The Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games: An Introduction

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On 4 April 2018, some 35,000 people jammed into Carrara Stadium on Queensland’s Gold Coast to see athletes from seventy-one nations march in to the Opening Ceremony of the 21st Commonwealth Games. It was a beautiful Gold Coast day and signalled the start to eleven days of competition across venues from Cairns in the north of Queensland to Coolangatta on the southern border with New South Wales. It was also the culmination of a ten-year journey that had started back in 2008 when Premier Anna Bligh mooted the suggestion of bringing the Games to the Gold Coast as a means of reviving and transforming a Gold Coast economy that had been badly affected by the Global Financial Crisis.

Ten years later, more than 1.2 million spectators filled stadia and other venues as Queenslanders and visitors from interstate and overseas rode trains and buses to see colourful competitions in eighteen different sports and twenty-six different disciplines. In addition, many thousands of hours of television coverage reached a global audience estimated to be 1.5 billion. As a sporting spectacle, the Gold Coast Games were an undoubted success with several world records broken and a large number of Commonwealth records shattered. And notwithstanding understandable complaints about transport difficulties following the Opening Ceremony, the Games went off pretty much without a hitch. There were no major incidents or accidents, athletes were very happy and spectators went home satisfied with seeing spectacular events in excellent conditions.

It was the second time the Commonwealth Games had come to Queensland, the first being in Brisbane back in 1982, and the fifth time in Australia – which has always hosted successful Games. Indeed, it had only been twelve years since the Games were last in Australia, hosted by Melbourne. However, this time the Games were hosted by a much smaller regional city in Australia, and they came to the Gold Coast not long after the problematic experience of the Delhi Games in 2010, when many leading athletes decided not to compete and venues were barely finished when competition was about to start. While the success of the Glasgow Games in 2014 certainly contributed significantly to recovering the reputation and image of the Commonwealth Games, according to its inaugural chairman Mark Stockwell, the Gold Coast Games had ‘a bit more riding on its success than has previously been the case … as much for the Commonwealth Games [movement] as for the Gold
In other words, the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) needed another successful Games even more than the Gold Coast did in order to demonstrate its ongoing value and sustainability.

For both the Gold Coast and the CGF, then, the success of these Games was part of bigger stories. For the Gold Coast, it was about changing the image of the city from being solely a fun and surf destination, diversifying its economy beyond tourism and the boom-and-bust construction industry, and demonstrating that it had come of age as a global city. For the CGF, it was a demonstration that an affordable Games was feasible, and that it could be hosted outside of major capital cities (such as Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur or New Delhi). It was also the first Games under a new CGF President, Dame Louise Martin, CBE, with a new vision, and its timing also coincided with the imminent departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, offering the tantalising prospect of a revival of the political and global significance of the Commonwealth of Nations. For all these reasons, the success of the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games was of particular interest not just in Queensland but in the Commonwealth movement.

This special section of this issue of Queensland Review takes a look at particular aspects of the success of the Gold Coast Games, with articles examining its likely economic benefits, the infrastructure development it has contributed, its potential legacy for the Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct (GCHKP) and its innovative contributions to future Games — particularly in the areas of inclusion, diversity and sustainability. The section concludes with an interview with the former Chief Executive of the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games Organising Committee (GOLDOC), in which he discusses the challenges of hosting a major multi-sport global event like the Games in a regional city, the inevitable risks associated with doing so, and the delivery of an event of which the people of the Gold Coast and Queensland can be proud.

Griffith University was contracted by the Queensland Government prior to the Games to undertake an independent analysis of its putative economic benefits for the Gold Coast, Queensland and the rest of Australia. The peer-reviewed article that commences the section discusses the modelling used to estimate the likely economic benefits of the Games going forward for the next four years. Associate Professor Tien Pham from Griffith’s Institute for Tourism Research led a team that initially undertook the pre-Games analysis, then subsequently also a post-Games review using the same modelling approach and based on data available after the Games. The new data reveal that the economic benefits to the Gold Coast and the wider region will be even greater than was predicted in the pre-Games modelling exercise.

This rather technical economic benefits analysis leads into a second peer-reviewed article that looks at the multiple venue and infrastructure developments implemented for the Games, arguing that the approach taken should mean that the legacy of these Games — unlike so many other such events — will not be so-called ‘white elephants’; rather, the facilities that were built or improved will provide community amenity and utility while the bulk of the additional spend on road and rail infrastructure was already budgeted by the Queensland Government and was simply accelerated to meet the demands posed by the Games. The improved transport infrastructure spend is expected to enhance economic growth through easing congestion, while the successful legacy of the new or enhanced venues will
depend substantially on their managers’ success in bringing further national and international events into South-East Queensland.

One of the more interesting infrastructure legacies of the Games is the contribution made by the Athletes’ Village to the GCHKP in the Parklands. The foundation participants in the precinct are Griffith University, the Gold Coast University Hospital and Healthscope’s Gold Coast Private Hospital. With the light rail running along the boundary together with the substantial health investment already in place, the Athletes’ Village and associated retail facilities will provide the accommodation for a new labour force within walking distance of the foundation contributors to the precinct. The third piece in this section, written by Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost of Griffith University’s Gold Coast campus, Professor Ned Pankhurst, is an insightful commentary on how Griffith University’s innovative contribution to the precinct of an advanced manufacturing centre has taken shape after an interesting journey of discovery and imagination.

It is followed by a second commentary piece on the innovative and inclusive nature of the Gold Coast Games. In many ways, this was a Commonwealth Games of ‘firsts’, and of a commitment to demonstrating actively the importance of the full inclusion of women and para-athletes. In line with the CGF values of humanity and equality, the Gold Coast Games provided women with as many chances to win medals as men, and also greatly increased the number of para-sports events that were fully integrated into the main program. Furthermore, GOLDOC took the courageous step of developing a first-ever Reconciliation Action Plan for the local Aboriginal people of the Gold Coast. This plan laid out expectations for the Games’ organisers in terms of employment, procurement and cultural recognition. It was an innovative, demanding and highly symbolic act that laid down a precedent for future Commonwealth Games.

As mentioned earlier, the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games section concludes with an interview with Mark Peters, the former Chief Executive Officer of GOLDOC and formerly the CEO of the Australian Sports Commission. Mark was asked to head up the Gold Coast bid team from the start of the bid process in 2008 and so was involved with the Games from the beginning. As CEO, of course, he has a positive view of the Gold Coast Games narrative; however, his views regarding the major challenges, what worked and what did not, and what he sees as the greatest accomplishments of the Games are certainly worthy of consideration. Understandably, he focuses on the many ‘firsts’ of the Gold Coast Games, the event’s contribution to transforming the image of the Gold Coast and the ongoing diversification of its economy as the most significant benefits. Importantly, he also celebrates the success of the Games from a sporting standpoint, with many records broken and the Australian team achieving so much success. He concludes with a positive view of the life expectancy of a viable and sustainable Commonwealth Games.

Note
1 Daniel Koch, Interview of Mark Stockwell former Chair of the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games Organising Committee, February 2018.