years. And obviously, this document is my Bible as to whether I'm doing my job properly. You know, and the board has really come together in this space, basically saying, you know, we're the ones who created this vision, it's now documented, and we've got control of this. So that was, that was the biggest single thing for us, I think, as an organisation was being able to put everything down on one document, and then start working towards achieving those goals (Participant 7, Interview).*

In terms of a 'can-do mindset' one survey respondent stated '[you] need to grab opportunities and back yourself' (Participant 22, Survey).

The importance of 'internal relationships' and trust in harnessing opportunities was contextualised by one organisation leader with the following explanation:

*The governance needs to be very strong with the board. The board needs to understand that they're the ones who employ the CEO, they are the CEO's employer, and they have to allow the CEO to put in place the things that they want put in place. That's not going to happen if there is not mutual trust (Participant 7, Interview).*

Finally, one respondent identified an additional factor about the external environment contributing to making the most of opportunities that was not listed in the ranking options. They stated that 'another major factor was to try and have a good working relationship between all levels of government and the Native Title Representative Body' (Participant 23, Survey).

Providing context to the ways internal relationships matter for organisations navigating crises, one participant explained:

*[Our] crisis involved a huge split and power struggle among the board. If the chair and CEO had not had a very good and trusting relationship the organisation could not have pulled through. And most importantly if the will of long-standing members and board was not so strong there would not have been the patience and commitment to pull through.' (Participant 5, Survey).*

On the importance of having a 'can-do' mindset in times of crisis, one participant explained:

*I think it was very important, especially when we're looking at COVID and having to sort of transition things online. Having staff supported by myself and the board to be able to be open to new ideas, in terms of how we transitioned our programs online, was very important. It has proved to be the reason why we were quite successful during that COVID lockdown 2020 (Participant 19, Interview).*

In terms of the value of having a skilled, committed and hardworking CEO, managers and staff in times of crisis, one participant told how:

*... when things went really wrong, the staff really strongly supported me. Because they realised ... because they wanted to hold on to the organisation, and they were so worried that it would fall apart, like every other place sometimes (Participant 13, Interview).*

Two survey respondents added additional factors that were not listed in the survey ranking options for navigating crises. One cited the importance of their board remaining 'open and transparent with our funding bodies about

the situation' (Participant 6, Survey). And the second stressed the importance of 'knowing who you are' (Participant 22, Survey).

### Q.1 and Q.2 Further interview insights

It is worth noting that for those we spoke to in the interviews, the importance of taking a 'holistic' approach to understanding an organisation's competing governance priorities, was also identified. Two participants articulated the idea that you cannot put one priority, or goal, above the other as more important. One participant explained:

*So, as an example, that sort of tension between finance and community engagement, both are equally important, you can't actually put one above the other. And that's where the issue is, because we need to treat both at the same time. But at times, sometimes the financial aspect needs to actually take precedence over community engagement. But then we need to also ensure that our community engagement remains because otherwise we lose community (Participant 19, Interview).*

Another explained it in the sense of cause and reaction – *and how you may be required to change one thing, but in turn, this may impact upon other aspects of what you are trying to achieve, so you need to ask 'what is the reaction to that [going to be]?' (Participant 16, Interview).*

One additional insight to arise out of a follow-up interview that was not listed as a key factor, nor raised by way of comment in the survey, was the value of data collection in supporting their organisation:

*In relation to evaluation, we have our program evaluated externally every three years. And we've done that since 2008. We've used different providers [each time] and next year, once we have the full 2022 program delivered ... our next evaluation review of the program [will include] the organisation at all levels. So everybody has feedback into those reviews (Participant 8, Interview).*

The same participant spoke about building a database of information over a 20–50 year period. They were able to break down the dollar amount impacts of their work, and spoke of how this type of data can be relied on as evidence of the impact of their programs, to secure further funding, and as support for their model of operating. They explained how:

*... over the years, we've brought along the evidence base, that proves that if you do it this way, this is what you're going to get. ... And essentially, build that database of information over that 20-year, 50-year period (Participant 8, Interview).*

### Question 3: The Indigenous cultural factors that support organisations through opportunity and crisis

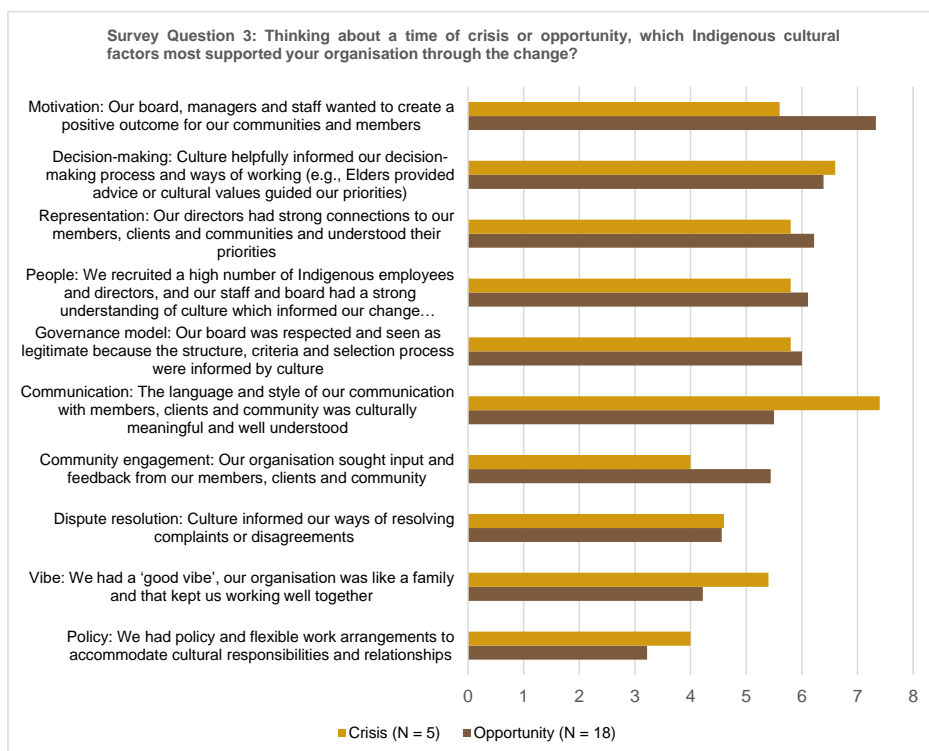
Survey participants were asked to rank a list of 10 Cultural Factors from 1 (most supportive factor) to 10 (least supportive factor). They were given the option to respond regarding either a real-world opportunity or crisis that their organisation had experienced. A total of 18 participants elected to respond about an opportunity and 5 about a crisis. Responses were weighted to create a score out of 10 for each Factor. As noted at the beginning of this section, interview discussions were generally more fluid regarding whether responses pertained to instances of opportunity or crisis.

The motivation of the Board, managers and staff; culturally informed decision-making; and community representation were ranked the top 3 cultural factors which support an organisation to take up an opportunity (Figure 2). Communication style and culturally informed decision-making were ranked the top 2 cultural factors which support an organisation to navigate a crisis. Indigenous and other staff and board members having a strong

understanding of culture; membership and community representation on the board; and a governance model where the board is respected and seen as culturally legitimate ranked equally in third place as additionally important contributing factors (Figure 2).

Policy was ranked the least important cultural factor to support an organisation navigate a time of opportunity or crisis. For times of opportunity this was followed by vibe and dispute resolution. In times of crisis, community engagement and dispute resolution were ranked as 2nd and 3rd least supportive to organisations (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Combined data comparing Indigenous cultural factors that most supported organisational leadership during an opportunity, and in a time of crisis



Source: Responses to Survey question 3 (Appendix A).

**Q.3 Survey results contextualised**

Speaking about the impact of motivation, one leader in their interview told how, for their organisation:

*It's driven by culture, it's driven by, you know, I've never met an Aboriginal person that wants to be unemployed, unhealthy. You know, not successful to whatever their aspirations are, you know? (Participant 16, Interview).*

When thinking about times of opportunity, one leader explained how their organisation's strategic goals were the motivating force for their organisation:

*Everything is always an opportunity. We focus on the can do, and how we can do it within our resources. We are a values-driven organisation which, through our strategic goals, aim to make a difference to our children & teenagers in our programs (Participant 8, Survey).*

In terms of how culture helpfully informed their organisation's decision-making process and ways of working, one leader explained:

*...I am not from here, I'm a Gadigal man from Eora nation so I'm from Botany around Mascot in the city. Although I've been up here for 30 years, so I'm always respectful to say to the local elders on my board: Can I have your voice, can I have your opinion? I am paid to do a corporate job. But as an Aboriginal man, I want to bring in our lore and bring it into the organisation. So I think the board works very well as an entity and it's quite a good board for discipline, and to have an agenda that actually listens to the community. So I have I've got seven Board members I probably have three that are in their 30s and the other four are older ones. I say to the younger one who are new, 'I want you to speak up'. And to the older ones: 'I want you to teach until the younger board members understand what their responsibilities are'. I say to these young people, you have been given the greatest opportunity to learn something so to just listen unless they ask you to talk (Participant 16, Interview).*

Another described what 'culturally informed' decision-making was about for their organisation in navigating a specific opportunity:

*The decision-making process took significant time, effort, and resources. Many Directors needed to travel over 6 hours to attend meetings. Each meeting took hours, and everyone had an opportunity to address their view in a holistic manner. Difficult conversations... to improve the situation [were] frank and actions were set in place to resolve matters (Participant 10, Survey).*

The same organisation went on to explain that institutionalised racism was a compounding issue when they were trying to implement change, and that the system that they worked within was not designed for 'Indigenous ways of doing and thinking' (Participant 10, Survey).

A third organisation noted that currently, 'our cultural processes are ad hoc and we are working on formalising these as embedded and underpinning our organisation's policies, procedures, processes and systems' (Participant 17, Survey).

A fourth organisation raised the importance of '*whanighadalinya*', that is, 'knowing oneself'. The same organisation raised this in the earlier question on which governance factors help an organisation to navigate a crisis (Participant 22, Survey).

When dealing with a crisis, one organisation noted that, in their case:

*cultural factors were not impact[ful] until we were able to establish fundamental good governance via leadership direction to enforce corporation objectives and regulations (Participant 18, Survey).*



When speaking about representation, one leader spoke about the sometimes-blurred lines of representing an organisation's members and the broader community who may be interested in, and impacted by, an organisation's business:

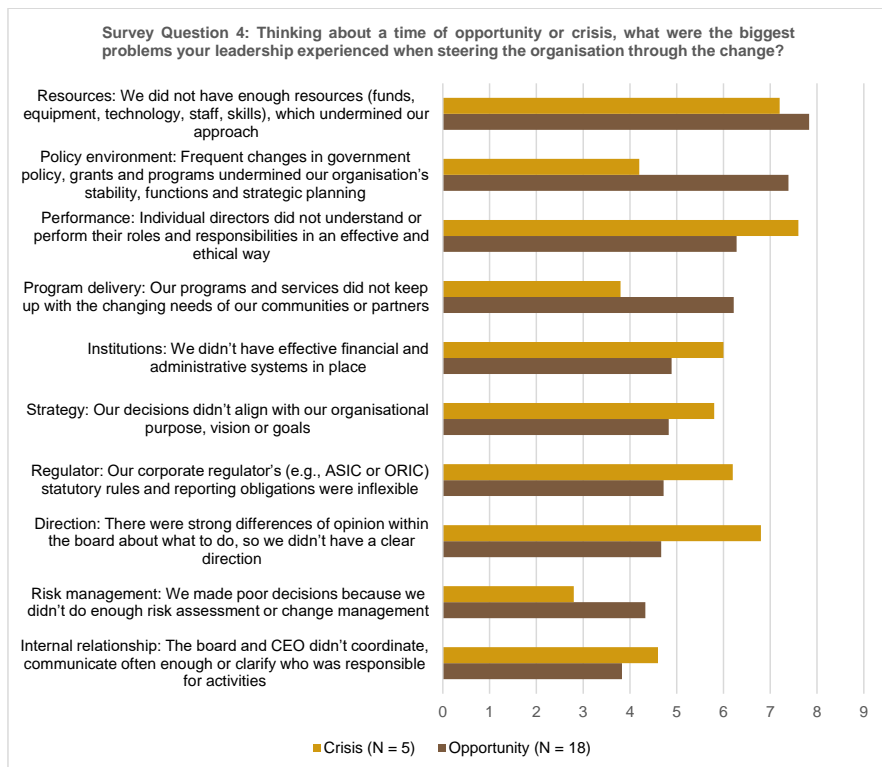
*A lot of [community members] will come [to meetings] but no one wants to be a member. And you know, it's interesting how when, you know, I ask, 'Why don't you become a member?' They say, 'Oh, you know, we're very happy with what you're doing'. That's I think, First Nations way of responding. We're very happy with what you're doing. So why would we want to? It's almost like, if you're not doing right then we will become involved ... And I have seen that in other organisations, every time there is a controversial issue a whole lot of people turn up. Otherwise, it's hard to get even a quorum (Participant 13, Interview).*

#### **Question 4: The barriers organisations face when navigating opportunity and crisis**

Again, when asked about the problems that their leadership experienced steering the organisation, they were invited to focus on a time of opportunity or crisis. For those that focused on opportunity, insufficient resources, an unstable policy environment and then poor performance and program delivery (equally) were ranked the top 3 barriers for the organisation in taking up the opportunity (Figure 3). For those that focused on a time of crisis, poor performance, insufficient resources, and unclear board direction were ranked the top 3 barriers to navigating the crisis (Figure 3).

Insufficient risk management was ranked as the lowest and second lowest barriers during a crisis, or opportunity, consecutively. This may indicate that these organisations have effective risk management processes in place. For those that responded to times of opportunity, other lower scoring factors included internal relationships and direction. For those that responded about times of crisis, program delivery and policy environment were ranked lowest (Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Biggest problems that leadership experienced steering the organisation during an opportunity, compared with during a time of crisis



Source: Question 3 (Appendix A).

**Q.4 Survey results contextualised**

In terms of not having the required resources (funds, equipment, technology, staff, skills), having an impact in times of both opportunity and crisis, one leader told how:

*There's a lot of issues behind the scenes in regard to leases and land tenure, and those sorts of things that create exponential problems for us, because we're not able to get accommodation for our staff. So, you know, we're having to deal with one person having to do four jobs instead of one person just focusing on one job. And then the unskilled workers within the community, that creates an issue with ourselves as well, because we want to provide the training and give them the capacity to build up to those positions. But then we need to have the time to be able to do that. So we're time poor in that space. Sometimes we don't have the resources to be able to do that. Other times, we just don't have what it takes to be able to create that sustainability within the community. But then on top of that, you also have the whole issue of generational trauma. You have this negativity, this cloud hanging over the community, you've got the issues around the federal government, paying job keepers. So people who were in part time positions, were getting paid as much as they were on the dole, so they just quit their jobs. You know, it's, it's not just one thing, it's a whole*

*stack of things that when you put it all together, it just turns into a melting pot of, basically, shit (Participant 7, Interview).*

And another explained:

*Training is very costly. A lot of organisations can't afford that training. But I think there's a lot of training that's needed because what I see is a lot of other organisations that reach out to me when they have a problem. And I keep saying to them, you need to get yourself trained in governance. You know, no one knows how to do a CEO appraisal, they don't know how to – doesn't matter whether they're First Nations or not First Nations, or whatever. They have a duty and you have to uphold that. But if you don't arm yourself with that knowledge, you can't hold people accountable. That's where I think the biggest failures come in for Indigenous organisations – the board is not armed with that knowledge (Participant 13, Interview).*

One organisation leader explained how competition for staff who are attracted to higher paying government roles presents a significant barrier:

*Policy driven government(s) have created a challenging environment within the job market by paying overs, and this has severe impact on community organisation[s] to recruit suitable staff (Participant 8, Survey).*

Another organisation leader described how individual Directors not understanding their roles impacted on the effectiveness of the board:

*Until we accessed the leadership [equipped] to assist the board to understand our constitutional objectives and how to resist external undermining governance influences, we struggled (Participant 18, Survey).*

'Valuable support and resources from our partners, funders and stakeholders' was presented as a supportive governance factor in Survey question 1. Two organisations commented that a lack of support from their partners was a barrier for them. One specified that it was government agencies who were unsupportive, and the other identified 'team building and leadership' as the key areas that they would like more support in.

A third organisation's leader noted that the actions of the regulator and stakeholders were in fact the cause of serious problems for them:

*Serious breaches from public servants and unprofessional bias conduct created a serious situation for this organisation ... Governance training, discussions and fair resolution was denied by the very institutions that regulate our activities and a key federal funding body. [The] malicious behaviours and actions from [these bodies] lead by non-Aboriginal, White Men resulted in setting this corporation [up] for failure. The fact these public men in power expressed openly to third parties their expectations for this organisation to fail and disappear, is outrageous ... Currently none of the actors that behaved poorly had taken responsibility for their actions but have used their public role to employ third party Aboriginal people to obstruct communication and act with[out] transparency [or] responsibility (Participant 10, Survey).*

Frequent changes in government policy, grants and programs undermining an organisation's stability, functions and strategic planning was also spoken about at length:

*[T]he government sort of wanted to commandeer the model and this sort of thing. So we were looking at losing ownership of it in something that we designed and developed and delivered, so we didn't feel that was the relationship that we wanted to have moving forward. So what we've done, because this, this is all about developing a model that'll work ... So what actually happened was the government within their structures are on three and four years cycles, ministers change and shift. People come and go, and you*

*deal with a lot of people in a short period of time. So you're continually having conversations about what you're doing, and impact and results and all this sort of business.*

*Whereas with philanthropy, you're generally dealing with a philanthropist, their family, husband and wife. They're the decision makers ... So there's different levels of certainty. Now, I've experienced myself in previous government business that you can be the best community organisation going around. And if they need to find some funding, or strip back some funding for some reason, then you can get hit, and your doors can close. And it's like you never existed. So we didn't want to have that hanging over us (Participant 8, Interview).*

The same organisation leader succinctly articulated their organisation's strategic response to such funding-related barriers:

*So we're not in the space of if government rang me tomorrow, and said, I've got 10 million bucks, and I want you to design and deliver juvenile justice program. I would say to them, that's not what we do. And we're not interested. And we're not going to do teenage pregnancy and we're not going to do mental health. We've got our lane. We're in the lane. We're there for 50 years (Participant 8, Interview).*

With respect to factors leadership have faced when navigating a crisis, one organisation provided a clear example of how, for them, ineffective institutions (rules, policies, and procedures) negatively affected decision-making:

*The organisation went through a period of rapid growth, and had been in a positive position in many ways, but decisions to grow had been made without adequate management and financial systems being put in place and there was an extended period with no permanent manager to maintain clarity of roles in the staff team. While commitment of board and staff was high – there was not clarity or discipline about the different roles of the board, CEO and staff which resulted in some extremely confusing communication. When the going got tough rumour rather than strong policy and clear rules of governance impacted action for some people (Participant 5, Survey).*

A second organisation noted that the actions of the regulator and stakeholders were in fact the cause of serious problems for them:

*[The] Gov[ernment] funded agency responsible for training and oversight of effective governance failed our corporation ... they had no interest in our corporate objectives. ORIC for many years failed to respond, until we accessed effective leadership (Participant 18, Survey).*

To this issue of individual directors not understanding or performing their roles and responsibilities in an effective and ethical way, one leader told how:

*The biggest challenge would be to bring on those skilled directors. Some board members felt that they knew everything, and they didn't need other people coming in telling them what to do. And some people embraced it. It was quite a journey to embark on. Once it happened everyone changed their minds very quickly, because they started building really good relationships with the two [skills-based recruited directors] (Participant 13, Interview).*

Finally, providing further context to the low ranking that risk management received as a barrier in times of both opportunity and crisis, one leader's follow-up interview provided some support to the inference that Elder organisations generally have highly effective risk management processes in place. They described how:

... [E]ach year, [we] go through and identify what those upcoming risks might be and how we might, how the organisation might deal with them. [Because,] it's a major thing that is going to really assist with being around for a longer time. Looking ahead at what's going to happen in the next 12 months... It also takes away the crisis driven mentality (Participant 16, Interview).

#### Q.4 Further interview insights

Further insights to emerge from the interviews on the topic of survey question 4 included a serious lack of external support from government agencies, based on a perceived and/or actual responsibility to provide support. Conversely, an over-reliance on external agencies in the past was cited by one interviewee as an issue related to lack of internal capacity to navigate change. The same leader connected this issue to an absence of a strategic plan, or policies and procedures in place, when they entered the organisation.

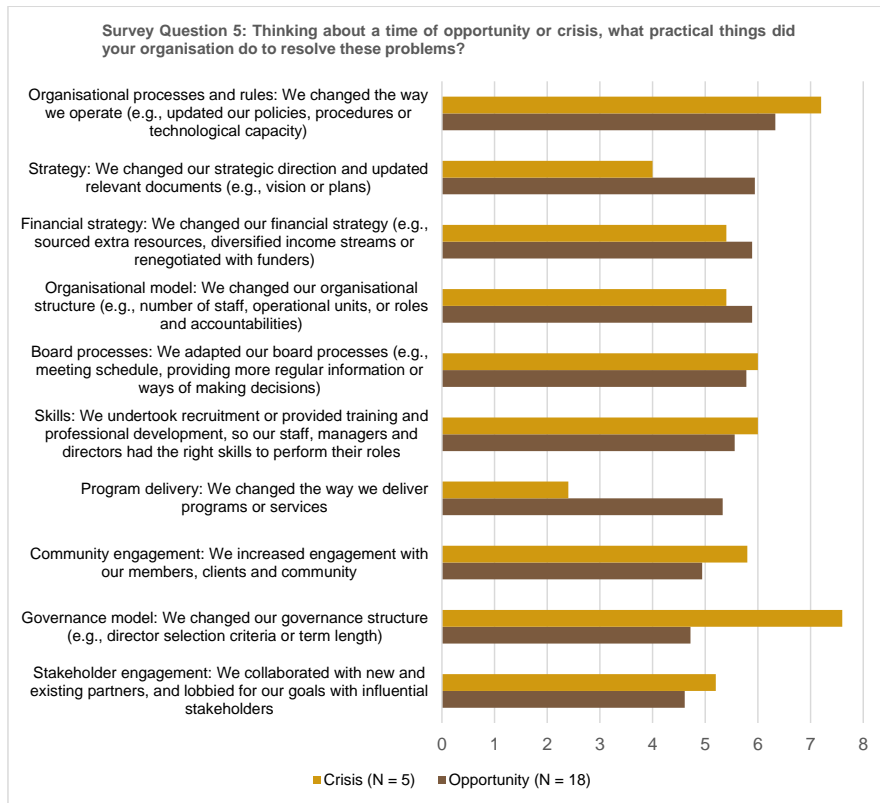
This set of circumstances highlights two important points. Firstly, that an organisation that has *lasted* for more than 20 years does not necessarily equate to an organisation having *excelled* for the full duration of those 20 years (and may indeed have spent a portion of that period in administration, for instance). The second point, related to the first, is that just because an organisation may have struggled in some key governance areas does not necessarily mean that it's done for. To the contrary, and to link back to the discussion above around thinking about governance factors in a holistic sense; an organisation may be just one key element away from bringing together everything it is doing well, to a point where it is then able to make significant inroads toward its organisational objectives. The implication here is that a combination of factors may lead to a critical juncture that becomes a tipping point into vulnerability and failure, but it might also be a critical juncture which launches an opportunity to resolve any issues and thus lead into a period renewal and revitalisation. This suggests that at such critical junctures, it is really important to stop and reflect on what's happening, what is missing, where is the gap, what is needed. People often don't have time or make time to take that reflective time out.

#### Question 5: The actions organisations take to address barriers

Again choosing to focus on either a time of organisational crisis or opportunity, participants were asked about actions that organisational leadership took to resolve barriers in such times. Among those who responded about an opportunity, changing organisational processes and rules, revising strategic direction, and revising financial strategy were ranked the top 3 actions for an organisation to resolve barriers to harnessing that opportunity (Figure 4). Changing the governance model, changing organisational processes and rules, and undertaking recruitment or professional development were ranked the top 3 actions for an organisation to resolve barriers through a crisis (Figure 4).

In a time of opportunity, stakeholder engagement, governance model, and community engagement ranked lowest as actions taken by an organisation. In a time of crisis, it was program delivery, strategy and stakeholder engagement (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Actions organisational leadership took to resolve barriers during an opportunity, compared with during a time of crisis



Source: Responses to Survey question 5 (Appendix A).

**Q.5 Survey results contextualised**

The same organisation who commented that a lack of organisational institutions caused difficulties in decision-making, explained that they began to refer to their Rule Book and developed new governance documents to provide guidance when leaders could not agree.

Another leader spoke about how their organisation changed its organisational structure to resolve barriers:

*It's definitely been a very rough road for the organisation and for the community.... So, where we're situated now is that we've been able to get past our difficulties, our crawling stage, you know, falling over, all those sorts of things. Now we're on the up and up, and we just need to keep that momentum going. And so having put in place the strategies, the governance models, the management structure, so that when I go, I'm hoping, really hoping, that the governance and the management structures that are in place, are going to still be there – because they weren't there when I started – and that the next person that comes in can build*

*on top of what's there now and really take the organisation in a direction that it needs to go (Participant 7, Interview).*

The same leader elaborated on this:

*'I think if you don't have the strategic plan, if you don't have budgets, don't have expenditure, or capital budgets – which we didn't have when I first came in – If you don't have your governance controls in place in regards to staff management, HR processes, those sorts of things. It all paints a really bleak picture, if all you're doing is being very reactive, in a crisis situation ... Because we knew it was going to happen. We knew it was coming. And we knew that we had to be prepared. It's the same thing with the [opportunity spoken about]; We knew that it was coming, we knew that we had to be prepared. So we had to put things in place to make sure that we weren't doing everything at the eleventh hour, but we, you know, there are still some teething problems. We've still got some issues there that weren't recognised at the time. But then again, this is completely new to us. We're working through those issues. But I think the thing is, if you're as prepared as you possibly can, for a crisis, regardless of whether it happens or not, at least you're prepared and you've put processes and policies in place, for in case that occurs, you can fall back on those things, rather than being reactive, trying to be as proactive as possible in the way that we're managing and the way that we're thinking. Try to think big picture so I keep on saying to my staff, 'think big picture. Always think big picture; what's gonna happen tomorrow, what's going to happen in 12 months' time. And how do we get there?' (Participant 7, Interview).*

And another spoke about the importance of organisational strategy, not just for guiding an organisation, but also as a signal to any external interests:

*I think for me at the end of the day, these policy and procedures also provide not only guidance internally, for a start for the board, but I truly believe it also provides a level of confidence for external stakeholders. That it's a reflection of, at the end of the day, good, proper governance that the organisation has (Participant 19, Interview).*

Regarding financial strategy, another leader explained:

*The reality is that there's a lot of people out there that understand that things need to change. Yeah, understand that things are broken. Things that have been tried and invested in, in the past, haven't worked to the level and the intent, initially, and something different had to be done. But we brought along something different. And not only that, over the years, we've brought along the evidence base that proves that if you do this this way, this is what you're going to get. And philanthropists ... sit down with me, and they talk about how they can help us do what we do ... This model can change a lot of communities. And you guys need to step up, put your hand in your pocket, get involved, partner with us, partner with corporate Australia, partner with philanthropy Australia, all other philanthropists and do this as a team (Participant 8, Interview).*

#### **Q.5 Further interview insights**

Though not explicitly discussed in all interviews, a clear theme to emerge across the examples discussed was the role of leadership – both at individual and collective levels within organisations – in navigating organisational change. Such dedicated leadership appears to have played a decisive role in steering many of these organisations toward constructive, directed change, in times of crisis and opportunity alike. As one leader stated:

*...And that was when the board said 'no, we're not prepared to do that. We're going to [do it this way instead]. And really the whole premise behind that whole thing was about self-determination, self-*

*empowerment, and providing jobs and employment for ... generations to come; for the next 40 to 50 years (Participant 7, Interview).*

Also evident within these examples were the great lengths organisational leaders go to embed strong governance strategies into their organisations, in a manner which would ensure their resilience beyond the involvement of any one particular leader:

*Initially, we were failing those [accreditation standards] and then that's when the board really realised 'Oh, there's a lot more than just sitting on different boards and coming here'. And because what they do is they actually have an interview with the board, without [the CEO]. And a lot of them just had no idea what they were talking about. I always had this fear around the board, that there was too much reliance on [the CEO]. I'd always tell them, take [the CEO] out of the equation, because too much trust is not good. Because you know, okay, [this particular CEO] might not do anything [in bad faith], but you put the same trust in someone else in that position, you won't know what hit you. You know, because a CEO can do so many things without the board knowing and without the staff knowing. So I keep saying 'your job is managing the CEO. So you have to know everything they're doing, and not taking every word, always looking at the reports and making them accountable for that' (Participant 13, Interview).*

Such measures, in some instances are yet to be tested. For instance, leaders who have worked to put mechanisms in place to ensure the organisation has the governance structures and processes in place to function beyond their involvement, are still with these organisations. Indeed, a final commonality among the organisational leaders interviewed is that they had each been with their organisations, as either a board member or CEO/general manager, for substantial periods of time: three of those interviewed had been in their position for around 10 years, one for just under 20 years and another had been with their organisation just short of 30 years.

Even so, changing the governance model and attention to training and development were also notable topics to arise from the interviews, as actions organisations took to resolve leadership-specific barriers encountered during an opportunity or crisis. For instance, education around what the roles and responsibilities of board members are, led to different ways of thinking about who should be a board member throughout the community for one organisation. For another organisation, it led to changing the criteria for board member diversity, and introducing some 'skills based' appointees to complement the community elected board members.

Another approach spoken about was to scale back the number of board members to less than one-half (from 14 to 6) to assist with being able to meet more frequently and productively for key decision-making sessions at this critical juncture in the organisation's life course. Notably, for this organisation, the decision was made not to change the constitution to limit board member numbers officially, rather, the strategy was to retain a level of flexibility to extend numbers back out when the organisation felt this would be in its interest to do so.

## What works: Organisations' tips and strategies for longevity

Before finishing, survey participants were asked to share a strategy or tip they had learnt about adaptation and renewal based on their organisation's 20 plus years' experience. 100% of organisations answered the question and six of them shared more than one idea. All comments were categorised under common themes. In the course of our conversations, interview participants also spoke further to the strategies raised in the survey responses. We summarise these strategies and tips below, by theme.

Content from the follow-up interviews was also examined for any bigger picture lessons offered by the organisational leaders. We looked at themes of what has worked for organisations, what has not, as well as



anything the participants proposed they might do differently with the benefit of hindsight. Strategies of what has worked for organisations have been incorporated into the section below. Insights into what has not worked, along with what they would do differently are summarised in the following section.

**a) Organisation Tip: Downward accountability**

Six organisations commented on what we categorise as forms of 'downward accountability' to their communities. These organisations used a range of phrases to describe this, such as, 'bowing to the wants of the people' or 'responsibility to deliver to the community' or 'Aboriginal community controlled'. The commentary centred around maintaining relevance to the community by keeping up with their changing needs and acting accordingly, consulting community on major changes, and creating a leadership model where the directors are 'servants not bosses' (Participant 18, Survey) as one leader put it. Another provided the following additional context:

*Respect for the membership, their needs, wants and values is huge. And a representative governance structure so that the seats on the board represent and [acknowledge] the different groups represented (in this case geographic regions). A properly and transparently elected board representing the members is a key step in making sure the voices at the grass roots are heard. A system of annual regional meetings [of] the group in communities before the AGM is another way that voices at the grass roots are listened to. Respect for those voices, and regular consultation and engagement, means the organisation can be confident it has a mandate to speak for people in community (Participant 5, Survey).*

**b) Organisation Tip: Be smart with your finances**

Four organisations outlined their financial strategies as being critical. One organisation encouraged others to continually review their financial structures, a second encouraged maintaining financial reserves, and a third suggested making use of funding support available such as resourcing for administrative support available to PBCs. A fourth discussed the balancing act between achieving financial stability and meeting community priorities:

*Financial stability and security is key. But there needs to be a balance between how you achieve that financial security but also meet community expectations and remain a community organisation. We do not have an answer as we continue to struggle with this juggling act – trying to service key donors/funding bodies etc while ensuring that we do not lose sight of our values and purpose (Participant 19, Survey).*

**c) Organisation Tip: Foster honest and transparent communication**

Among survey respondents, three organisations discussed the value of honest and transparent communication. One noted that this type of open communication between their directors fostered 'trust and integrity', which in turn facilitated the 'ability to make fair but hard decisions as a Board when we have needed to'. Another noted that their regular monthly meetings helped them to maintain this type of communication. A similar view was articulated in one of the interviews:

*...[Y]ou have to have a place where people can talk openly and honestly, and be frank about it (Participant 9, Interview).*

Trust was an important enabler mentioned at several different points in people's follow-up interviews.

**d) Organisation Tip: Clear, shared long-term vision**

Three organisations discussed the importance of a clear, shared vision. One organisation noted that their cohort of volunteers were motivated by 'a shared vision of doing the right thing for our people' (Participant 21, Survey).

A second outlined their strategy to reinforce and maintain a strong vision by reiterating it at gatherings. A third organisation described their ways to stay focused, which were to regularly refer back to the original vision of the founding Elders, 'to ground us', and to stay focused on tangible outcomes rather than become overtly political, instead letting their work 'speak' for itself (Participant 6, Survey).

One interview participant spoke about how strong communication and clear, shared vision go hand in hand, in terms of what an organisation needs in its leadership:

*[You need a leader] ... that is able to demonstrate big ideas, bigger picture, kind of way of thinking ... But also somebody who's able to look at the human factor, and have demonstrated experience of being able to build capacity of people in community ... I think really, the biggest thing is being able to communicate with people. And if you can't do that, then you're not going to be successful (Participant 7, Interview).*

#### **e) Organisation Tip: Commitment to self-determination**

Three organisations considered the role of self-determination in their organisational success. One described how their directors' commitment to self-determination inspired others to get onboard with their mission:

*...Shared respect for and commitment to self-determination is the other major factor which has held the organisation together. Strong Indigenous leaders have inspired other Indigenous leaders and young people to join in and stand up for the mission to work together to keep art, country and culture strong (Participant 5, Survey).*

A second outlined the connection between self-determination and resourcing, stating that, for their organisation to effectively practice self-determination, governments 'need to make way and facilitate realistic resources' (Participant 10, Survey). The third explained how their organisation navigated two-way governance (being simultaneously accountable to their peoples' priorities and ways of working, and to broader legal and regulatory requirements) to manage and care for their land. This organisation designed culturally-centred programs, administrative support and other services that also aligned with their Rule Book and relevant government legislation. They also included Elders in their decision-making structures, again in a way that met their corporate governance requirements.

#### **f) Organisation Tip: Preparation, planning and strategy**

Several organisations discussed the importance of planning for the future. One leader suggested:

*...Always think big picture; what's gonna happen tomorrow, what's going to happen in 12 months' time. And how do we get there? (Participant 7, Interview).*

Another noted that having a 5-year strategic plan was helpful to guide their vision, with another suggesting that such plans should be written in your own grammar and understanding. A further two organisations recommended an approach of adapting with changes that happen around you, and making your own changes (where needed) in response. A further two organisations focused on aligning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture with their organisational culture. One stated their aim as:

*[To] ensure that from the top (Board) to all levels of organisation that everyone understands the importance of our culture and our organisation's culture, and they live and breathe it every day and in every way (Participant 19, Survey).*

One example of this was to incorporate cultural practices, such as, 'care for country and children [and] passing on knowledge' (Participant 6, Survey) with succession planning. Another was to take up new opportunities which match your cultural values.

#### **g) Organisation Tip: Invest in organisational governance development and education**

One leader spoke about the value of governance education and training:

*...I think there's a lot of training that's needed because what I see is a lot of other organisations that reach out to me when they have a problem. And I keep saying to them, you need to get yourself trained in governance. You know, no one knows how to do a CEO appraisal, they don't know how to make – doesn't matter whether they're First Nations or not First Nations, or whatever. They have a duty and you have to uphold that. But if you don't arm yourself with that knowledge, you can't hold people accountable. That's where I think the biggest failures come in for Indigenous organisations – the board is not armed with that knowledge. If Governance Institute can provide some good training, and repeated training. I think that's really what has worked for [the organisation]. We repeat the training every year ... For the second time [attending training], you'll find that they will ask questions, more questions than the first one, and it really builds that skill (Participant 13, Interview).*

A different approach to governance learning and development by an organisation with limited resources and governance support has been to encourage a broad range of community members to have a go as a director, to build wide understanding and experience:

*[I've started] engaging as many members to come onto the board as possible, even if out of a dozen meetings of the year they only attend four times, I'm actually receiving this feedback of, 'well, I had no idea' and 'it was really good being a director and understanding what goes on, what these fellows talk about, and seeing how you look at your money and how decisions are made and quorums'. So it's an education process on the long haul, looking at the long view (Participant 18, Interview).*

#### **h) Organisation Tip: Clarity of roles and responsibilities**

Two organisations discussed how skilled board members and senior managers who know their roles and responsibilities make a significant impact on organisational growth and performance. Similarly, one interviewee further articulated that directors should not get involved in disputes and complaints concerning staff and/or community members and that there must be a formal process in place that is followed, stating succinctly: 'You have to learn to set that boundary' (Participant 13, Interview).

#### **i) Organisation Tip: Invest in, and value, your people**

Three organisations spoke about the value in investing in building and maintaining long-term relationships with your staff, with one in particular flagging the importance of staff to organisational sustainability. Another spoke about investing in knowledge and skill development for both staff and leadership as integral to keeping an organisation running well.

Another leader spoke about how working to ensure diversity, and fair representation exists across boards is an important consideration for signalling respect and inclusion. For two of the leaders this intersected with issues of organisational sustainability and succession planning; one sighting a long-term goal being for one of their program attendees to eventually take over as CEO, saying 'hopefully one of our kids is the CEO, I mean, that's the target for me' (Participant 8, Interview). The other stated how mentoring is about:

...[L]istening and having a respectful relationship, older and a younger person. So in fact, a lot of the mentoring is so important for the big transition arrangements we're seeing – between director CEO to deputy, or Board Chair to Deputy Chair. But often there's no mentoring at all because one person's gone and another person comes in and they're totally new. If they're lucky, they might be already in a deputy arrangement. But mostly people come in totally new and the previous person has gone. When there's a 12-month overlap it shows what can be achieved out that human cultural values investment side of mentoring. You just don't get that over two days or two weeks (Participant 16, Interview).

Finally, one CEO conveyed their organisation's fortune to have the ongoing patronage and guidance of their founding director:

*We are very lucky that we have our founding director on the board. We call him the father of [organisation]. He is 89 years old. He's still active on the [organisation's] board. We're very lucky that he's still with us, he's a real visionary (Participant 13, Interview).*

#### **j) Organisation Tip: Maintain accountability**

A further two organisations highlighted the importance of accountability. They suggested that clearly articulated objectives with checkpoints, which are written down and communicated effectively is the way to keep each other accountable.

#### **k) Some final organisation tips**

A number of additional tips were articulated singularly by survey and or interview participants. These include:

- keep good records and files of everything
- maintain strong partnerships
- be in charge of your own wellbeing and harness the power of healing through storytelling to address intergenerational trauma
- evaluate yourself regularly, and use the data produced to strengthen your organisation and tell your story
- 'stick to your lane' rather than getting sucked into the agendas of your funders.

Finally, one organisation shared their principles for success: 'be innovative, risk averse, and surround yourself with the right people' (Participant 24, Survey).

### **What hasn't worked?**

While interview responses to the question 'what has worked well for your organisation' were quite broad, responses to 'what hasn't worked' were more targeted. In particular, they sat within the two categories of *reliance on government* (financial and otherwise) and *inappropriate, substandard board behaviour*.

#### **a) Organisation Tip: Avoid over-reliance on government**

On the topic of government reliance, it is important to note that the leaders were not altogether opposed to receiving governance funding. Rather, the issues centred around the burdensome reporting and other requirements that come with funding, such as limitations surrounding how the funds may be spent, and on what. The impact of short-term funding cycles on organisational planning was raised as a vulnerability for organisations; where even the best run organisations may unexpectedly receive funding cuts and have to close up shop. It was

noted how, in turn, this orientates an organisation away from its own agenda, in the direction of those of the funder, resulting in a feeling of losing 'ownership' of what an organisation does:

*Yes, so with government funding back in the early part of the century, we developed successful employment programs, and through those sorts of relationships with – you know, on yearly grants, three-yearly grants and those sorts of things. And my understanding is – or the story is that – the government sort of wanted to commandeer the model and this sort of thing. So we were looking at losing ownership of it in something that we designed and developed and delivered, so we didn't feel that was the relationship that we wanted to have moving forward. So what we've done, because this, this is all about developing a model that'll work. And maybe that's the time when the government gets involved, when all the ground work's done (Participant 8, Interview).*

A similar point was made by another leader, about the potential to form more balanced relationships with government once an organisation has established itself:

*'We don't need to go to the government and ask for a handout. We can actually go to the government and say we're going to go and spend some money on this, would you want to chuck in some to help us get there? It changes the focus from being an organisation that relies, or is co-dependent on the government, to an organisation that has control over their own governance, their own management, their own destiny. And we can go to the government and say, 'look, we've got this here, would you like to be part of what we have got?'; And more often than not, they lap it up, because it ticks all their KPIs [Key Performance Indicators], and they really want to be involved in an organisation that is moving forward and ticking some of those KPIs that, that they can also say, you know, we're doing something in this space. It's a much easier place to work than to be in a place where you're always asking for money (Participant 7, Interview).*

One organisation spoke about their frustration with government regulatory bodies having no 'teeth' in responding to organisations, or dealing with particular members found to be doing the wrong thing. There are all these rules around reporting and compliance but then no repercussion for those not complying:

*You see the structures in place to oversee governance and compliance, to correct governance, but what's the incentive for complying? And if you don't comply, there's really no disincentive either (son of Participant 18, Interview).*

Another interviewee spoke about how, in their view, government structures of funding and service delivery had contributed to government dependent mentalities within their organisation:

*I have my view, I don't know whether people would agree with it. I feel as though many Aboriginal organisations over the last 40 years have been welfare centric, have always been on the handout line. And they've been treated as such by funding bodies. And that in itself has a psychological change for people who are running the organisation, people who are working in your organisation (Participant 7, Interview).*

#### **b) Organisation Tip: Stamp out inappropriate, substandard board behaviour**

Regarding the second category of inappropriate, substandard board behaviour, one interviewee spoke about the problems arising from having a Board Chair who is wish-washy or under confident in their role, or don't have the required skill set to run the organisation:

*...when there's no confidence in the figurehead, the chairperson or the CEO – that's when a board goes off the rails (Participant 16, Interview).*

Another related issue raised was board members with outdated thinking and an unwillingness to adapt and embrace change. One leader's view was that it is important for founding members to step back at some point to allow their organisations to continue to evolve, under new leadership. However, as demonstrated above in Participant 13's excerpt regarding their organisation's good fortune to have a founding member still involved in the organisation after almost 50 years, this view is not universally held. What matters is being able to critically assess the ongoing value of longer-serving leaders, to ensure they continue to contribute constructively to the goals of the organisation.

Finally, it was made clear by a number of interviewees in different contexts, that 'rogue' board members acting outside of the rules is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated by their organisations. In the words of one:

*And I see it over and over again ... where the greater, the reason why we are here is forgotten, and [board members] get caught up in these personal issues (Participant 13, Interview).*

### What would you do differently?

When asked what they would do differently, interview participants were pragmatic, and with little regret. There appeared to be a general acknowledgement of the 'life course' of organisations involving ups and downs, and having to face the hard times head on. As one interviewee put it:

*...I mean, if I look back on our sort of trajectory from 2012, to where we are now, I think every decision that we made – I wouldn't go back on it (Participant 19, Interview).*

In making it through a significant organisational crisis, that took a great toll on the organisation, another leader reflected:

*I don't think we could have done anything differently. Because that was the mindset. If we're talking about people's personalities, we can't really control that. You know. When I say, we all must know what our duties are and where our boundaries are. That's something that we can get people to sign a code of conduct, or, all these things. But how you live that is up to you, isn't it? (Participant 13, Interview).*

## Synthesised insights from the data and analyses

In this section, the evidence of the qualitative and quantitative data sources has been synthesised under emerging themes arising out of an analysis of key factors explored in both survey and interviews, and then contextualised by newly collated data giving a national overview of all Elder organisations. The emerging picture has been further considered in terms of the current literature debates about organisational life course and performance. Using this triangulation method for data sources and evidence, a number of insights emerge to do with the capabilities that constitute resilient adaptation. We argue they have strong resonance with the practical experience and stories told to us by Elder organisation leaders, and resonate with our extensive previous fieldwork experience with Indigenous organisations. The findings usefully extend on the gaps in the literature, and produce new insights that hopefully offer practical guidance to other organisations – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – in building future capability for resilient adaptation in their organisational practice.

We separate the below insights into three sections: (1) Overarching Insights, (2) Internal insights (those which pertain to internal governance matters) and (3) External Insights (those which involve external agencies and stakeholders, in particular, government).

## Overarching insights into capabilities

Our research findings indicate that for Elder organisations:

### a) Dynamic life courses

Organisation trajectories are not characterised by neat linear, sequential progressions, but rather are dynamic, involving periods of stability interspersed with sometimes tumultuous and sometimes incremental change. Even periods of apparent stability require an alertness to changing community dynamics, and the impact of changing government policy and funding frameworks. This creates a characteristic recycling of stable phases, interspersed with points of stagnation, decline, crises, renewal and re-emergence.

While each life course is idiosyncratic, the research has identified common transitions and tipping points that do appear to arise for every organisation. How an organisation governs those points in its life course determines its subsequent trajectory.

### b) Critical junctures

There are key points in an organisation's life course where they may face a critical juncture for their future viability. Arrival at such junctures can be triggered by a broad spectrum of internal and external impetuses. They can seem to appear suddenly as opportunities (e.g. for one organisation it was deciding to take over the running of the community airport, and so needing to do fast, robust risk planning), or are a lurking problem revealed in smaller incidents that incrementally accumulate into a larger tipping point (e.g. another organisation deciding they did need to respond to inappropriate board behaviour; and another with board members continually interfering with operational business).

### c) Common transitions can become critical junctures

All the organisations had experience of going through big transitions; a number of these were common, and so have a degree of predictability that could be planned for. For example, experiencing a major financial change in bottom-line funding and resources, having a high flow of top-quality or poor-quality staff; the transition from claiming native title, to having it recognised, and then to forming a PBC to manage newly recognised rights and responsibilities. Another important transition is the departure or arrival of a new CEO or new Board members. Yet another transition is taking up a major opportunity or a new service model.

These were prominent examples of what can be a period of great opportunity or challenge. The outcome was dependent upon the organisation's internal ability to harness such opportunities or govern the crisis impacts, and on the kinds of external capabilities and support mechanisms they could mobilise to ensure the organisation could withstand transition. Such transitions can quickly become a critical juncture leading to a tipping point.

### d) Ability to mobilise capabilities

The range of capabilities that are directly within the control and reach of an organisation to navigate such critical junctures, will determine what options organisations can call upon to respond, and thus which opportunities may be harnessed, or which crises can be averted. Key individuals (CEOs and Chairs of Boards) play a crucial role in bringing their abilities and experience to bear on creating strategies that activate an organisation's capabilities to deal with the situation at hand. Conversely, when necessary capabilities are not within reach, such junctures may become a tipping point for an organisation, leading to a period of crisis. In one such instance the organisation was aware it lacked the specific area of expertise, so brought in a new executive with the ability to steer the organisation away from looming insolvency.

**e) Opportunities and crises intersect.**

A change caused by opportunity or crisis can be best understood as 'two sides of the same coin'. That is, depending on the circumstances, an opportunity can be equally a challenge to navigate. Conversely, a challenge may be exposed to be an opportunity in disguise. What matters is the adaptive capability of an organisation to respond, prevent, circumvent, mobilise or recover at critical junctures. Interestingly, while survey responses tended to focus on opportunities, in the interviews, people spent more time discussing times of crisis and how they were (or are being) overcome. Furthermore, while in the survey we asked participants to focus on a time of *either* crisis or opportunity, across the interviews, it became apparent that such events are often less discrete; instead, crisis and opportunity were revealed to be closely intertwined as parts of the same story of how the organisation found its way forward.

**f) A holistic approach to governance and management**

This was raised in the comments section of the survey responses, and spoken about throughout the course of the follow-up interviews. The strong view was that no one governance factor is more important than another. Several respondents noted feeling uncomfortable about ranking factors in order of importance, because a *collection* of factors was critically important to address their challenge. Rather, it is the *recipe* of how you combine a number of the essential ingredients together that determines an organisation's success in navigating change and staying the course to achieve the organisation's objective. The particular combination of capabilities differed depending on the specifics of the challenge or opportunity, and the organisation's context.

A holistic strategy was apparent not only in how capabilities were approached as a cohesive set of tools to be mobilised, but also in respect to the deliberate changes being made by an organisation needing to happen in a holistic manner as well. For example, by risk planning, by making incremental changes, by looking at changes made in one area of the organisation for unintended consequences in other areas. Organisations also emphasised the need for a holistic approach to communication and participation; not excluding staff, board members or community people from having a say.

These characteristics demonstrate the diversity and complexity of kinds of change that confront Indigenous organisations across their life course. Our investigations show change arise from crises and opportunities and their dynamic intersections; they can be both internally and externally driven (as discussed below), and oftentimes by factors outside of an organisation's direct control. In all these diverse circumstances, the most significant factor in their ongoing viability and indeed vitality, is the way an organisation responds and, specifically, its own capabilities to respond adaptively when big changes happen. When the required set of capabilities are directly within the control and reach of organisations – and are reinforced by well-working institutions (rules) and procedures – critical junctures can be an opportunity. However, without the relevant capabilities and administrative backup, they have the potential to trigger periods of substantial crisis.

A related implication here is that there is no one 'right way' to govern a crisis or opportunity, and no single governance or management capability will deliver the solution. Rather, there are a *set* of intertwined capabilities that are essential survival ingredients. It is the recipe of *how* each of the essential ingredients are locally tailored and harnessed together that determines an organisation's success in navigating change and staying the course to attaining their objectives. A valuable learning from the Elder organisations here is to control the matters you do have control over, actively build the set of survival capabilities, and govern them well and properly.



## Inside the organisation: Insights into factors and capabilities

In terms of 'internal insights' (those which pertain to internal governance and management matters), our research indicates nine factors and capabilities that are significant for Elder organisations.

### a) Governance and leadership runs right through an organisation

Governance and leadership needs to be part of the whole organisation's approach and internal culture, not be seen as something that only sits 'at the top' of an organisation. In *different* ways staff, managers and boards can all show leadership within their own areas of responsibility. This means that, yes, there are separate roles, powers and decision making at each level, but the organisation needs all three areas of responsibility to be working in a cohesive integrated way, in order for whole-of-organisation governance to work well.

This insight emerged from the survey responses, particularly in relation to Questions 1 and 2, which asked about the factors which most support the organisation to adapt and renew. The top three factors for both opportunity and crisis are noticeably people-centric factors; being a shared purpose and vision, trusting and effective internal relationships, and skilled staff (Figure 1); and trusting and effective internal relationships, a can-do mindset, and skilled staff (Figure 1). Participants also spoke about the importance of patience and commitment of their members, directors and staff.

The long-established Elder organisations seem to be characterised by respecting the separate roles and responsibilities and powers, at the same time as demanding an *integrated* collaborative effort across all levels of the organisation. Such integrated governance effort is visible through tangible aspects of the organisation that had been deliberately nurtured; for example, by having strong institutions of policies and procedures so that people 'know their place', and by putting a high value on relationships built on honest and transparent engagement and mutual trust. Combined, these attributes emphasise the importance of the individuals, the people who make up the organisation. This includes their understanding of the organisation's goals, their individual roles in achieving these, and a dedication to ensuring their responsibilities are upheld. In this way, each individual has a *leading* part to play in an organisation working together to achieve its objectives.

### b) The power of organisational identity and vision

Every Elder organisation emphasised the importance to their ongoing viability of having a strong foundation of purpose and motivation, and that was firmly located in the needs of their community members or clients – and their direct role in contributing to those. This was often framed as a form of self-determination; that is, to ensure the community is in control of, and the number one beneficiary of, the organisation's work and service.

An organisation's identity was in turn enshrined in a vision statement for the whole organisation that became a point of stability and a litmus test as whether potential opportunities or changes would reinforce their purpose or not. This is a valuable strategy for avoiding mission creep and mitigating against unnecessary organisational stress. This insight stems from several organisations having made clear the importance of 'knowing oneself', being clear on your organisation's vision and objectives, and staying in 'your lane'. This extends to advice around saying no to opportunities if they don't fall within your remit, rather than saying yes to secure funding which may serve as a distraction – or worse, require so much by way of upward reporting obligations that they completely derail an organisation's agenda.

The organisations are motivated by the objective of creating positive outcomes for their communities. This was reflected across the interviews and the survey data (see Figure 2). Mirroring that importance is the view that what constitutes a positive outcome is the business of the community, rather than just a board or general manager, to determine. An organisation's outward-facing identity was driven by having a strong internal culture – an agreed

'way of doing things well' that appears to be strongly promoted by leaders via the intangible aspects of its ways of doing things together.

This insight is further reflected in the discussion above regarding 'what hasn't worked' for organisations. The first lesson was over-reliance upon government. Specifically relevant here is the tendency to accept funding, and adapt program or service delivery to better align with available government funding, but which may undermine broader self-determination goals.

### **c) Culture is a bedrock, it can't be cut out of organisations**

The place of their local and community Indigenous culture for these Elder organisations came out in every aspect of their work. One leader spoke of its overall importance in terms of their aim being to 'live and breathe it every day and in every way'. Wanting to create a positive outcome for their communities was the highest ranked cultural factor to support an organisation take up an opportunity (see Figure 2). This manifests in a number of their ways of doing business, including the prioritisation of community control (via downward accountability) and culturally-centred decision making (see Figure 1) by organisation leaders (both board and managers). The importance of culturally informed decision making is reflected in the survey findings for question 3, where it was considered one of the most important cultural factors which most supported organisations through a period of opportunity and crisis (see Figure 2). It was also seen as integral to broader organisational objectives of collective self-determination as a means of maintaining culturally distinct ways of knowing, being and doing. This reflects broader values of cultural legitimacy, community control and self-determination as a means of asserting their community members' right to maintain culturally distinct ways of knowing, being and doing.

These priorities could be seen at work internally in more horizontal decision-making structures, and externally, in their ongoing efforts to push back against governing institutions and values that are not designed for Indigenous ways of operating. Both actions require more work than the alternative and are more resource-intensive: community engagement, consulting, collective decision-making are time consuming, require lots of investment in communication and can be very expensive, particularly when those involved are spread over great distances. Pushing back, against the grain to do things differently to how governments and powerful agencies might prefer, or expect, means more work justifying your stance at the risk of raising tension in relationships with partners and stakeholders. And yet almost across the board for these Elder organisations, they remain a priority.

### **d) Downward accountability is the preferred direction**

Directly associated with the above is another key insight, which surrounds the importance placed on 'downward accountability' by the Elder organisations. This principle is often mentioned by Indigenous organisations but can be hard to do. The Elder organisation emphasised the *practical* effort they put into making downward accountability an integral part of how they run their organisations, and how they measure success. The commentary emphasised the importance of maintaining relevance to the community by keeping up with their changing needs and acting accordingly, by consulting the community on major changes, and creating a leadership model where the directors are 'servants not bosses'. That is, in making sure they are meeting their objectives, from the perspective of their constituencies.

In tandem with this is the apparent fluidity around who such organisations consider themselves accountable too: whether this is their 'members', 'clients' or a more broadly defined 'community' and set of valued Indigenous networks. This may relevantly expand and contract among client groups, organisation members and broader communities, depending on the context. It seems that these Elder organisations consider they have a responsibility to act in the interest of a community, which extends beyond their immediate members.

This insight triggers a number of follow-up questions beyond the scope of this research, such as what this approach might mean for organisations in times of opportunity and crisis? How do different situational constituencies impact upon their decision making? How are they determining what acting in the best interest of their community is? In the most immediate sense, however, this seemed uniformly shaped by these organisations' sense of public spiritedness and public duty. Downwards accountability to members was often posed by the organisations as a proper counter to Board directors or CEOs who act out of *selfish* determination, for their own personal ego or presumption of 'knowing best'. Having the latter kind of leadership could be taken as one sign of the potential for an adverse tipping point for an organisation.

#### **e) The role and rules for trust**

The role of trust within organisations is paramount. This insight came out of the survey responses, where trusting and effective internal relationships was considered key to supporting organisations through times of both crisis and opportunity (ranked as most supportive factor, and second most supportive factor consecutively) (Figure 1). This sentiment was also discussed across the course of numerous follow-up interviews. The challenge discussed by organisations is in seeking to balance trusting, respectful relationships with ensuring checks and balances are in place, and proper process is followed in order to govern well, and manage roles and relationships between board/ executive/ staff/ members/ community responsibly. It was noted to sometimes be a 'double-edged spear' in that if too much trust is given, then a CEO can act in ways the board does not want; and vice versa. Too little trust and the CEO can feel hampered in doing their job. Too much trust and community members disengage from the organisation. Too little and they intervene in unruly disruptive ways.

As one organisation leader explained, trust needs to be backed up by strong ground rules (institutions), and practice. This helps govern expectations of relationships and safeguards against any changes in leadership where trust alone may end up not being sufficient. In other words, Elder organisations nurtured and valued 'trust' as an actual behaviour to be delivered on, but did not rely solely upon that to govern and manage well. Rather they also institutionalise their solutions and strengths into strong guiding rules, processes and policies so that the organisation generates confidence and is not vulnerable to the flow of leaders and key staff.

#### **f) Board stability and strategic renewal**

This insight around long-standing board members was not posed as a specific survey question. Rather, it emerged from a number of the follow-up interviews, with founding members given particular mention. Long-serving board members can be of great value to organisations, but also a detriment to organisations; depending on the individuals and context. Some of the organisations had long-serving board members and pointed out the great value in times of unsettling change of having access to their deep corporate knowledge and experience. One leader spoke of the important role that older experienced directors have in providing mentorship and knowledge transfer to new, less experienced board members. Another spoke about their organisation's 'great fortune to still have their 'visionary' founding director involved in the organisation after almost 50 years. Another pointed out the role of long-serving board members in mentoring the Deputy CEO.

However, one leader had also experienced problems with long-serving directors, telling how they had encountered great resistance by some older directors when attempting to bring on new directors to broaden the collective expertise of the board and despite the move being in the best interest of the organisation. Another leader was adamant about the need for organisation founders to step back at some point, in order for an organisation to continue to survive, thrive and evolve with the contemporary context. This insight is further reflected in the discussion above regarding 'what hasn't worked' for organisations. One of two key themes to emerge was inappropriate, substandard board behaviour.

And so, it becomes apparent that it is not so much about how *long* a director may have served for, but rather whether they remain committed to move with the organisation, remain committed to the best interests of the organisation as those *change* over time. On the one hand, long-serving or arrogant board members who assume to have all the knowledge required to make a decision can cause problems when they in fact do not. When left unmanaged, such personalities can quickly become an obstacle to organisational innovation and adaptation in times of opportunity or crisis, and hold back younger board members or staff from having a say, or from building their own expertise. However, on the other hand, their potential value as long-term corporate knowledge holders, having an integral role to play in mentorship and knowledge transfer cannot be understated. Leadership qualities cannot be accumulated overnight – especially in a turbulent intercultural environment – rather they are built through exposure, knowledge sharing, and by instilling confidence in those less experienced. Given the importance of board direction during times of great change, having a board capable of being open-minded to new ideas and ways of doing things is critically important as is the ability to actively learn from previous experience, and continue to apply new learnings. Perhaps most valuable, are those who offer a realistic vision of how to navigate these changes.

Amongst the Elder organisations in this research, these leadership capabilities have been nurtured over a long period of time; they are effective survival skills. The caveat around this view is the dangers when a long-serving board member (or CEO) becomes entrenched, contentious and unilateral and so dominates discussion and decision making.

#### **g) Board–CEO relationship: Separate powers but collaborative practice**

In our conversations, all the organisations had very clear, robust views about the fact that Board members and CEO have their own set of roles and responsibilities and need to respect that in each other. But all spoke compellingly of the importance of having a strongly collaborative relationship in practice. In effect, a ‘separation of powers’ but ‘always working together’.

Two organisations discussed how skilled board members and senior managers who know their roles and responsibilities, and perform them well, make a significant impact on organisational growth and performance. Similarly, one spoke to the importance of board directors steering clear of disputes and complaints concerning staff and/or community members, advocating instead for firm boundaries between roles and responsibilities. A number of leaders were adamant that investment in governance training is central to ensuring that board members are clear on what their roles and responsibilities are, and why it is paramount that they are upheld. Furthermore, such training must be invested in as a regular and ongoing activity to ensure proper knowledge and skill development can occur.

This insight links to a number of the tips which emerged from the research including investment in organisational governance training and education, and clarity of roles and responsibilities. It is further reflected in the earlier discussion of ‘what hasn’t worked’ for organisations, where one of two key themes to emerge was inappropriate, substandard board behaviour.

#### **h) Highly effective risk management processes**

This insight emerged from the survey findings that ‘insufficient risk management’ was ranked as the lowest and second lowest barriers organisations faced when navigating a time of crisis and opportunity, consecutively (Figure 3). These results suggest that in general terms, Elder organisations have highly effective risk management processes in place. The alternative is that the role that risk management plays in navigating change may be underestimated or under examined by organisation leaders.

Based on the level of governance expertise exhibited among survey respondents and our follow-up interviews, we propose it is more likely the former. Certainly, the one organisation leader who did discuss risk with us in their follow-up interview, provided some insight into the extremely detailed level of attention risk management is given in their organisation. This included an annual process of identifying any upcoming risks and development of suitable responses, weekly reports and conversations between senior management on risk assessment, and routine analyses of organisational performance in a highly charged area of community service. They identified such a process as key to removing the more reactive, 'crisis driven' approach to governing an organisation and central to their organisation's longevity more broadly.

#### **i) Data for governing and governing data**

The value of data collection was not directly asked about in the course of the survey. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that it was not reflected as an important factor in the survey data. However, it was raised by some of the organisations in interview discussions as an important aspect of their organisation's professionalism. One organisation leader made a compelling case for the merit in conducting regular, organisation-wide evaluations. This leader described how for their organisation, the data collected from such evaluation processes was valued for a multitude of purposes including report back to community (another aspect of 'downward' accountability) and measuring the long-term impact of their programs, as an evidence base for reporting to funders (an aspect of 'upward' accountability), as an endorsement of their program model as well as for informing internal decision making. Another leader spoke about data in the broader sense about the importance of having the knowledge to hold people accountable, proposing that the biggest organisational failures come when a board is not armed with the knowledge needed to do their job properly.

Evidence-based governance and management can serve to ensure decision making is measured, informed and accountable. Timely information also helps to dismantle any debilitating hierarchies of influence that may exist within a board decision making environment. Thus, for those attuned to its value, data may be considered a useful investment in governing and managing well. The fact that it was not raised by more organisation leaders may indicate that data collection is an under-utilised tool by organisations, or perhaps just not considered as crucial as some of the other factors discussed. Certainly, for resource-stretched organisations with small staff numbers (our national ORIC data indicate three-quarters of all Elder organisations have seven or fewer employees, and the great majority reported very modest funds), it is very likely that regular data collection and evaluation may be considered something of a luxury beyond their reach.

### **Outside the organisation: Insights into factors and capabilities**

Regarding 'External Insights' (those governance topics which involve external governmental, industry, non-government organisations (NGOs) and philanthropic agencies and stakeholders) our preliminary research indicates that for many Elder organisations there is a tension between needing more resources and a reluctance to depend on government funding due to the laborious funding requirements and the related instability of short-term funding cycles. This tension acts as a compounding barrier to organisations seeking to navigate change effectively. Further, we found two compelling barrier factors faced by the Elder organisations surveyed.

#### **a) Govern and diversify funding and resources**

'Insufficient resources' was ranked as the biggest barrier most organisations face when navigating an opportunity, and second biggest barrier in a time of crisis (Figure 3). While the obvious solution to funding and resource deficiencies is to source government funding, our data supports widespread dissatisfaction with the conditions and requirements tied to such funding. For instance, the survey results showed 'insufficient resources' and an 'unsupportive regulator' to have each ranked among the top three barrier factors for organisations during times of

both opportunity and crisis. Thus, rather than acting as a safety net at critical junctures, it appears that unsupportive government agencies and regulators are, in some instances, contributing to organisations reaching tipping points.

When asked about governance factors that best support organisations through times of change (questions 1 and 2) 'we received valuable support and resources from our partners, funders and stakeholders' received the lowest score of all the listed governance factors in times of both opportunity and crisis (Figure 1). Following this, in response to question 4, 'frequent changes in government policy, grants and programs which undermined the stability, functions and strategic planning of an organisation' was found to be a leading barrier for organisations seeking to adapt and renew (Figure 3).

Our collated ORIC/ACNC data supported this reality of insufficient resources, revealing that many organisations reported having only modest financial resources, and most having no employed staff; with three-quarters of organisations having seven or fewer employees. Certainly, in the course of a number of follow-up interviews, regulators were identified as falling short of their perceived or actual responsibilities to Elder organisations, and, in some instances, considered to blame for a range of issues encountered by organisations.

This insight is significant since limited resources can translate to there being limited chances for organisations to proactively take up opportunities. This was discussed in the follow-up interviews in terms of the limits to organisations being able to invest in governance training and capacity development for their leaders and their staff. At the same time, however, the Elder organisations were strong advocates of properly reviewing, planning for, governing and managing the limited finances they did have. Some emphasised the need to make a conscious effort to look to community and cultural capital for skills and ideas – rather than government – to work through any challenges the organisation is facing. Multiple stressed the value in looking for other sources of funding to decrease reliance on government.

#### **b) Keeping an astute eye on the wider environment**

There are many creative, adaptive approaches organisations are applying to address resource shortages or changing resource needs. Many mentioned the great value of being able to call on their wider Indigenous networks. And while not presented in the list of governance factors to choose from in the survey, two organisations raised 'external relationships': as an important determinant factor when navigating change. Numerous Elder organisations are actively exploring external relationships within industry and the non-government sectors, limiting their dependency on government agencies in order to escape the restrictions perceived to accompany such arrangements. Some put considerable time and effort into building one-to-one relationships with individuals at senior levels in philanthropic organisations and industry, and establishing more flexible funding and knowledge-transfer partnerships with them.

Some of the Elder organisations in this research emphasised their effort in looking for new partnerships and opportunities, and checking their wider operating environment; that is, they tried to be outward-turning and absorptive, not inward-turning and isolated.

A set of constituent capabilities have been identified throughout this research paper, which are crucial to producing the interrelated forms of resilient adaptive agency described in this section. Below we set these out as discrete capabilities for the purpose of those organisations who may want to focus on this area of their overall operations. But we emphasise the point made by the organisational leaders themselves; namely, that each capability in fact works in tandem with all other capabilities and by doing so, creates a form of multiplier effect in their impact on the crisis or opportunity at hand.

## A survival capability: Resilient adaptive governance and management

The capabilities below are mutually imbricated, meaning they intersect, overlap and influence each other. No single capability will be sufficient to govern really big crises or opportunities. Instead they need to be considered as a holistic 'survival DIY package'. At the same time, building up and putting one capability into practice, feeds into and strengthens others. Each individual capability can also deliver multiple beneficial impacts at different points in an organisation during times of change.

The hopeful lesson coming from this research is that these capabilities are not mysterious, they are not gifted from the outside as part of a government grant, and they are valued aspects of the ways Elder organisations operate. Many of them arise from within Indigenous culture and ways of doing things, and they demonstrate that others can strengthen and nurture such capability as well. They include:

**a) Identity capability.** The Elder organisations have exceptionally strong internal identities, based around valuing cultural ways of thinking and doing, and around a shared commitment and purposeful motivation to make a positive contribution to the Indigenous people for whom they work. This cultural identity is a capability function of high value for longevity. It generates an internal culture within the organisation and extremely strong relationships that last. These provide a normative platform for resilience, encouraging board, management and staff to work well together in extreme circumstances.

**b) Vision capability.** The purposeful identity in the Elder organisations has in turn given rise to (and been embedded into) a dedicatory Vision for the organisation of what they are aiming to achieve in both the short and longer terms. This Vision statement appears on all the organisations' websites and is used to produce and monitor strategic direction and planning, it creates an anchoring capability for the organisation when turbulent changes could cause it to come adrift. Many organisations referred to it specifically as a tool for keeping them focused, on track, a compass towards a new direction.

**c) Outward-looking capability.** The Elder organisations in this research are not insular and isolated. They stay attuned to their changing community circumstances, to the state of relational play with their members, partners and stakeholders. They appear to commit time and energy to important external relationships. This creates a 'readiness' capability, an 'openness' to change that has been described as 'restless renewal' by Indigenous leader, Leah Armstrong (Smith, 2008). This capability helps enable an organisation to take a proactive approach to life-course challenges. It also means that in times of disruption, they can quickly call on additional capabilities, resources and knowledge from well beyond their own boundaries.

**d) Risk recognition capability.** The outward-looking ability of Elder organisations means their leaders have honed an alertness capability, demonstrated as vigilant attentiveness to the contexts and risks arising from both their internal and external environments. With vigilance, leaders are alert to particular possibilities, threats or dangers, and signs. Given the volatility of the government, industry, community, political and economic environment in which Indigenous organisations work, and their intercultural placement as brokers and advocates it is not surprising that Elder organisations have developed a focused readiness to detect and respond to changes and impending risks.

**e) Awareness, absorptive capability.** The openness of Elder organisations produces a mature ability to recognise the need for new ideas, information, knowledge and skills, to seek those out, customise and apply them for particular purposes in times of crisis or opportunity. They collate and produce new information (by evaluating and reviewing themselves), look for expertise, and seek out the experience of others. This absorptive capability is not just linked to prior knowledge within the organisation, but to its openness, interconnections with its members,

and its wider networks. It also seems to be linked to an organisation being prepared to invest in mentoring succession and the professional development of board, management and staff – who then bring new knowledge and skills into the organisation where its potential can be realised when needed in difficult times. In this way Elder organisations are iterative learners.

**f) Innovation capability.** The Elder organisations are experimenters; they have shown they are not afraid to change the comfortable way they do things, and create untried beginnings by which to renew or refresh. Board members and managers who purport to ‘know it all’ are challenged to refresh their knowledge and put it into effect. They experiment, but do so by being informed and well-armed with knowledge, and a hard-nosed assessment of possible risks involved. This capability positions an organisation as an ‘innovation agent’, which can strategically redesign and adapt their governance, management, institutional and structural arrangements to secure ongoing viability and renewal.

**g) Cooperative leadership capability.** The Elder organisations appear to have customised application of the standard ‘division of powers’ between the Board and CEO – strongly respecting and reinforcing the division of authority and responsibilities that lie with each, but tightly weaving practical forms of cooperative agency that is promoted through routinised two-way information flows. This builds confidence and trust over time, so that during major changes the organisation’s governance and management are capable of working together in agile, sometimes new ways. If cooperative agency across the board–CEO divide doesn’t happen in a crisis or big opportunity, the organisation can underperform or lose an important chance. Interestingly, Elder organisations are frank and tough about performance – expecting high standards from the board, management and staff, and prepared to make changes if that does not happen. There also appears to be a strong emphasis in the Elder organisations on the fact that leaders (whether they be governing board or CEO) are there to do a public service for their clients/members, not for personal *selfish* determination.

**h) Transformability capability.** If we refer to the set of shared values, vision, institutions (rules for ways of doing things), and relationships of a particular organisation as its ‘identity’, then in this paper we see Elder organisations demonstrating an ability for self-directed transformation. This is its ability to strategically expand its identity at times of crises or opportunities, by creating novel solutions that aim to introduce new stabilities and ensure its ongoing viability. An important aspect of this capability is that some Elder organisations emphasised the need to institutionalise relationships of trust and new solutions that worked for them; that is, they translated them into policies, guidelines, rules and procedures for the organisation.

## Conclusions and policy implications

This paper investigates how Indigenous organisational identity, purpose and function persist over the longer term, while other organisations may flounder and stagnate, even fail completely. We have focused on the form and role that the capability functions of governance and management play in an organisation, and the agency of individuals in dealing with major changes to create a ‘new stability landscape’. The paper has drawn on mixed-method research evidence to maximise a deeper understanding of the factors producing longevity for some Indigenous organisations in the context of their intercultural positionality. While the findings are preliminary, we argue they have strong resonance with the experience and stories told to us by Elder organisation leaders themselves, and usefully extend on the gaps in the literature. The analysis has also produced new insights that may offer practical guidance to other organisations; both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Several of the conclusions would benefit from further investigation through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with particular organisations about their full life-course; that is, not only during their operation, but also in the nascent



period when a community is working through their ideas and goals for establishing an organisation, and then the 'afterlife' in a community if a well-established organisation fails.

The research evidence indicates that Elder organisations have developed through their own idiosyncratic series of stable and unstable states as they operate in an intercultural environment. Their life course does not develop in an orderly progression, but rather is actively shape-shifting and mutating. Yet the research indicates there are also common challenges facing Indigenous organisations – managerial, governance, communication, resourcing, cultural, community, externally imposed, internally generated, and naturally occurring problems. In other words, all organisations will periodically go through transitions and need to transform in order to face new crises or opportunities.

The paper identifies critical junctures in an organisation's life (some arising from success and opportunities; others arising from crises and risks) that can become tipping points, where a problem/issue reaches a threshold level. Whether the opportunities, uncertainties or crises are internally generated or externally sourced, the bottom line is they *all* then rely upon an organisation's capacity to govern and manage for solutions. The trajectory of a tipping point that is teetering on a threshold level *must* be addressed. If efforts prove effective, the organisation adapts and transforms in immediate or incremental ways. If not addressed, the organisation may fail completely, or flounder and stagnate. This latter 'zombie' state inexorably leads to a future greater tipping point towards organisational failure.

Based on our research it appears that amongst Elder organisations there are some capabilities that come to the fore in times of opportunity, as opposed to crisis, and vice versa. This was shown most obviously in relation to the Indigenous cultural factors which most supported organisations through a crisis, as opposed to a time of opportunity. In a time of opportunity, it was clearly motivation: organisation's boards, managers and staff wanting to create a positive outcome for their communities and members. Whereas, in times of crisis, it was communication: ensuring members, clients and community were provided with culturally meaningful and well understood messaging (see Figure 2).

Resilient adaptation is a dynamic interplay and pattern of *persistence and transformation*, which we have couched firmly within a human capabilities framework in organisational settings. We have argued elsewhere that this capability is a pre-existing one in Indigenous organisations and has been mobilised to great effect during the Covid-19 pandemic (Drieberg et al., *in press*). It is perhaps not surprising then that within Indigenous Elder organisations resilient adaptation has been nurtured and developed (sometimes actively, sometimes invisibly), as a set of capability functions to pursue organisational continuity in an uncertain and fluctuating environment. We conclude that Elder Indigenous organisations have a high capability for resilient adaptation which they mobilise in diverse contexts of major change. They demonstrate in their overall governance, management and institutional systems an overall high ability to effectively cope with shocks.

This gives us a new view of organisational longevity, where cooperative governance and management are critical components of a 'whole-or-organisation' capability function for resilient adaptation. This package of resilient adaptation capabilities, creates a high degree of what we call 'organisational plasticity'. That is, having the capability means there can be diverse strategies and solutions designed for the same problems. It also means an organisation can actively create forms of transformation that are not seen as off-track or debilitating, but rather as credibly innovative and adding to its overall purpose, vision and performance. In these ways they can periodically create a new stability landscape.

In the 'What works' section, we extracted the implications for governance and management practice for Indigenous organisations, many of which were identified as 'tips' by the Elder organisations who themselves have successfully navigated their way through major transitions and critical junctures.

Below we present the several implications arising from government policy, including for its regulatory agencies. Those organisations which have managed to survive over the long term and renew themselves – the Elder organisations – seem to have done so in spite of government policy and program conditions, in spite of insufficient funds and resources, and low staffing levels. While that is a laudable achievement for those organisations and should be recognised and celebrated as such, it suggests that Australian Government policy is in a parlous state of affairs. Indeed, we can only conclude that government policy, program and funding institutions, and short-sighted politically motivated churn of funding cycles over recent decades are onerous, constitutes a barrier to organisational viability and longevity, and are undermining the governance and management practice and planning of Indigenous organisations, and so their capacity to deliver culturally-centred and effective programs and services.

National government policy frameworks for the support of Indigenous organisations in Australia are at a critical juncture, if not a tipping point where the architecture of its Indigenous affairs policy, programs and funding for organisations arguably has failed. It is time for government to renew its own policy capabilities, and redesign its vision for how its regulatory and funding support can be better delivered to organisations.

When they are working well, Indigenous organisations are *the* lifeblood of community health, wellbeing, vitality, safety and prosperity. Given their vital contribution across remote, rural and urban locations, and the additional local benefits produced by the longevity and resilience of Elder organisations, it is imperative that government develop an overarching policy that sets a framework for empowering organisations to realise their resilient adaptive governance and management strengths. One-third of organisations are Elders; they have survived and prospered. A national government policy framework needs to be couched as an investment in the long-term, to enable other organisations to reach this more stable point in their own life courses. That would be a welcome investment in community well-being. The findings, insights and tips presented in this paper offer a contribution to that urgent consideration.

In addition, we make the following recommendations.

1. The Australian Government develop an overarching *written* policy specific to incorporated Indigenous organisations that sets out its approach to engagement with organisations, its own vision, its purpose and goals for the longer-term, based on a clear policy commitment to supporting sustainable, resilient and adaptive governance and management by organisations.
2. Such a new policy framework and funding agreement frameworks (below) be formulated by direct engagement and co-design with Indigenous incorporated organisations.
3. The Australian Government review its various financial frameworks for the funding and provision of other resources and support to incorporated Indigenous organisations in line with the development of such a policy approach. This should include creating single funding-line mechanisms wherever possible, and the negotiation of long-term Organisational Funding Agreements which aim to support, rather than restrict, the capability needs and aspirations of organisations.
4. That Organisational Funding Agreements include an ongoing allocation of 'governance capability funds', including for in-house professionally salaried staffing (to attract and retain staff, and making a case for benefits of budgeting for above award rates), whose job is to support the organisation to incrementally build adaptive resilient capabilities for governance and management over the long-term.
5. Ongoing governance training be considered in policy frameworks and funding agreements as both an investment in building communities and a risk-management strategy, and so factored into organisation budgets accordingly.

6. The government's regulatory body ORIC be reviewed with regard to Indigenous organisations' own experiences of ORIC's ability to deliver constructive, timely governance and administrative support to them that goes beyond mere surveillance and compliance. Arguably, a surveillance and compliance focused-regulatory body is limited in its ability to act as a governance-development institution able to promote resilient adaption within organisations.
7. Governance capacity development that focuses on the set of capabilities that enable adaptive resilient and effective governance and management of organisation should be provided as an ongoing process of relational iterative learning, expertise development, and practical problem-solving that is oriented to the tipping points and transitions commonly encountered by organisations, rather than as one-off workshops, and tick-box exercises.
8. In-house data collection, management and self-evaluation processes by Indigenous organisations should be encouraged and supported by government as part of longer-term Organisation Funding Agreements. ORIC should provide data methods and systems training for organisations aimed at strengthening and protecting organisational data sovereignty to maximise the value of own-data collection for effectively governing.
9. When partnering with Indigenous organisations, government funding bodies and other stakeholders should focus on ways of engaging which strengthen and support the development of the identified 'adaptive resilient governance capabilities' described in this paper.

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## Appendix A Survey Questions



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