

## ‘Finding my new way of being and self-identity’: Leadership Lab Pilot Evaluation

An internal evaluation of the Leadership Lab (the Lab) pilot initiative of Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* (WLI) was conducted in late 2022 to assess the Lab’s relevance and effectiveness and inform future programming.

### Background

The Lab was based on similar programs delivered in the Pacific and elsewhere by WLI’s contracted delivery partner, CLA Adaption and used a methodology called ‘Leadership can be taught’ whereby issues participants experience are applied to leadership concepts as a way of contextualising learning. Participants brought a ‘case’ that they are, have or will work on in the future, to the Lab. Peer groups, one-on-one coaching and a process that reviewed the whole group as a ‘case’ were used to structure participant learning.

31 participants, 11 of whom had participated in the Lab’s design meetings, were accepted onto the Leadership Lab program. The pilot program, which concluded on 30 September 2022, consisted of six four-hour sessions held each fortnight from 25 May to 17 August, peer support and individualised coaching sessions for participants. To receive certification, participants were required to attend at least four Lab sessions and four coaching sessions and submit a 300-word piece on how they applied their learning to their leadership challenge before 30 September. 90 per cent of enrolled participants (23 women and five men) completed the Lab program and 64 per cent met certification requirements.

### What did we learn?

The evaluation confirmed that the Lab was a positive experience for participants. It was both effective as a means for participants to practice and explore the exercise of their leadership in a ‘safe’ place and, was relatively efficient in providing a range of online resources, coaching and technical advice and support.

Respondents stated that through the Lab they felt more confident and more rounded as leaders, that they had strengthened their leadership capacity and were more equipped to apply the strategies learnt, were more able to manage conflicts and issues, have ‘hard’ conversations with colleagues, family and friends, and build their self-identity. Facilitators thought that the biggest impact was in the participants’ growth in self-awareness, especially given their disrupted WLI experience (due to COVID-19) and their growth in understanding of the adaptive aspects of the challenges that they may face at home.

The Lab was **relevant** and met most participant needs, especially for those who had returned or were about to return home after studying in Australia. Respondents stated that they joined the program for a variety of reasons including to access to the Lab ‘offerings’ to further develop their leadership skills, learn new skills and strategies to create change and to gain new perspectives on leadership. One participant described their time on the Lab in terms of, ‘*Finding my new way of being and self-identity. This was my greatest achievement.*’

The Lab was **effective** in meeting expected outcomes for participants with 66 per cent stating that the Lab was very useful or useful in helping them take action over personal challenges. All respondents rated one-on-one coaching and facilitation highly.

The Lab was reasonably **efficient** in providing participants with a rich and accessible set of resources, which included online resources, access to facilitators, coaches and WLI program staff. Lab resourcing supported the delivery of the main sessions and one-on-one coaching. Online delivery of the Lab was both experimental and necessary given the locations of participants and facilitators, logistics and program cost. Some participants were impacted by disruptions to their home / work internet or were based in ‘closed’ sites and / or needed to purchase personal internet credit.

### Key recommendations

The main recommendation was that the Lab be implemented again in 2023 with targeted and minimum improvements based on the lessons learnt from the pilot implementation.

In 2023 the Lab will be more consistent with WLI’s ontological approach and its framing of adaptive leadership and consider more contextualised design; more flexible scheduling, sequencing, and programming; be more explicit in exploring gender issues; and strengthen the peer group learning and support mechanism. The Lab may offer modular non sequential ‘building blocks’ through the WLI’s Hub online platform.

This second cycle of implementation will help to determine if the tweaked 2022 version is more relevant and effective than the Pilot Lab or if different offerings or packages are better for future alumni. Any model will require a considered cost-benefit assessment against all WLI tiered offerings to help determine overall value for money.