THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

2027 Cohort

Leadership in Major Projects Catalyst Program

Program Prospectus



Invest in Project Excellence

John Grill Institute for Project Leadership

CRICOS 00026A TEQSA PRV12057

The Catalyst Program Advantage

We build the capacity to lead, rather than a bunch of frameworks that sit on the shelf.

There is a point in a project career where success starts to look different. It usually arrives with the move from medium-scale, medium-complexity projects to larger and more complex ones. The leaders who reach it are technically strong – they know how to plan, schedule and control work, and they have been rewarded for it. As size and complexity increase, the work becomes more relational, more political and more uncertain. Project management skills remain essential, but on their own they become insufficient for project leadership. The step up is in what the new role now asks of them as a leader.

We designed Catalyst at the request of, and together with, our government, advisory and delivery partners. Their accounts were strikingly consistent. Technically strong project managers do not stall because they have forgotten the mechanics of project management. Instead, they stall because senior project leadership demands a different operating model – less personal control, more influence, a business mindset, better systems judgement and heightened stakeholder legitimacy.



Leadership Impact

Learning is best when the context is real. Catalyst participants learn on live project challenges – supported by the program.

Project Impact

Our approach has proven impact: participants report that their learning has solved problems and brought projects back on track.

Vertical development

Catalyst takes a vertical development approach. Where horizontal development adds skills and expertise to a leader who is otherwise unchanged, vertical development grows the leader who can more easily acquire the skills. Where horizontal is an addition, vertical is a transition of mindset, resilience and capacity – which is what the evidence says has greater leverage and higher correlation with success.

Catalyst works on the structures that grow leadership capacity. That is why participants leave with a changed relationship to uncertainty rather than a playbook that sits on the shelf, and why the work happens across eleven months inside their own projects.

How this approach differs

The predominant approach to leadership development – across 14 major project leadership programs we reviewed worldwide – is to add expertise. Frameworks, practices and processes for leadership – paired with self-awareness assessments. We have no argument with that approach. The evidence simply finds it insufficient, on its own, for effective leadership in the complexity and uncertainty of modern-day major projects. The wider picture of award programs is the same: an audit of 1,688 course descriptors across the Financial Times top 100 MBA programs found only around 5% addressed the leadership capacity for leading in complex and uncertain environments.

What differentiates the Catalyst is that we pair self-awareness assessment with a pedagogical framework that shifts leadership capacity. The psychometrics describe where a participant is actually starting from; the pedagogy is how we move them from there.

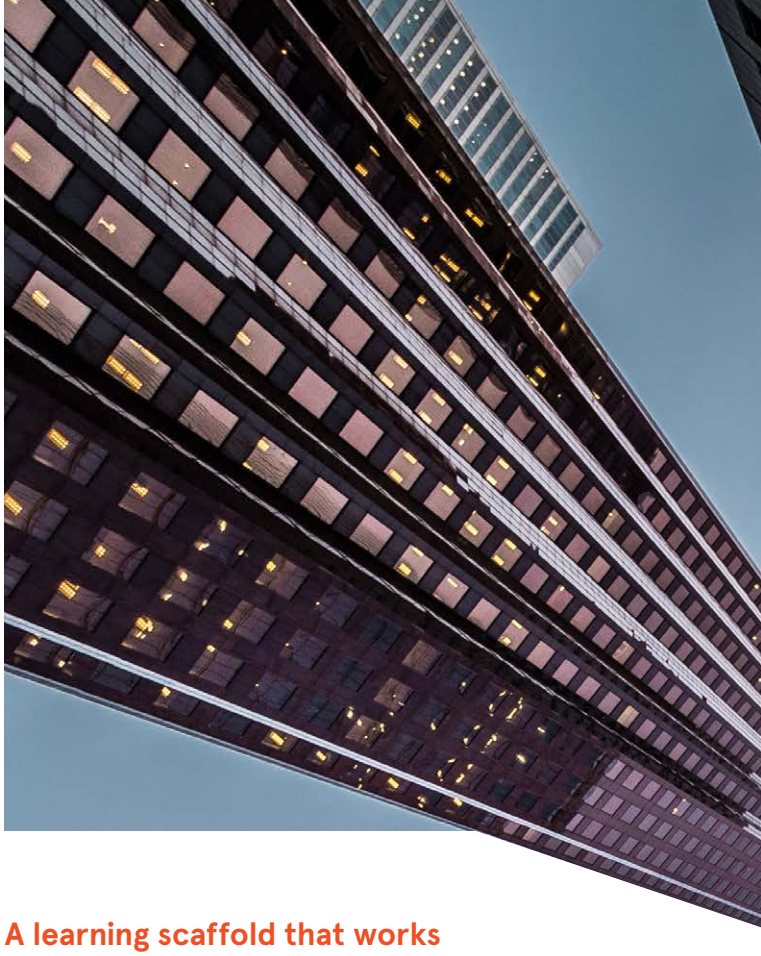
Delegation – or lack of it – exemplifies this approach

Delegation is a common topic in executive education, yet remains the most often-named leadership struggle. The common solution is to teach a delegation framework. However, what we find holds leaders back is something more fundamental – an unspoken worry that delegation will reduce quality or a deeper need to defend their position through being seen to act. Commonly taught frameworks are limited to technique. Vertical development places the shift in mindset at its centre.

Shantz, A. et al. (2023). Grand challenges and the MBA. Journal of Management Education, 47(3). Competitor review: John Grill Institute market analysis, 2026.

Executive education with proven impact

Our approach is a design built from experience and evidence about what grows a leader.



The John Grill Institute was established to close a capability gap that Australian projects have met the hard way: leadership capacity. Our Executive Leadership in Major Projects program has built that capability at the most senior level for over a decade. Catalyst extends the same method to the leadership transition mid-career.

A program design built on evidence of what works

The most comprehensive meta-analysis of leadership development – 335 studies covering more than 26,000 leaders – found three features that separate programs which transfer into the workplace from those which do not. Sessions spaced over time outperform a single block. Structured feedback roughly triples what transfers into the workplace. And combining information, demonstration and genuine practice outperforms any alone.

Catalyst is built on all three: eleven months of spaced work rather than a single residential week; a 1-1 chat throughout, plus an AI coach in your pocket; and practice that is real, because it happen on a live challenge inside your own project.

CAREER IMPACT

90%

of our ELMP alumni have been promoted or have expanded their roles.

A learning scaffold that works

Vertical development is not a recent idea. It rests on five decades of adult development theory – Piaget, Kohlberg, Loevinger, Kegan and Torbert – and on work connecting a leader's developmental stage to how they behave. Leaders at later stages are more likely to delegate, to hold people accountable, to influence through expertise rather than positional power, and to look for underlying causes rather than treating problems as isolated events. McCauley and colleagues (2006) summarise the benefits, including several studies that show high correlation between vertical development and leadership success.

Catalyst is designed to create the conditions for that growth

Our own track record

Executive Leadership in Major Projects runs on the same principles – both vertical development and real-world application on live projects under way – and alumni report the results in those terms. Project outcomes are described on page 9.

McCauley, C. et al. (2006). The use of constructive-developmental theory to advance the understanding of leadership. The Leadership Quarterly, 17(6). Lacerenza, C. et al. (2017). Journal of Applied Psychology, 102(12). Day, D. et al. (2014). The Leadership Quarterly, 25(1).



only 10%

of students moved a full developmental stage through a traditional curriculum-based program.

Teaching by itself moves almost nobody.

whereas 94%

moved a full stage when that teaching was combined with applied practice.

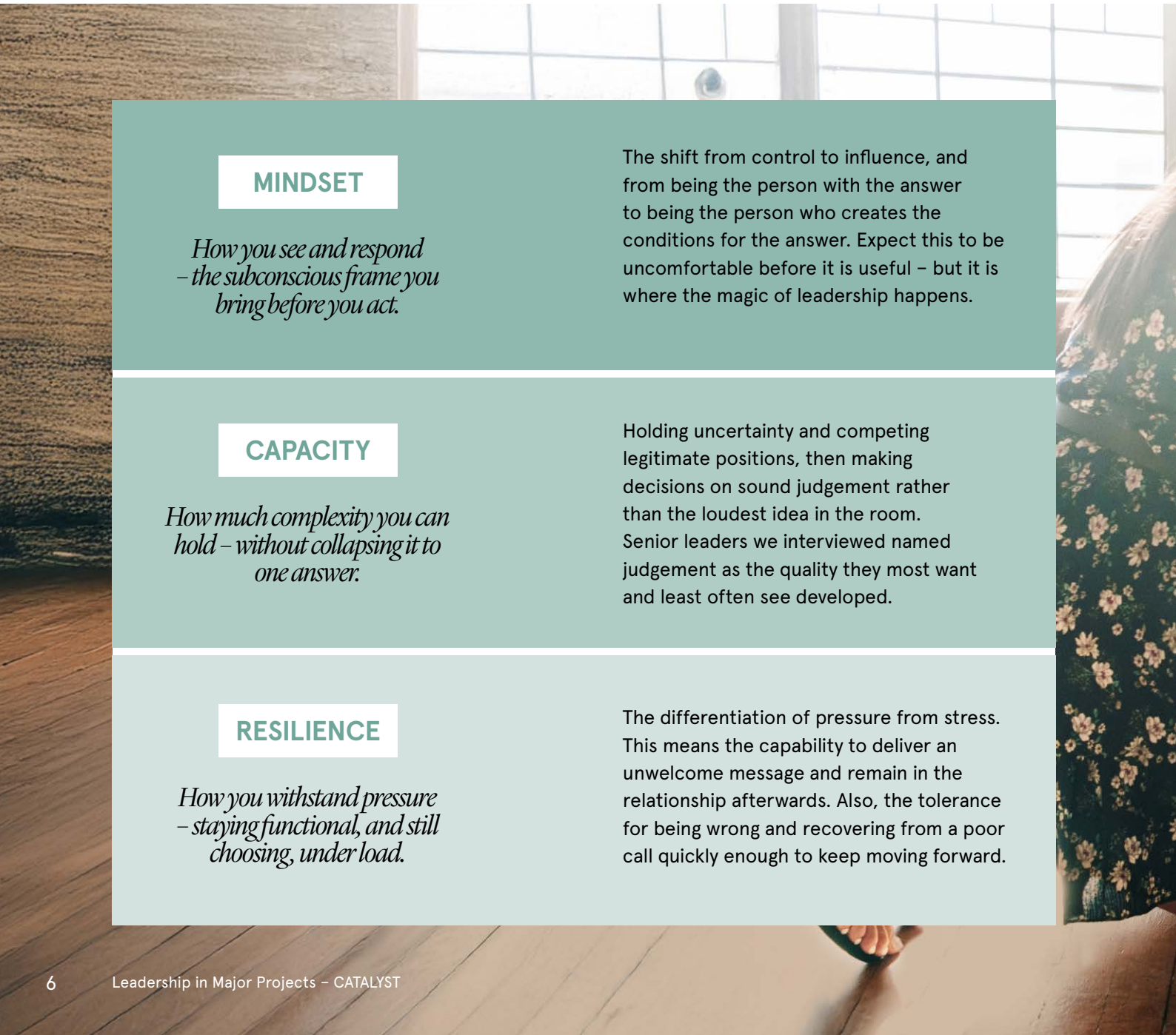
This is why Catalyst is built around a live project undertaking.

What to expect

You are very good at what you do. That is also the problem this program addresses. Being very good at the work does not, by itself, produce effective leadership of it.

Expertise is how you got here. It is also, from here, the thing most likely to hold you back. The leaders we interviewed when designing this program all described the same pattern: leaders who pull back toward the work they know how to do, have difficulty letting capable people take a slower route to an answer, or quietly accumulate stress as a result of not fostering accountability.

Catalyst works on three ways of growing leadership identity. They are not separate modules that can be studied. They need to be experienced through practice and through work you do in your own organisation.



MINDSET

How you see and respond – the subconscious frame you bring before you act.

The shift from control to influence, and from being the person with the answer to being the person who creates the conditions for the answer. Expect this to be uncomfortable before it is useful – but it is where the magic of leadership happens.

CAPACITY

How much complexity you can hold – without collapsing it to one answer.

Holding uncertainty and competing legitimate positions, then making decisions on sound judgement rather than the loudest idea in the room. Senior leaders we interviewed named judgement as the quality they most want and least often see developed.

RESILIENCE

How you withstand pressure – staying functional, and still choosing, under load.

The differentiation of pressure from stress. This means the capability to deliver an unwelcome message and remain in the relationship afterwards. Also, the tolerance for being wrong and recovering from a poor call quickly enough to keep moving forward.

What this asks of you

Eleven days face to face across eleven months with online workshops in between, plus a leadership challenge inside your own organisation that is a stretch – something beyond what you would normally complete as the leader you are today. You will be asked to give a real account of your own performance to a small group of peers, repeatedly, including the parts that did not work. Toward the end of the year, you will have a conversation you have spent months avoiding.

You will leave able to **do things** you cannot do now – and, more to the point, being someone who can keep learning to do them.

"The hardest leadership lessons are usually not intellectual – they are behavioural and identity-based."

Head of assurance, state infrastructure body

—

Catalyst design research, 2026



What organisations should expect

Returns that arrive during the program, not after it.

DURING | MONTHS 1–11

Work delivered, not simulated

Every participant enters with an Undertaking – a real leadership challenge agreed with their organisation before the program begins. A piece of work the organisation needs done, chosen because it is beyond the participant's reach today, and worked for eleven months with a coach, a peer group and the Institute behind it.

This is action learning. The development happens through the work rather than alongside it, which means the year produces an outcome as well as a change in the participant.

AT COMPLETION

A leader who operates differently

The changes to look for are behavioural and observable: delegating work they could do faster themselves and holding the line when it is slower; raising risk earlier and with less prompting; moving stakeholders they have no authority over; carrying difficult messages to senior people without flinching or damaging the relationship; and putting the portfolio ahead of their own project when those diverge.

At the close-out, organisational sponsors will be in the room. Participants will give an evidenced account of what changed, where they fell back, and what needs to change on the road ahead.

BEYOND

Pipeline, retention and trajectory

Investment in development is among the clearest signals an organisation can give about future potential. Catalyst also connects participants upward, to the Executive Leadership in Major Projects cohort and its alumni network.

The Undertaking needs to hold risk.

This work cannot be a safe challenge – which develops nobody. It needs to hold risk and therefore be allowed to fail, with a focus on the developmental account over the project outcome.





WHAT OUR ELMP PARTICIPANTS HAVE ACHIEVED

$200M

estimated maintenance savings attributed to an approach an ELMP participant developed **during the program.**

$135M

of federal funding retained **after a participant resolved a decision-making misalignment** on a major project.

120

government projects brought onto an aligned assurance gating process by **a single participant's applied work**

Participant Journey

The challenge is there from day one, what changes is how you rise to it.

The Undertaking provides the arena for development

01
Residential 1
MONTH 1
Five days

MINDSET • RESILIENCE

The Edge of Expertise
What stops working from here?
An immersion built to take you past what experience can solve. You arrive treating your Undertaking as a problem to execute, and leave understanding how and why it requires you to change.

02
Application
MONTHS 2–4

MINDSET

The Variable You Control
What changes when I change?
Experimentation with how you show up in a recurring situation inside the Undertaking, and the evidence of what it altered. The point is proving to yourself where your leverage sits.

03
Residential 2
MONTH 5
Four days

CAPACITY • RESILIENCE

Deciding Without Certainty
How much complexity and ambiguity can I hold without collapsing it?
Work at the edge of your judgement – consequential decisions, competing claims, no resolution available – on the cohort's own live Undertakings.

04
Application
MONTHS 6–8

MINDSET • RESILIENCE

Leading What You Don't Control
Who moves when I have no authority?
The parts of your Undertaking that depend on people you cannot direct – usually where it is genuinely stuck. Experimentation on influence. Working with your pod and your coach to understand what you cannot see from the inside.

05
Application
MONTHS 8–10

RESILIENCE • CAPACITY

The Conversation You've Been Avoiding
What am I willing to risk?
By now there is a person, a position or a truth you have worked around since month one. This cycle moves it.

06
Residential 3
MONTH 11
Two days

MINDSET • RESILIENCE

Proving It Holds
What continues when the program stops?
Recounting what's changed and what this means for your future leadership journey - witnessed by your sponsor - who joins for the second day.

DURATION	FACE TO FACE	ONLINE	EXPERIENCE	COHORT
11 months	11 days	8 sessions, plus 1 hour a week	7–15 years	25

How the learning happens

Eight modes, each doing a job the others cannot. None of them is a lecture.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Developmental assessment

A structured assessment of your current action logic – how you presently make sense of complexity and respond to it – drawn from five decades of adult development research. This is not a personality test; instead it is a developmental scaffold. It establishes where you are starting from, and shapes your leadership journey.

THROUGHOUT

Action learning

The spine of the program. Three cycles of inquiry into one sustained challenge in your own organisation – act, observe, reflect, act again. Learning without action is meaningless.

THROUGHOUT

Peer pod

Five or six participants, assembled across sectors. Formed in the first residential and held for the year. These sessions run without faculty present, because the pod has to be where the real account gets given rather than the presentable one.

THROUGHOUT

AI Coach in your pocket

When faced with a challenge, have you ever wished that you could remember a learning from that program you went on? Our AI lab puts the coach in your pocket. Trained in the language of the program, this agent helps you with the capacity, mindset and resilience to address everyday leadership challenges.

THROUGHOUT

Mentoring

Access to senior leaders who have made this transition, from across Australian and international major projects. Distinct from coaching – a mentor lends you their map of the terrain, where a coach works on how you form your own.

THROUGHOUT

Coaching

A developmentally trained coach. Development work can also be personal. Here we provide you with seven 1-1 sessions with a professional coach, trained in vertical development, and aligned to the program learning structure. This is space to explore your growth edge and what might be holding you back.

RESIDENTIALS AND BEYOND

Fireside conversations

Unscripted sessions with chief executives, project directors and public sector leaders talking candidly about decisions that went wrong and what they learned in the middle of them. Exposure to genuinely different ways of construing a problem is one of the set of conditions under which developmental movement occurs.

RESIDENTIALS

Immersion

The first two residentials, both in the first five months, where the Institute holds the learning space. This is where we expand leadership capacity and where the cohort becomes a cohort.

John Grill Institute for Project Leadership advantage

John Grill AO, founder and former CEO of Worley, the resources and energy services firm, is the chair of the John Grill Institute for Project Leadership.

Our Institute is shaping the future of major project leadership by advancing research and translating best practice across governance, methodology, social processes, sustainability, and artificial intelligence.

Our diverse field of research aims to explore the reasons behind's project failure, many of which can largely be attributed to increasing project complexity, and a limited human capacity to make decisions under uncertainty.

Strong collaboration with industry, the Faculty of Engineering, and other University bodies creates a powerful, experienced team to deliver Catalyst.



Who should apply

About you

- A major project practitioner with 7–15 years' experience.
- Supported by an organisational sponsor.
- Curious about a deeper understanding of self and systems, and ready to treat the next step in leadership as a genuine stretch.
- Willing to step beyond traditional leadership and management paradigms into cutting-edge work on mindset, resilience and capacity.

The investment

Time commitment:

- 11 days face-to-face
- 8 online sessions in between
- 1 hour per week
  (with your coach, mentor or your pod)

Program fee:

$30,000 AUD, includes accommodation and meals (travel not included)

Commences: July 2027

How to apply

Applications

Interested candidates are encouraged to complete an application form, including a short leadership statement.

Candidates will be invited to an interview.

As places are limited, we recommend applying early.

Apply here:

short-courses.sydney.edu.au/course/CATALYST

For questions or a 1-1 chat:
john-grill.execed@sydney.edu.au



Why the University of Sydney?

The University of Sydney is consistently ranked in the top 50 universities globally and one of the best universities in Australia. It has been challenging traditions for 176 years as well as producing leaders who serve our communities and advance society at every level.

We are a leading, comprehensive research and teaching community. Through critical analysis, the latest thinking and active contribution to public debate, the University helps shape Australia's national and international agenda.

Alumni

The University of Sydney has more than 450,000 alumni in Australia and around the world.

Participants for this program will automatically join the John Grill Institute for Project Leadership alumni, together with globally leading project professionals from infrastructure, energy, mining, health, telecommunications, construction, and finance.



World Rankings

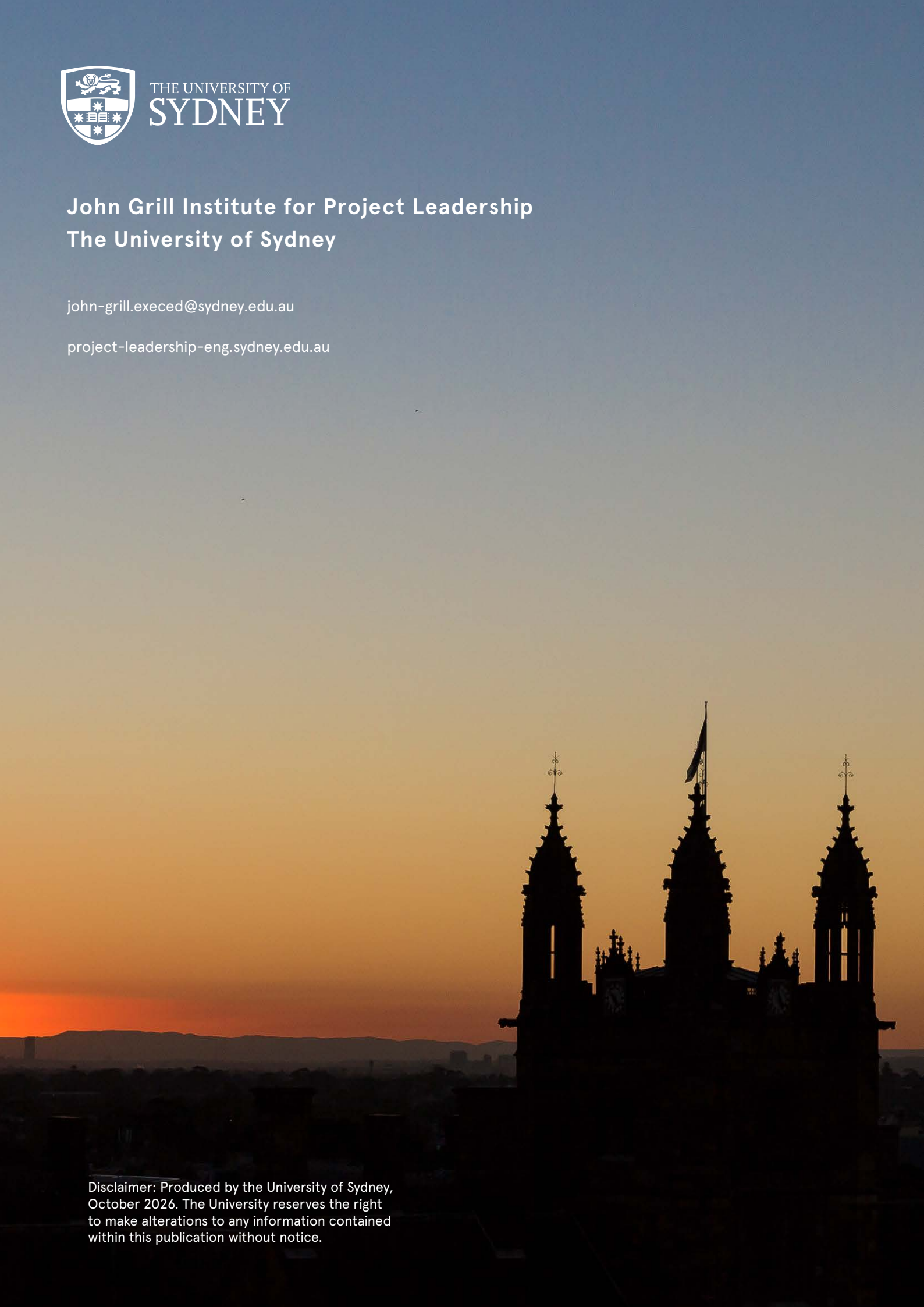
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IN THE WORLD ON
THE 2027 QS WORLD
UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

No. 02

IN AUSTRALIA,
US NEWS BEST GLOBAL
UNIVERSITIES 2026-2027





THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

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