



Aviation planning policy in Australia: Identifying frames of reference to support public decision making[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Aviation planning policy in Australia, particularly as it pertains to the expansion of privatized capital city airports, continues to be problematic as a result of legislation that requires federal approval for infrastructure-related projects on airport land, but only requires other stakeholders, such as state and local governments, together with resident groups, to be consulted. This study employs Q-methodology to identify the frames of references held by those participating in the Australian aviation stakeholder arena to develop a better understanding of the context in which existing federal policy sits and to allow airport planners to navigate their way through the views of relevant stakeholders. The identification of these frames of reference across three Australian capital city airports also revealed two underlying nation-wide discourses of 'power' and 'functionality' pertaining to utilization of the airport space, and aviation in general. These outcomes, though not providing a solution to existing controversies relating to airport expansion, nevertheless concretize the prevailing discourses that should be addressed when formulating and enacting aviation planning policy across the nation.

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1. Introduction

The future of commercial aviation has often been called into question by a variety of transport analysts and policy makers. Concerns have been raised about its sustainability, especially given that, at a local level, airport capacity continues to be tested, especially in space-constrained areas (Saldiraner, 2013). Since airports, because of the significant noise generated by aviation and the very nature of flight operations, require considerable space, it is becoming apparent that a growing demand for aviation is not always reconcilable with increasing airport capacity (Charles and Barnes, 2008). Further concerns from stakeholders relate to aviation's reliance on carbon-based fuels, which are now recognized as detrimental to global climate stability (Moriarty and Honnery, 2008). That these conventional fuels are likely to become more expensive, especially as reserves become depleted after peak oil

production is reached, has even led to sustainability concerns that have made their way into the spatial planning and airport capacity debate (Charles et al., 2007; Kivits et al., 2010).

With other land-uses, such as residential housing, encroaching on space-constrained airports once located on the urban periphery, there has been increasing tension relating to the containment of aviation-related noise (Van Eeten, 2001; Stevens et al., 2010; Kiani Sadr et al., 2014). In many cases, curfews and significant charges for night operations have been put in place (Kivits et al., 2008), with serious ramifications for the economic viability of the airport, together with that of its host city and region. Finally, the privatization of many formerly government-owned airports in the developed world, such as Australia, has led to significant planning- and governance-related issues. This is especially pronounced in Australia, where airport development is not subject to the same planning regime as adjacent jurisdictions. These developments have resulted in land-use conflict and infrastructure burdens for surrounding stakeholders, especially with respect to access (Stevens et al., 2010).

In light of these issues, there is an emerging understanding that the views of a wide variety of stakeholders must be considered when it comes to developing national policy relating to commercial

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aviation, and sustainable inter-city transport by extension (Van Eeten, 2001). Aviation planning policy, especially with respect to physical infrastructure such as the airports themselves, should arguably be shaped by a well-grounded understanding of the views held by relevant stakeholders, beginning with their broader attitudes to aviation itself (Kivits et al., 2008; Australian Government, 2009). This is particularly relevant for Australia, where aviation remains the most feasible transport mode for a wide array of journeys across the continent. On account of its widely-dispersed population centres and the long distances between these centres, Australian aviation policy does not merely concern how Australians connect with the rest of the nation, but relates to how the nation connects with the rest of the world.

To develop a better understanding of the broader context in which contemporary aviation planning policy sits, and to enable airport managers and planners to understand the lack of homogeneity in the views of traditional stakeholder groups, this study identifies and analyses the various frames of reference that Australians have with respect to aviation. Three major Australian capital city airports, Brisbane, Canberra and Adelaide, were used to survey a set of stakeholders for each airport on a specific planning issue, i.e., the *planning integration of on-airport non-aeronautical developments*. Q-methodology was used for each of the cases to extract the frames of reference. The overall outcome is that frames of reference, whose adherents cut across a broad array of varying stakeholder types, tell us a great deal about the various views pertaining to the identified issue. They also enable greater insights into the way in which aviation planning is regarded by Australians. These frames of reference have the potential to assist airport planners in understanding the impact of their decisions across all the relevant stakeholder groups.

2. Aviation policy and planning issues

2.1. Global airport planning issues

With increasing demand for aviation services, this demand is exerting significant pressures on existing airport infrastructure (Gelhausen et al., 2013; IATA, 2013; Saldıraner, 2013). The explosive growth of the aviation industry represents one of the most difficult issues in planning policy analysis and subsequent planning policy formation. This difficulty is closely linked to the existence of a vast number of affected stakeholders, together with the emotive standpoints that they often hold on aviation-related issues (Bailey, 2002; Amaeshi and Crane, 2006). Nowhere are the fundamental economic and environmental challenges that aviation poses more apparent than in the context of airport expansion.¹ An accompanying complication is that, rather than being a self-contained infrastructure project, airport expansion has become an ongoing and highly controversial process because of its spill-over effects into adjacent communities (Van Eeten, 2001).

The nature of airports, as opposed to 'fixed' infrastructure such as highways, is that airplanes fly over communities and use paths that are not fixed (though they are generally set within strict boundaries). Noise and pollution from a highway are generally only experienced within a close distance to the highway. Intrusive aircraft noise, however, can be experienced over 30 km away from the airport (Airservices Australia, 2008). This means that a larger area around the infrastructure is impacted by transport-related

externalities, and this impact may be less obvious to the uninformed observer. Flight-paths can also change, and a residential settlement previously unaffected by aviation noise can suddenly become affected, whereas the actual infrastructure, the airport, has not changed at all. These types of issues are additional complications attached to a 'non-fixed' infrastructure such as an airport.

The situation currently faced by airports and their multifarious stakeholders is directly a result of the historical development of airports. Airport expansion in terms of secondary business (e.g., parking and retail) has become increasingly evident (Graham, 2009; Kasarda, 2004, 2006), particularly as aircraft evolved from their historical status as an innovative transport technology to an everyday transport mode (Stevens, 2006). Nowadays, airports are not only locations for transport activity, but also act as hubs of commercial infrastructure (Wells and Young, 2004), with numerous opportunities allowing airport owners to explore the commercial space and increase financial gain. Yet, with this increase in commercial activities outside the 'traditional aviation context', airports have also become entangled in management, sustainability, security, and legal issues (McLay and Reynolds-Feighan, 2006).

2.2. Airport planning in Australia

The Australian Airports Privatisation Program began in April 1994, when the federal government announced its intention to privatize 22 major airports. In April 1995, a formal decision was made to lease these airports by way of individual trade sales to private entities. Within the legislation drawn up, and as part of a 'hands-off' airport development approach (Australian Government, 1996), the new airport owners were given considerable independence with regard to airport management. Since airport land remains under Australian Government control, local and state governments have little to no influence on the planning of developments taking place on airport land. Under the *Airports Act 1996*, every major development plan undertaken must gain federal ministerial approval (Australian Government, 1996). State and local government approval is not required. One exception to the hands-off approach was pricing regulation, which was under tight control at the time (Littlechild, 2012). Pricing regulation, however, has little bearing on airport development planning and, as a consequence, is not part of this study's scope.

Airport operators can therefore act independently of local and state governments. This leaves local and state governments without any direct influence on planning processes relating to on-airport projects. As planning of projects affects both jurisdictional spaces, viz., on-airport (Australian Government and the private owner) and off-airport (local and state), this leads to complexity in decision making, as the various stakeholders have diverse, and often opposing, views and opinions. This is because issues such as security, sustainability, environmental, social, infrastructural and commercial planning can result in different approaches from different authorities. A growing tension over project responsibility has resulted in several conflicts between airport and city land-use planning (Freestone and Baker, 2010; Stevens et al., 2010). These conflicts have shown that stakeholders not directly involved are more than willing to exercise their alternative forms of power to influence planning decision-making processes. This means that these stakeholders remain important to the planning process, even if they have no direct legal ability to influence the process.

The Australian Government's main objective in the aviation arena is the continued development of the federally-leased airports (Australian Government, 2008, p. 8). It also regards a co-ordinated strategy, through a process such as stakeholder engagement, as

¹ Airport expansion encompasses the wide range of both growth of the air and landside of airports: flight movements as well as terminal expansions, additional runways and even non-aviation related developments, such as shopping malls or other commercial developments.

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