

Life Is a Project (LIAP) 2.0: An Intercultural Project-Based Concept Model for Building Social Cohesion in Culturally Diverse Communities

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Abstract: Minority community groups around the world have been disproportionately impacted by the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research paper examines the concept and outcomes of a pilot program designed to help restore wellbeing and social connection within culturally diverse communities in Melbourne, Australia. The pilot utilised the ‘Life as a Project’ (LIAP) concept model, based on theoretical foundations of interculturalism, positive psychology, social prescription and project-based learning. A guiding principle of learn global, act local, was adopted to source creative social solutions from diverse cultures. A field survey of 13 participants from 6 countries of origin explores the social impact of the LIAP language immersion and intercultural project framework. Key pilot outcomes include reduced social isolation, increased intercultural bridging, improved optimism, wellbeing and quality of life. The study concludes with views on sustainable social programs, civic support, global learning and ideas for further research.

Keywords: intercultural projects, life is a project, social impact, social cohesion, project based learning, positive psychology, social prescription, cultural diversity

1. Introduction

In 2021, a Curtin University study estimated that loneliness across Australia, as a state of ill-health, was costing the nation AU\$2.7 billion per year (Lu, 2021). When COVID-19 descended on the world in 2020, the social isolation from lockdowns and associated anxiety severely impacted the wellbeing and mental health of communities around the world. In particular, the wellbeing of multicultural community members was placed at heightened risk (Hayward et al., 2021; Weng et al., 2021). In Melbourne, the world’s most locked-down Covid city (Boaz, 2021), the risks to social wellbeing would have been even more extreme. By 2022, governments and city councils across the globe, including Melbourne, were seeking innovative ideas for rebuilding social cohesion amongst communities most deeply affected by social isolation.

This paper explores the concept of learning from the practices of diverse and remote societies, lessons which can be applied to resolving complex global issues. In this case, the issue being addressed is the restoration of post-Covid social cohesion and wellbeing amongst multicultural communities in Cardinia Shire, a small, south-eastern electorate in the city of Melbourne, Australia. The study introduces the idea of an intercultural Project Management Office (iPMO). It draws on the ideologies of interculturalism, positive psychology (Seligman, 2012), social prescription and project-based learning to present a scalable, sustainable model of project-based social wellbeing programs for diverse communities—Life is a Project (LIAP) 2.0.

2. Background

2.1 The Issue: Impact of COVID-19 on Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Western nations such the USA, UK and Australia had raised serious concerns about rising levels of loneliness and social isolation in their communities. (Ernst et al., 2022; Holt-Lunstad, 2021; SGS, 2019). Reference was already being made to an “epidemic of loneliness” in the developed world. (O’Sullivan et al., 2021) Increasingly, studies have highlighted the escalated mental health risks associated with loneliness—anxiety, panic, insomnia, depression, trauma and in extreme cases, even suicide (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). Further still, loneliness has been linked to greater risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, compromised immunity and a 26% higher risk of death (Holt-Lunstad, 2022).

It was little surprise that the stringent lockdowns enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic have given rise to unprecedented levels of emotional distress for many. One global study across 101 countries reported a three-fold increase in the prevalence of “severe loneliness” (O’Sullivan et al., 2021). Of greatest concern, was the exacerbated impact of COVID-19 isolation on marginalised social groups, such as migrants and refugees.

The term “CALD”, referenced throughout this study, is an acronym, widely used in Australian public and academic discourse, to describe minority social groups of “culturally and linguistically diverse” persons. The term was first introduced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in its 1999 standards for national statistics. The definition of a CALD status person is imprecise, as is the general concept of ethnicity. This research paper adopts the recommendation of a review (Pham et al., 2021), suggesting use of the most widely-used definition of CALD status, in the Australian context, which refers to “those who were born in non-English-speaking countries and/or their main language spoken at home is not English”. In the global context, the term CALD may be viewed as referring broadly to all persons of minority ethnic origin in each respective location.

Already at risk of social isolation, COVID-19 lockdowns presented CALD communities around the world with a whole new level of challenges, anxieties and risks to wellbeing (Alarcão et al., 2023; Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020; Weng et al., 2021). For many in CALD communities, already navigating the stressors of acculturation (Brown & Holloway, 2008), the daily coping mechanisms which had relied on modes of community support and physical interactions were stripped away, with no certainty of restoration.

With further social exclusion, CALD communities also faced disproportionate physical risks of contracting COVID-19 itself. Less favourable living arrangements, higher-risk occupations, language barriers and lesser access to health services all contributed (Hayward et al., 2021; Spiritus-Beerden et al., 2021). This threat no doubt contributed to even greater distress for CALD communities in a vicious cycle of physical-emotional risk.

In Australia, the stringency of COVID-19 social lockdowns brought a new focus to the issues of loneliness and social isolation. As with other Western nations, a pre-Covid national study had already identified “problematic levels of loneliness” in 25% of Australians aged 12 to 89. (Ending Loneliness Together [ELT], 2022). A further study during Covid concluded that “loneliness increased the likelihood of developing a clinical depressive disorder by eight times and a clinical social anxiety by five times” (ELT, 2021). Studies reported similarly disproportionate risks and impacts to the wellbeing of CALD community members in Australia, as elsewhere—social isolation, service access, work-related risk, diminished mental and physical health (Weng et al., 2021). Others referenced a sense of “declining social cohesion” and a disturbing rise in racism and xenophobia (Mansouri, 2023). These issues

were not new to Australia's CALD communities (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015; Stead, 2017), but they were greatly compounded by COVID-19.

2.2 Rebuilding Post-COVID Social Wellbeing across Diverse Communities

As the COVID-19 pandemic eventually began to abate, nations turned their attention to the question of how to combat the severe social impacts of COVID-19-related isolation and loneliness (Holt-Lundstad, 2021). There was widespread agreement that programs designed to rebuild social cohesion were to be the primary answer. As Holt-Lundstad (2021) stated “research has shown that high-quality interactions among household members, interacting with neighbours, providing support to others, and expressions of gratitude, all promote social bonds and are negatively correlated with loneliness”. She also advocated for community and national leaders to “foster norms of support, inclusion and trust, leading to a greater sense of security” and social connectedness.

Consistent with this thinking, in 2022, the Cardinia Shire Council, in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, sought community proposals for programs to help build capacity for COVID-19 response and recovery across their CALD communities. The central theme was that of rebuilding social cohesion and, in doing so, wellbeing. The Cardinia call to action, triggered a response from a voluntary endeavour within the local CALD community—Life is a Project (LIAP). Previously run as a pilot CALD capability-building program in London, it was agreed to repackage LIAP as a CALD community Covid-recovery pilot in Cardinia Shire, as summarised in Figure 1.

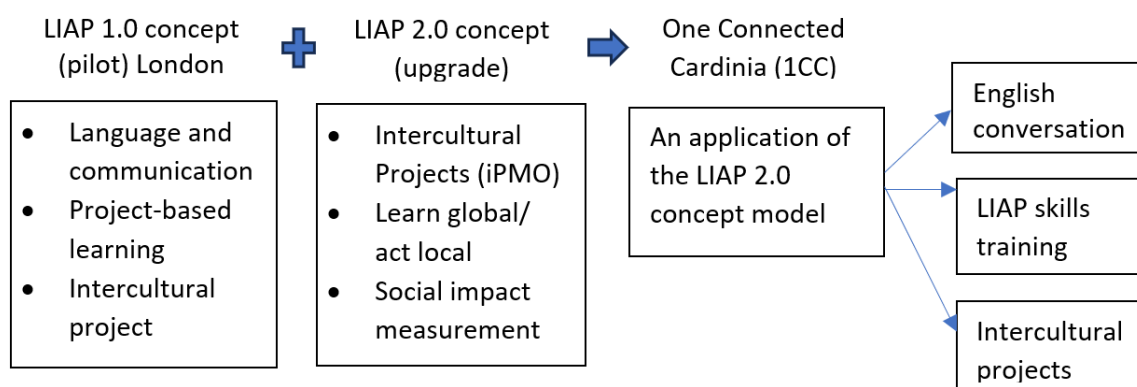


Figure 1. The LIAP model evolution.

2.3 Life Is a Project (LIAP) 1.0 Pilot—A Positive Approach to Social Rebuilding

In London, 2016, a six-week pilot project of ten participants from six countries of origin explored the novel concept of teaching a simple set of life project skills to migrant community members, as a strategy to support the acculturation process (Robinson, 2017). The pilot program was built around the U-curve theory of cross-cultural adjustment (Figure 2) proposed by Lysgaard in 1955 (cited by Black & Mildenhall, 1991) and adapted by others (Sam & Berry, 2010). The focus of the program was the wellbeing of migrants and persons of refugee backgrounds as they navigated through the culture shock and adjustment phases of the transition. Many studies in the acculturation field have identified the risks posed to wellbeing and traumatic potential of these transitions (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Ward & Kennedy, 2001).

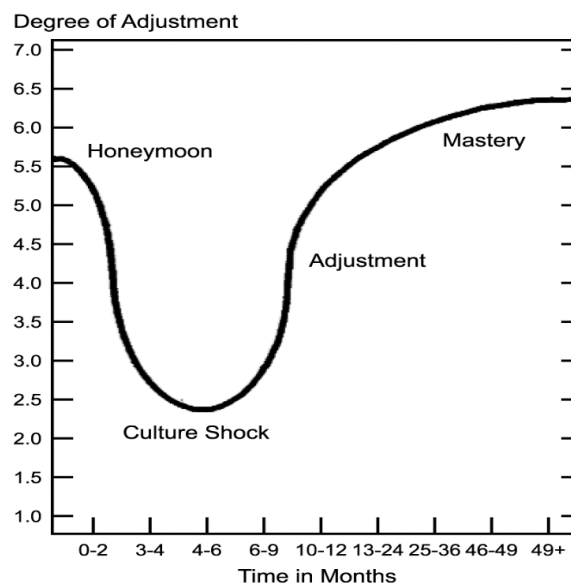


Figure 2. The U-Curve of Cross-Cultural Adjustment (Source: Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p. 227).

The LIAP 1.0 pilot seized upon observations that active coping strategies such as “task-oriented planning” had potential to combat the stressors of acculturation. Most importantly, it aimed to tackle the key stressor of “helplessness” (Brown & Holloway, 2008) by building capability for self-determination, goal-achievement and autonomy. The LIAP pilot program (Figure 3) shared simple project planning methods and culminated with a community project planned and managed by the intercultural participant team. Pilot outcomes observed included significant improvements in participant mood, self-esteem and wellbeing. The pilot, led by an experienced global project practitioner, was unfortunately, without academic rigour or measurement. Despite this, the novelty of concept and outcomes, though informal, generated much interest in project management (IPMA, 2017), academic (Lakatosné Szuhai & Baršić, 2018; University of Salford, 2017) and community (Ealing Council, 2017) forums.

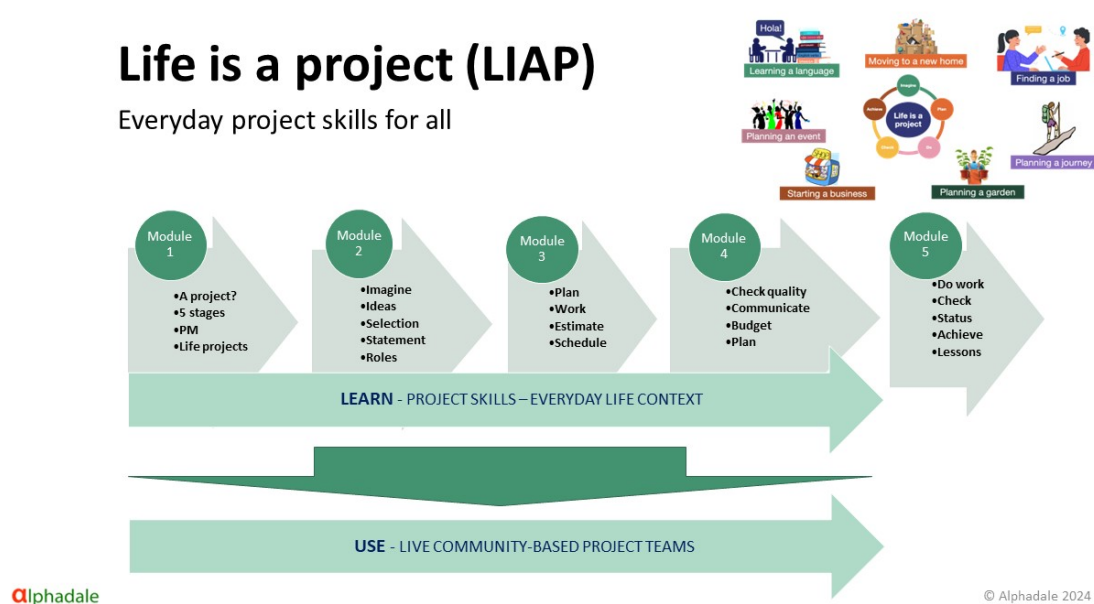


Figure 3. LIAP project skills workshop framework.

2.4 LIAP 2.0: Building Social Cohesion—an Intercultural Program Concept Model

Building on the learnings of LIAP 1.0, an enhanced program concept model, LIAP 2.0, was developed which replicated the skills-building workshops of the original pilot, supplementing it with the concept of an intercultural Project Management Office (iPMO). In the world of project management, a PMO is defined as “a management structure that standardises the project-related governance processes and facilitates the sharing of resources, tools, methodologies and techniques” (Project Management Institute [PMI], 2021, p. 211). This paper introduces the concept of an iPMO—a PMO established with the specific purpose of managing intercultural projects.

Within this concept model, the iPMO is proposed as a management structure for:

- Receiving and assessing intercultural project ideas and requests
- Preparing intercultural project proposals and business cases
- Prioritising intercultural projects, programs and resources
- Coordinating the management of intercultural projects
- Measuring and reporting the outcomes of intercultural projects

A guiding principle: learn global, act local

The updated LIAP 2.0 concept model, in keeping with its intercultural flavour, further adopted a guiding principle that iPMO community project ideas and requests should be sourced from remote and diverse cultural origins, supporting a philosophy that embracing and learning from the richness of global diversity will lead us to the best solutions and practices.

The enhanced LIAP 2.0 concept model is illustrated in Figure 4.

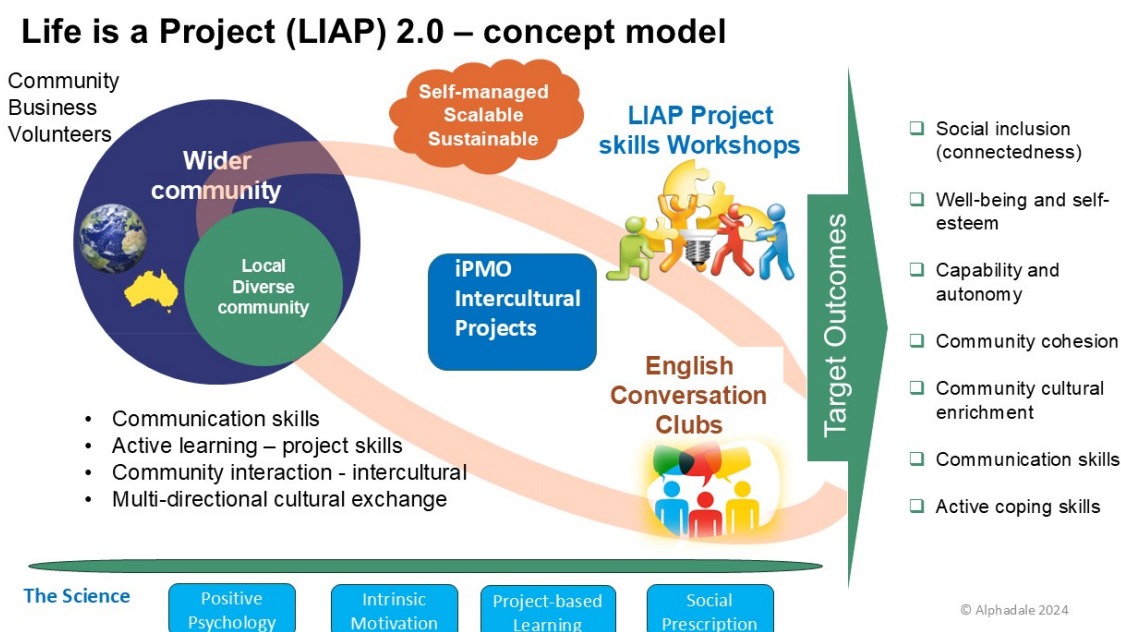


Figure 4. LIAP 2.0: an intercultural program concept model.

2.5 One Connected Cardinia (1CC): An Application of the LIAP 2.0 Model

When the Cardinia Shire Council sought innovative program ideas to help rebuild post-Covid social cohesion within local CALD communities, the LIAP 2.0 model emerged as an excellent fit. The model was packaged locally as the One Connected Cardinia (1CC) Program. The LIAP 2.0 principle of learn global, act local, was viewed as particularly

relevant to the challenge of rebuilding social cohesion and wellbeing. Anecdotal evidence from global encounters suggests that social cohesion might be superior in the cities, towns and villages of developing countries, compared to the cities of the developed West. Several studies also allude to the “epidemic of loneliness” as a predominantly Western trait, linked to the significant rise in single-person households (O’Sullivan et al., 2021). In ICC we resolved to look to the lessons of these remote developing societies as sources of inspiration for COVID-recovery strategies in Cardinia Shire. The iPMO was to be the vehicle for collecting these innovative ideas from within Cardinia’s CALD community.

3. Theoretical Considerations

3.1 Interculturalism

In Cardinia Shire, the purpose of the CALD recovery programs was to counter feelings of social isolation and to strengthen community connections. This focus on connectedness between and within CALD communities drew the program leader to the concept of interculturalism.

Interculturalism as an ideology promotes the concept of active communication and participation between diverse cultural groups. It is based on the belief that through active social contacts with people from other cultures, trust and solidarity is built, and feelings of inclusion grow (Zapata-Barrero, 2017). One study proposed that interculturalism has, as its end goal, the formation of new mixed identities and a new “sense of belonging” (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Whilst some see interculturalism as a departure from multiculturalism, the two themes are widely viewed as complementary (Mansoori, 2023; Modood, 2021). Whilst multiculturalism connotes tolerance and respectful coexistence, interculturalism speaks more at the activity level—diverse communities coming together to learn, share and act in unity.

In terms of social capital theory, interculturalism is about bridging social capital, the “horizontal social ties that transcend ethnic, linguistic, religious and class-based differences” (Stead, 2107). Intercultural practice is about “the contact, dialogue, interaction and exchange” between members of these diverse (CALD) communities (Elias and Mansouri, 2020). Aligning interculturalism with the goals of Cardinia Shire’s program is the Elias and Mansouri (2020) assertion “The stated goal of an intercultural approach is to foster social cohesion”.

What is attractive, particularly in the European context (Council of Europe [COE], 2008), is the upbeat interculturalist view of diversity “as a potential resource and a public good that needs to be distributed and not as a nuisance to be contained” (Zapata-Barrero, 2017). The immigrant is viewed as a rich source of “worldviews and knowledge”. Interculturalism speaks of the “diversity advantage”—the opportunities, creativity and fresh perspective that diversity brings to the community. These views align closely to the LIAP 2.0 approach guiding principle—learn global, act local.

In the “One Connected Cardinia” program (LIAP 2.0) it was resolved to embrace an intercultural approach. As studies have asserted at practice level, an approach which promotes activity between cultural groups (intercultural), particularly in local community settings such as parks, libraries, sports and neighbourhood spaces, is most likely to foster greater social cohesion (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015; Versey et al., 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

3.2 Positive Psychology

Studies have reported the catastrophic impact that COVID-19 has had on the wellbeing of minority CALD communities around the world (Hayward et al., 2021; Weng et al., 2021). What approach can we now take to best restore mental and physical wellbeing in Cardinia Shire? Positive psychology, based on the “well-being theory” of Seligman (2012), looks relevant.

The LIAP 1.0 pilot in London produced some interesting learnings. LIAP 1.0 chose to counter the mental stressors of acculturation—anxiety, depression, helplessness—with positive and active, goal-focused coping strategies to build resilience, purpose and plans. Outcomes, whilst informal, were positive.

This approach, of focusing on our strengths, capabilities and taking positive action towards achieving goals which bring us meaning and joy, is highly reflective of the doctrine known as “positive psychology”. As described by its founder “Positive psychology is the study of positive emotion, of engagement, of meaning, of positive accomplishment, and of good relationships” (Seligman, 2012, p. 70). In contrast to traditional psychology, which seeks to scrutinise and minimise suffering, positive psychology faces forwards and upwards, focusing on building enabling skills to achieve meaningful goals and purpose. Without realising it, LIAP 1.0 had deployed this approach.

The comprehensive study of Waters et al. (2022) advocates for the use of positive psychology practices to help buffer, bolster and rebuild mental wellbeing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It cites evidence of resilience, social support, and coping mechanisms as buffering against distress in China. It reports the bolstering role of meaningful work and gratitude in Italy. It provides evidence of optimism leading to post-traumatic growth in Spain and Australia. Above all, the study highlights the protective and restorative role of high-quality social connections.

3.3 Social Prescription

Social prescription, or the assignment of specific social activity as a strategy to help counter the negative health impacts of isolation and loneliness, may be viewed as an application of positive psychology. Social prescription looks beyond the treatment of symptoms, such as anxiety, depression or trauma, to address the root cause—social isolation and loneliness. In order to counter the disruption to naturally occurring social networks imposed by COVID-19, communities have been motivated to come up with innovative ideas to rebuild connections.

In Japan, there is a traditional cultural behaviour known as *Osekkai*—people in the community doing what they think is good for others. During COVID-19, the practice of *Osekkai* was revived and evaluated in the city of Unnan as a pilot study to combat social isolation. The *Osekkai* project was based on a series of regular community meetings in civic spaces, during which community organisations and citizens would raise, review and volunteer to help with local projects of social good. After 16 meetings over 12 months, loneliness of the 77 participants was measure to have decreased by 4.70% (Naito et al., 2021). In Singapore, the “HAPPY” program, a gentle, community-based, fitness program for frail senior citizens, produced a 10% reduction in social isolation for its 197 participants assessed after 3 months of activity (Merchant et al., 2021).

LIAP 2.0 in bringing together intercultural teams, an intercultural PMO, intercultural project delivery, and sourcing its ideas with learn global, act local thinking, embraces interculturalism. The program applies positive psychology thinking with a strengths-based focus, active learning, and ideas for planning meaningful life projects. Ultimately, it is hoped

that the coming together of intercultural teams, working together to deliver community projects of meaning, will help to bond, bridge and rebuild social capital and cohesion.

4. Methods

The aim of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the LIAP 2.0 program model, implemented here as “One Connected Cardinia” (1CC), as a concept model for building social cohesion and wellbeing in culturally diverse communities. In particular, the study attempts to measure the degree to which the program meets its five primary stated goals:

1. Reduce feelings of social isolation in CALD community members
2. Increase positive community connection between CALD community members
3. Increase mental and/or physical wellbeing of CALD community members
4. Promote community kindness and mutual support among CALD community members
5. Open doors to personal growth for CALD community members

4.1 Setting

The setting for this program was Cardinia Shire, an electorate with a 2021 population of 118,194, situated in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, approximately 55 km from the city centre. The gender divide is almost equal—49.2% male and 50.8% female. 23.5% of Cardinia residents were born overseas, the main sources of migrant origin being India 4.3%, UK 4.3%, Sri Lanka 1.9%, NZ 1.6%, and the Philippines 1.0%. 17.8% of Cardinia residents speak a language other than English at home (Cardinia, 2021). In 2019, a local report into social isolation in the region cited lack of transport links, access to services, language skills and cultural barriers as key issues (SGS, 2019).

The intent of the program was to run the workshop activities from local community facilities such as libraries, neighbourhood centres and other public spaces. The local suburbs of Pakenham and Beaconsfield were targeted as initial sites for workshops.

4.2 Program Design

The LIAP 2.0 program was promoted to CALD communities in Cardinia Shire as “One Connected Cardinia” (1CC). The program concept model, as depicted previously in Figure 4, is a refreshed version of the LIAP 1.0 program previously piloted in London. The major components of the 1CC program planned for Cardinia were weekly English Conversation skills workshops, Life Project skills workshops and the ideation, planning and delivery of one or two small community projects by intercultural project teams. The intent of the program was to collect intercultural project ideas from CALD community members for compilation, assessment and prioritisation within an intercultural Project Management Office (iPMO). The live community project was to be chosen by the intercultural project team.

Although it was not a stated goal of the Shire’s program, the 1CC (LIAP 2.0) concept model was designed to be sustainable and scalable. It was hoped that government bodies and pro-social-minded volunteers from community, local business, professions, and other sources might embrace the idea and contribute resources to the program as it progressed. Prior experience from LIAP 1.0 informed this optimism. It was hoped that a successful pilot would inspire future deployment in additional locations, far and wide.

4.3 Participants

The ICC program was opened up as a free offering to adult (aged 18+) members of Cardinia's CALD communities. It was advertised as physical flyers and in online social media by local libraries, community centres, Shire Council, local businesses, cultural associations, sports clubs and public noticeboards.

4.4 Measurement

Learning from the shortfalls of LIAP 1.0, an online survey form was designed to measure how well the ICC program met its key objectives. A positivist approach was adopted for simplicity and timeliness (Saunders et al., 2016). Survey design was informed by a search of related studies, particularly journal articles. Relevant scale items were identified and adapted for use. ICC survey questions included adapted versions of items from the GBS–Belongingness and WHOQOL–Quality of Life scales (Malone et al., 2012; Skevington et al., 2004). Popular scales which focused heavily on measuring changes in negative conditions such as loneliness or depression were considered but rejected. The 15 survey questions were designed with clarity, simplicity and relevance in mind. Multiple choice questions with optional text commentaries were used. Likert-5 scales were used to capture more granular data responses from participants. The online SurveyMonkey tool was used to collect survey response data from program participants.

The production survey was shared to 15 program participants at the completion of the program. 13 valid responses were received. The survey collected basic demographic data and explored participant views on program effectiveness in relation to inclusion, friendship, intercultural connections, wellbeing, happiness, confidence, purpose, and self-determination. The data was analysed using Microsoft Excel charts and simple descriptive statistical methods.

4.4.1 Limitations of Measurement Approach

A much larger sample size would have been preferable for quantitative analysis. The scope and scale of the ICC program was forcibly constrained by financial, time and human resources. The survey questions did, however, manage to elicit a rich source of qualitative data via the optional text commentary boxes.

A temporal approach, with surveys conducted at program start and end may have been more effective at measuring status changes, rather than relying on respondents' perception of change. Again, this was deemed too complex to administer within ICC program constraints.

The survey outcomes indicate a strong positive bias in participants' responses. The survey questions were largely drawn from the existing validated scales of related studies (Malone et al., 2012; Skevington et al., 2004) and supported by use of the Likert-5 scales, specifically to mitigate against such bias. Respondents were encouraged to provide candid responses in the anonymous, online survey. Perhaps it was the mindset of the CALD participants, and an eagerness to convey gratitude, which contributed to the exclusively positive responses, as discussed below in Sections 5.4–5.8. Further research should perhaps explore the use of negative question statements and additional methods of eliciting critical negative feedback from respondents.

4.5 Ethics

The research survey was carefully designed to address all necessary ethics considerations. The survey form assured participants that data would be anonymous and securely stored. Links were provided to the data protection and privacy policies of the SurveyMonkey site. Informed consent (mandatory) was requested by the introductory survey question which requested participant confirmation of understanding, voluntary agreement to participate, and an age of at least 18 years.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Program Delivery—“One Connected Cardinia” (ICC)

The ICC Program achieved its goal of delivering 20 English Conversation workshops (30 h) and 10 “Life is a Project” (LIAP) workshops (15 h) to CALD community members in Cardinia Shire. Workshops were held weekly in a meeting room at the local Pakenham Library between October 2022 and March 2023. Plans to share the workshops with a second location, Beaconsfield, were amended due to lack of local interest. Workshops were led by a single facilitator skilled in project management, English language teaching and cultural diversity.

The English Conversation workshops were casual in format and covered topics chosen by participants such as sport, wellbeing, employment, food, travel, community, entertainment, arts and crafts. The LIAP workshops shared the concept of using simple project management methods to plan and achieve everyday life goals. The challenge of envisioning, planning and delivering an intercultural community project was presented to the aggregate participant group. The guiding principle of looking to diverse global practices to ideate solutions to local issues—in this case, social inclusion in Cardinia—was placed as a central tenet. The concept of an intercultural PMO as a repository for these community-sourced ideas was presented. The response from participants was very enthusiastic. A rich repository of novel social project ideas from diverse origins was compiled. Each idea was documented as a project concept brief, as depicted in Figure 5, and reviewed for feasibility. A single community project was then chosen for development—“Fitness in the Park”.

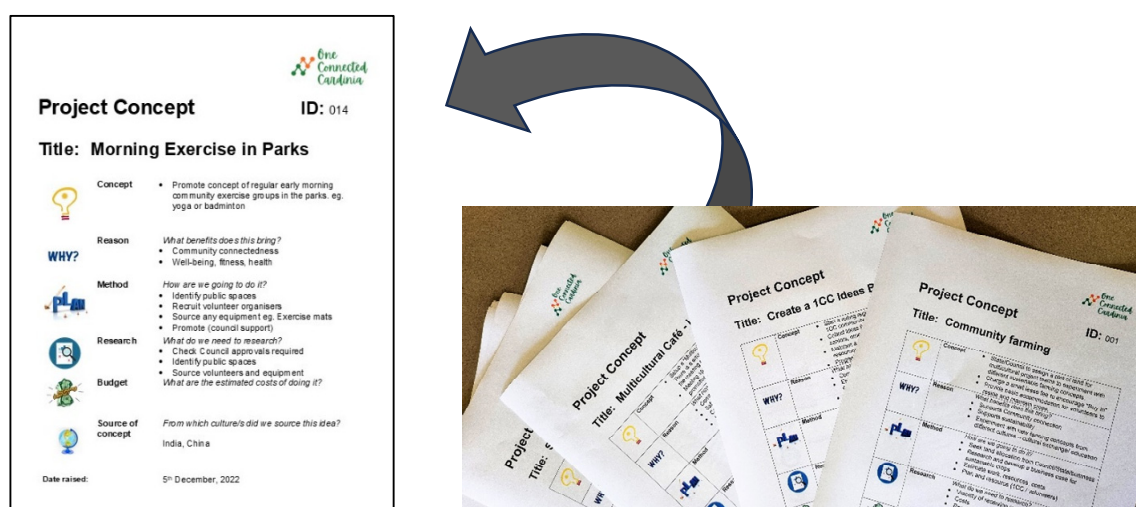


Figure 5. LIAP iPMO—project concept briefs.

5.2 An Intercultural Pilot Project—“Fitness in the Park” (FITP)

The FITP intercultural project was based on the idea of CALD community members coming together in green community spaces to exercise and socialise in a natural and healthy way. Benefits envisaged were improvements in mental and physical wellbeing, as well as building a sense of social connectedness and unity. The main challenges foreseen were the identification of usable green spaces, local council permits, recruiting volunteer leaders, sourcing exercise equipment and event promotion. The FITP concept was inspired, via CALD participants, by the social practices of communities in India and China. In particular, in Bengaluru, India, very early each morning, large numbers of community members can be observed congregating in the green spaces of central Cubbon Park with their exercise mats. A yoga instructor leads them through a series of gentle stretching and meditation—see Figure 6. There is no cost to join. An online search, reveals the grassroots origins of this movement (Reddy, 2019). The sense of social connection and wellbeing is immense. It seems easy, natural, accessible and fun.



Figure 6. Bengaluru: morning yoga, 2019.

Between February and March 2023, the FITP project was delivered in the idyllic, semi-rural grounds of the Gurdwara Sikh Temple—Siri Guru Nanak Darbar (SGND) in the local suburb of Officer. The original plan, to utilise Council Parks, had to be amended when insurance clauses prevented granting of a permit. The new plan was in fact far superior, with the Sikh community’s offer to host adding another dimension to the intercultural nature of the project. The owner of a local Fitness Centre came forward as a volunteer instructor and provider of outdoor exercise equipment. The pilot project, advertised with a cap of 12 twelve CALD participants—Figure 7, was fully subscribed with a waitlist. Participants came from 6 nations of origin. There was no cost to participants. Each Saturday morning, for 6 weeks, the group met in the grounds of the Sikh Temple for guided one-hour sessions of gentle exercise and wellbeing advice. The sessions were often followed by conversation, drinks and food from the temple kitchen. The program generated much interest and local media coverage for its novel and intercultural approach.



Figure 7. “Fitness in the Park”, 2023.

5.3 Demographic Analysis of Participants

A total of twenty CALD community members participated in the three streams of the 1CC pilot program—English Conversation, Life is a Project and Fitness in the Park. Attendance at each session was variable, possibly due to the zero-cost nature of the program. Participants came from 10 countries of origin—China, Colombia, India, Liberia, Malaysia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Uganda, UAE.

Personal circumstances of some CALD participants changed during and after the 1CC program, such that the post-program survey was only able to be shared to 15 participants, of which 13 valid responses were received. These responses came from participants originating from 6 countries—India, Liberia, Malaysia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and UAE.

Participants were mostly of a mature age. 39% of the group were aged 30–39, 15% were aged 40–49, and the remaining 46% were aged 50+ years. The FITP program was modified accordingly by the instructor. 69% of the group were female and 31% male.

The following sections present the results and discussion of 1CC participants’ responses to the anonymous online questionnaire, which was designed to measure changes in such areas as social isolation, connectedness, wellbeing, happiness and quality of life. As referenced earlier in Section 4.4.1, the survey resulted in exclusively positive or neutral responses from participants. The lack of negative responses was most likely due to the mindset of CALD participants, motivated by a desire to express gratitude and support for the program, rather than the balanced critical appraisal we had hoped to elicit.

5.4 Goal 1—Reduce Feelings of Social Isolation

The primary goal of the 1CC program was to help reduce feelings of social isolation within Cardinia Shire’s CALD communities. As illustrated in Figure 8, 85% of 1CC participants declared that they felt a little stronger (31%) or much stronger sense (54%) of social inclusion at the conclusion of the program. A heightened sense of unity and belonging was evident from many participants’ text commentaries:

“I’m able to make more connections beyond my own community, I’m able to speak a bit of English and with fitness program getting stronger day by day”.

“Now we are familiar with each other and wherever we see them we are so happy and feel no longer we are alone in Australia”.

“The diverse nature of the participants was a refreshing idea as we made so many friends, and almost felt like the activities were a project we all worked on—improving our physical and mental health”.

The references to a reduced sense of solitude (buffering), increased sense of support and personal resilience (bolstering), and growth through new learnings and skills (building) are all highly indicative of positive psychology in action (Waters et al., 2022). These outcomes are strongly supportive of intercultural studies which assert that regular and meaningful interactions with people from different cultures promotes a heightened sense of trust, purpose and inclusion (Holt-Lunstatd, 2021; Verkuyten et al., 2019; Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

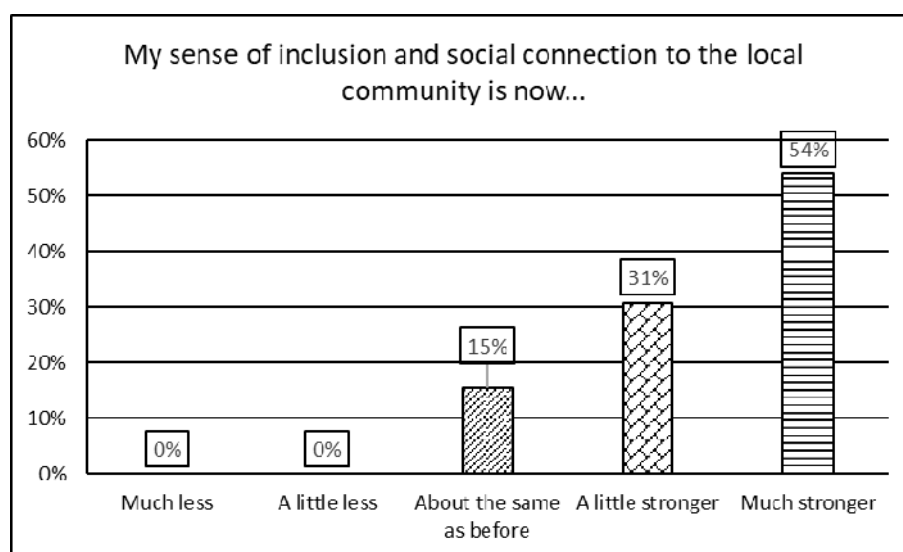


Figure 8. Sense of inclusion and social connection.

5.5 Goal 2—Increase Positive Community Connections

As depicted in Figure 9, 61% of participants strongly agreed that they had developed closer personal friendships in the local community. As one participant responded to this item, *“I got chance to connect with people from other communities/countries and love spending time with them”*. Another respondent stated simply, *“Now I have very good friends to reach out to”*.

The ICC program sought not only to combat the sense of isolation that CALD community members were feeling, but in a more sustainable sense, to help them build new, enduring connections in the local community. Throughout the program it was visibly evident that program activities were nurturing social bonds which were extending naturally beyond the program’s boundaries. Friendships were being formed, leading to new activities, shared endeavours and mutual support. The survey responses supported these observations.

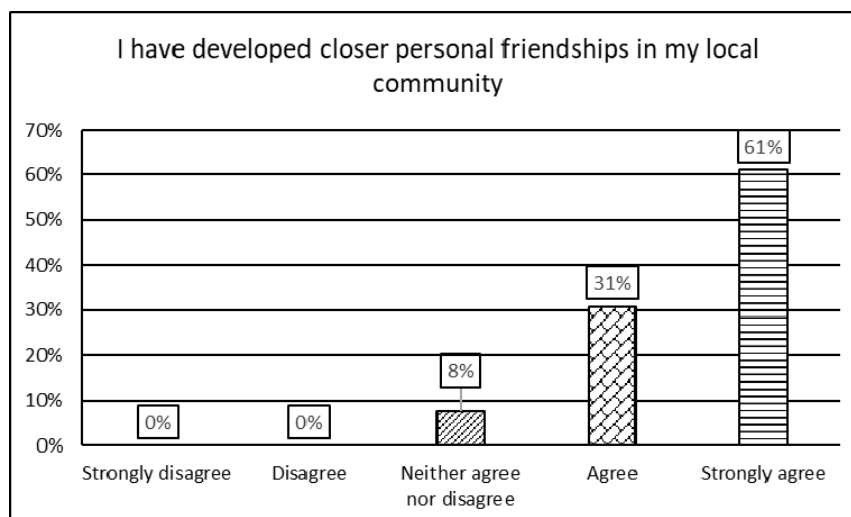


Figure 9. Closer personal friendships.

5.6 Goal 3—Increase Mental and/or Physical Wellbeing

The ICC program was focused foremost on raising the emotional, rather than physical, wellbeing of CALD participants, through learning, acting and achieving goals in supportive intercultural teams. Improved physical wellbeing was viewed as a natural, eventual, secondary outcome. The selection of FITP as the group's community project promoted physical wellbeing to the shorter-term benefits list. As shown in Figure 10, a dominant 92% of ICC participants responded that their physical and mental wellbeing was better or much better at the conclusion of the program. One participant shared, *"Now I feel more physically, mentally, and socially active"*. Another stated, *"Now I got an idea of living more healthier and active life"*.

Of interest was the strength of positive responses to the FITP pilot. Many participants expressed delight, a sense of achievement, and urged extension of the FITP component, with responses such as *"Would love to see this program continue or to be delivered on a regular base so more people can benefit of it and increase our physical activity and increase the active living measures"*.

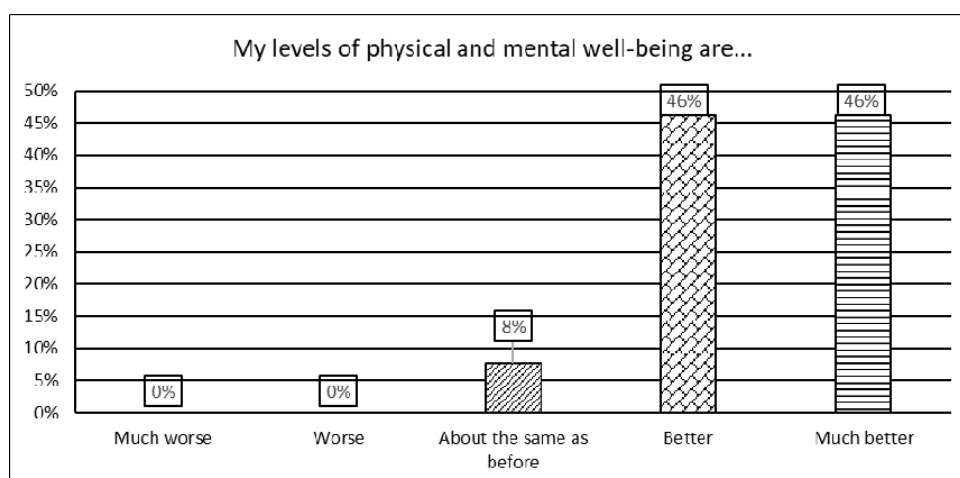


Figure 10. Physical and mental wellbeing.

Closely tied to the concept of wellbeing is the notion of quality of life. Using an adapted item from the WHO Quality of Life scale, participants were asked how, if at all, the ICC program has influenced their overall happiness with life. As shown in Figure 11, a significant 85% of participants agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (39%) that they were happier with their life. In the words of one participant, *“Earlier I felt a little bit loneliness in my home but after coming to this programme I felt relaxed and happy. It was exciting to meet them and talk with them”*. Directly referencing the COVID-19 impact, one respondent shared, *“Fitness in the park helped me to overcome my hesitance in social settings after the pandemic”*.

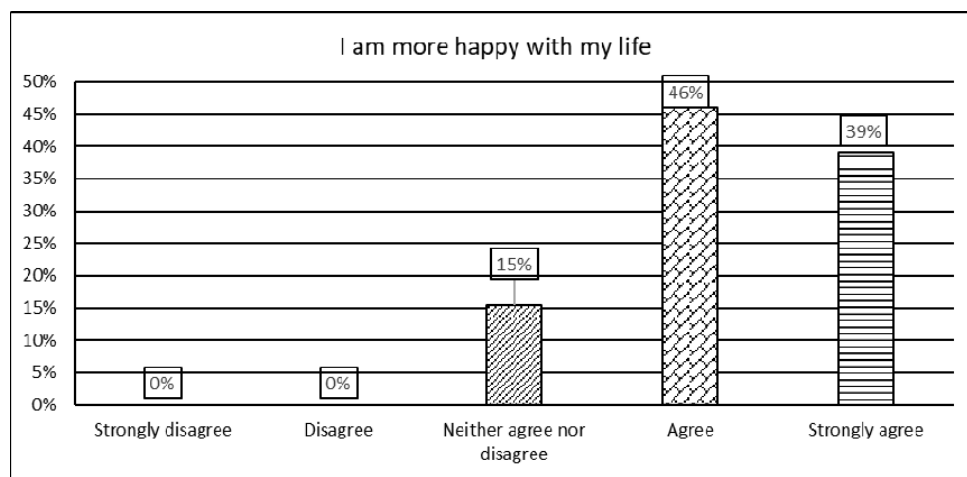


Figure 11. Quality of life.

5.7 Goal 4—Promote Community Kindness and Mutual Support

According to positive psychology theory, the giving of kindness and gratitude are supportive of heightened wellbeing. Not only does the receiver benefit, but the giver is moved to a higher state of emotional wellbeing by the positive emotions experienced in the process. In simple terms, “People are happier when they do good for others” (Waters et al., 2022). At the community level, greater community kindness is, of course, supportive of social cohesion. The ICC survey sought to measure whether the ICC intercultural program was able to foster greater levels of understanding, kindness and support between different CALD communities.

During the ICC pilot, a team spirit of giving and mutual support was very much evident, perhaps strengthened by the common goal of navigating Covid recovery. Libraries offered free meeting spaces. Local business offered voluntary services of qualified instructors. Cultural groups offered use of their sites to host project events. Participants shared food, drink and transport as the bonds of authentic friendship and mutual empathy visibly grew.

The survey results are not surprising. As Figure 12 illustrates, 92% of participants agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (54%) that they had developed stronger intercultural connections and support. 46% of participants also strongly agreed that they had improved their ability to talk to and work with people from other CALD communities (Figure 13). One participant stated, *“By organising functions there we were able to know about various food from their countries and share the food with them and it made us to be more closer”*. Another group member shared, *“The support I received from this group built up my confidence to communicate and work with other CALD communities”*. Clearly, these ICC outcomes are indicative of social bridging taking place, at least at the individual level. A third respondent,

whilst also positive, reminds us of the challenges, saying “*I’m confident but not totally, I’m still hesitant to speak because of lack of vocabulary.*”

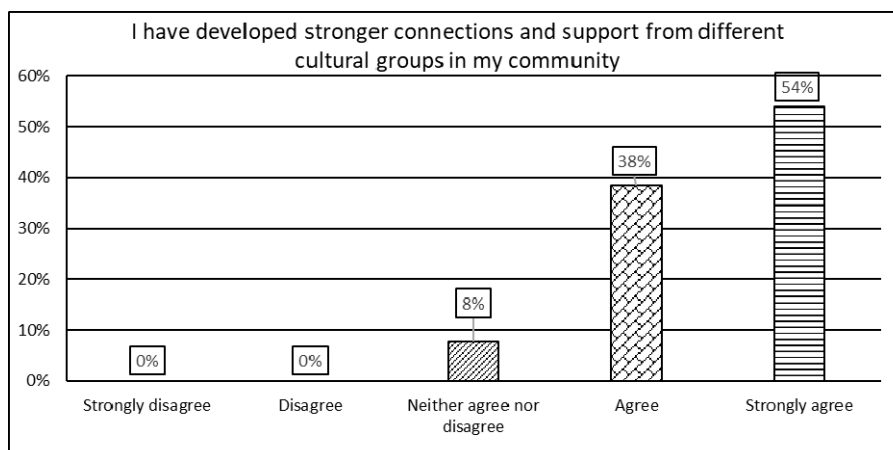


Figure 12. Intercultural connections.

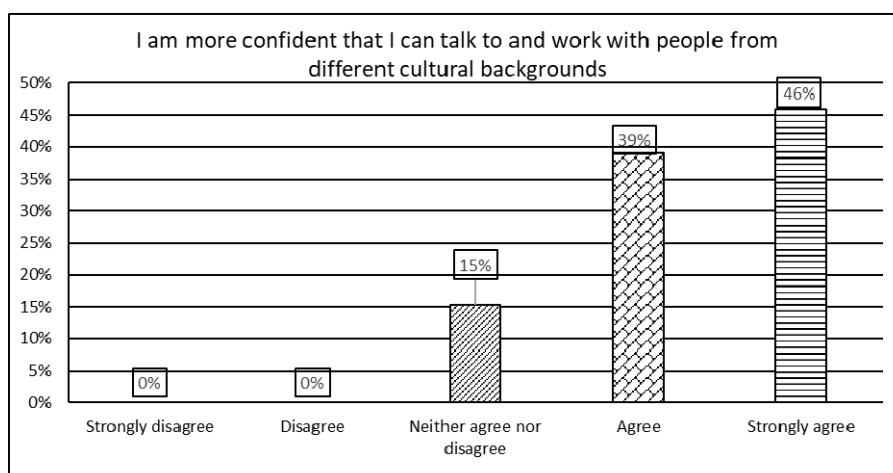


Figure 13. Intercultural effectiveness.

5.8 Goal 5—Open Doors to Personal Growth

One of the debilitating emotional impacts of COVID-19 on communities was the sense of helplessness and being stuck (Pietrabissa & Bissa, 2020). This was increasingly so for CALD community members who already faced the underlying challenges of the acculturation process (Brown & Holloway, 2008). A key objective of the 1CC (LIAP 2.0) program concept was to endow participants with a mindset and simple tools to help reclaim their sense of self-determination, productivity, and pathways to personal growth. Growth is a defining component of the positive psychology paradigm (Waters et al., 2022). The 1CC program aimed to open doors for personal growth in the areas of activating latent strengths, new language skills, new planning skills, self-esteem, intercultural intelligence and social connections.

The survey question on living a meaningful or productive life, is aligned to the WHO Quality of Life scale and is a leading element in the philosophy of positive psychology. As illustrated in Figure 14, 85% of 1CC participants agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (54%) that,

at the conclusion of the program, they were using more of their skills or abilities to live a productive life.

In the words of one participant, *“Very motivated to continue my new resolutions and commitment to active living and healthy eating”*. On a similar note, another shared, *“Now I got an idea of living more healthier and active life”*. One further comment from a participant reflected, *“I understood that age it is not a barrier to spend a happy life and to serve the community where we live”*. These comments reflect ascendent feelings of renewed hope, optimism and growth, rather than helplessness.

With specific reference to personal growth in language skills, 54% of ICC participants reported a better (8%) or much better (46%) level of English conversation skills at program completion—Figure 15. This outcome was positive, given that only 6 of the 13 respondents had attended the English Conversation stream of LIAP. This result is supportive of the project-based language learning observations of LIAP 1.0. It is also worth noting, as prior studies have highlighted, that language acquisition remains a critical, enabling element of the acculturation journey for CALD communities (Benson-Rea & Rawlinson, 2003).

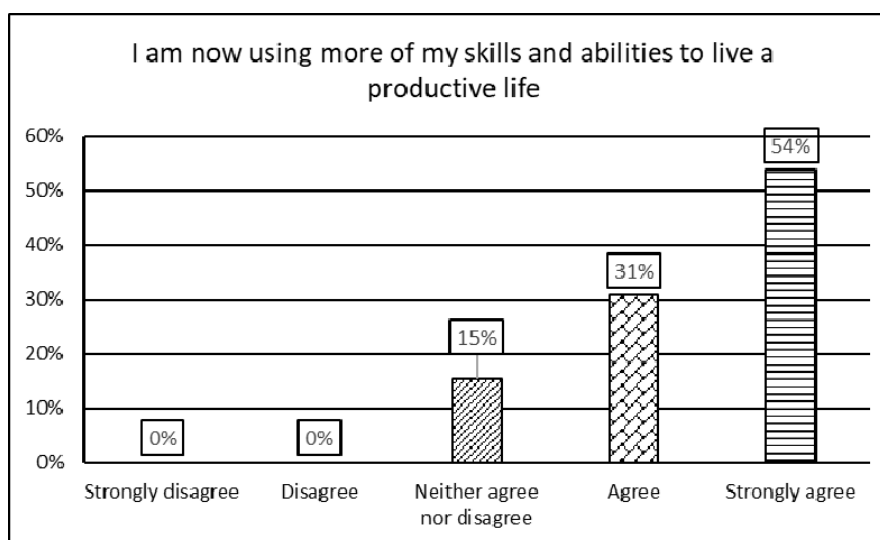


Figure 14. Personal skills and productivity.

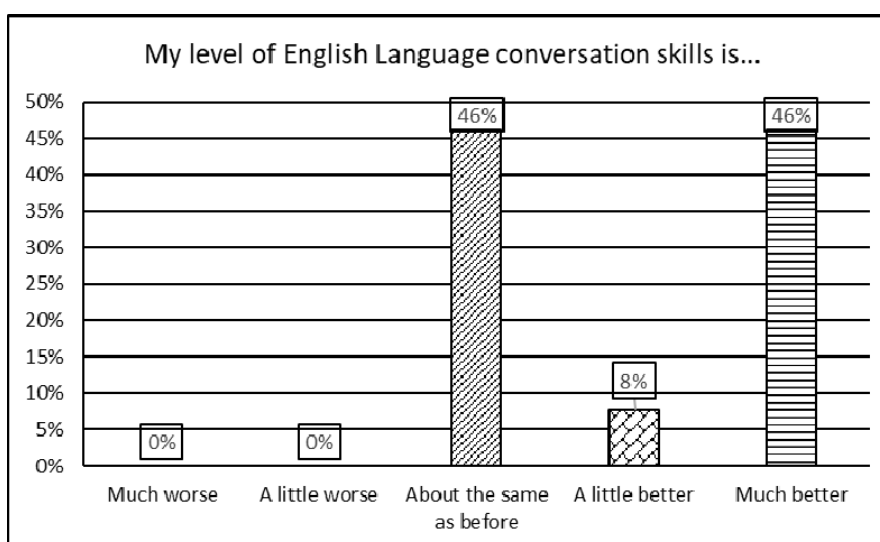


Figure 15. English conversation skills.

5.9 Sustainability and Scalability of Outcomes

The 2016 LIAP 1.0 pilot in London, an independent grassroots initiative, whilst lacking in academic structure, had revealed an abundance of pro-social volunteer sentiment and resource in support of the acculturation journey of CALD communities. Perhaps activated by media coverage in project management, academic and community forums, volunteer teachers, academics and project practitioners in diverse geographies came forward with offers to participate. Volunteer translators provided translations of LIAP 1.0 artefacts into 8 native languages. Materials were shared into the public domain for projects of social good. The LIAP concept however, like so many single-source grassroots initiatives, did not sustain and did not scale beyond the pilot. LIAP 1.0 was effectively archived as an interesting proof-of-concept, with no further applications, impacts or returns.

When LIAP 2.0 was repackaged for One Connected Cardinia (1CC), the concept model was designed with sustainability and scalability front and centre of mind. The CALD pandemic-recovery issue was very much a global one. A solution concept for Cardinia Shire should be just as applicable to, and repeatable in, CALD communities elsewhere. To be sustainable, 1CC needed to demonstrate measurable benefits, be repeatable, engage community sentiment, and to be actively supported by local community. Without sustainability, 1CC (LIAP 2.0) was in danger of becoming yet another honourable, but clichéd, one-off grassroots CALD pilot, with demonstrated potential, but no enduring contribution to community wellbeing (Stead, 2017).

Is 1CC sustainable? Yes, and no. The 1CC program has demonstrated measurable benefits. Despite its limited sample size ($n=13$), the survey commentaries did provide supporting evidence of improved optimism, life skills, authentic intercultural connections, empathy, mental and physical wellbeing. Within the pilot group, an intercultural and positive approach was not only seen to foster social cohesion, but also evidence-supported. The program succeeded in engaging community sentiment. Enthusiasm among CALD participants was high, numbers grew by word-of-mouth communications. Participation of high-profile CALD community leaders raised interest. 1CC and FITP activities were featured in local press and social media. A local fitness instructor volunteered his services. A local cultural group volunteered their grounds for FITP. A local library volunteered their meeting room. Members of Parliament asked to visit the FITP site. There was discussion of partnering with local intercultural sport-for-development initiatives, community organisations (e.g., Rotary), and replicating the program in neighbouring electorates. Many elements of a sustainable solution were in place.

In March 2023, the 1CC program concluded. It was deemed a success by Council and community, having met the goals of the one-off CALD Covid-recovery program. Sustainability was a LIAP 2.0 design principle, but not a Council program objective. At that point, momentum was still high. Participants wanted to continue, volunteers wanted to continue. And yet, all activity ceased. Without the structure and gravitas of being a Council-endorsed program, interest and investment quickly fell away. Unlike the grassroots yoga movement in Bengaluru, community and volunteer intent was not sufficient to sustain the 1CC program beyond pilot. What was different? On reflection, 1CC revealed numerous potential first-world barriers to sustainability of grassroots social practice—lesser capacity of community to self-organise, differing risk appetites, legal and insurance anxieties, governance and regulation risk (e.g., park permits), transport and commute complexity, differing leisure options, differing values, and an underlying sense of greater individual entitlement. This outcome—failure to sustain—is probably largely attributable to cultural difference. Sustainability is not further examined in this study, but presents an engaging and critical research topic.

6. Conclusions

When the global COVID-19 pandemic sent world populations into a state of virtual hibernation, attention eventually turned to the plight of minority social groups such as the CALD communities, and the question of how they were coping, both practically and emotionally. It was not surprising that CALD communities emerged as a group deeply affected by the social isolation imposed by COVID-19 lockdowns and uncertainties. As the pandemic fog finally started to lift, local government authorities, such as the Cardinia Shire in Melbourne, turned to grassroots social enterprise to help.

The One Connected Cardinia (1CC) program was built around the framework, learnings and encouraging outcomes of an earlier London pilot—Life is a Project (LIAP). Leveraging the active coping, upskilling and intercultural project features of LIAP 1.0, the Cardinia concept design added three significant features. Firstly, the concept of an intercultural PMO was introduced, as a dynamic repository for collating intercultural project ideas from community. Secondly, the guiding principle of sourcing social project ideas from diverse cultures was adopted. Thirdly, methods to measure, review and report social impacts were embraced. The dynamic iPMO concept helps position the LIAP model as both scalable and sustainable.

As was the case with LIAP 1.0, the 1CC program has generated much interest in the community and local media. The iPMO concept has been proven as novel mechanism for sourcing creative global solutions to local issues, in this case, social isolation. The intercultural pilot project, “Fitness in the Park”, was lauded for its CALD community wellbeing outcomes, and for partnering with local business, community and cultural organisations. Observed elevations in the moods, engagement and wellbeing of CALD participants are, once again, evident. Most critically, this study provides, to a degree, empirical evidence of the potential of grassroots social programs, such as 1CC, to help address complex social issues such as social isolation, intercultural cohesion and support, and community wellbeing.

The great challenge remains—sustainability and scalability. Both LIAP pilots, London and Melbourne, were acclaimed as successful and full of potential social benefit to CALD communities. Yet neither sustained or scaled. Where does this challenge even belong? Should it be placed at the feet of grassroots social practice? Perhaps the answer is yes in Bengaluru, but no in the suburbs of Melbourne or London. Perhaps, here in the West, this degree of self-organising social interaction is a fanciful notion and we need some type of civic leadership to make it happen. In any case, the band-aid approach of one-off social projects has value only as a pilot social intervention or proof-of-concept. Once proven, the goal must be sustainability, perhaps scalability, leading to significant and enduring social benefit.

This 1CC program study is well placed as a promising pilot implementation of the LIAP 2.0 concept. It is hoped that this study will inspire interested others to take the LIAP 2.0 concept further in directions that benefit marginalised communities, such as the CALD communities, in significant and enduring ways.

Further research is warmly encouraged in the areas of grassroots social program sustainability and scalability, intercultural teaming, sourcing intercultural project ideas, learning from the cases of remote global practice, and the iPMO concept.

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Informed Consent Statement

Participants were informed that survey data was anonymous and would be securely stored. Informed consent was received from all research participants as a mandatory survey item.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research article.

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