



**Rising from Resilience**  
**Pandemic Recovery Needs and**  
**Priorities of Pasifika Youth in**  
**South East Melbourne**



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## 1.0 Introduction

The Victorian Ongoing Initiative for Community Engagement (VOICE) was funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing in late 2021. VOICE is led by the Burnet Institute in partnership with the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and Monash University Action Lab. The role of VOICE, identified through sector engagement and co-design, is to:

1. Connect community organisations with public health practitioners thereby bringing together multidisciplinary and community expertise to guide innovative and effective practice
2. Collect and clearly communicate information on multicultural community needs and the strengths and opportunities to address them via our digital platform and other channels
3. Create and share stories, tools and resources to grow good practice; showcasing, sustaining and building on the hard work of multicultural communities during the pandemic
4. Build stronger reciprocal relationships between service providers, policy makers, public health practitioners and communities so that multicultural community public health needs are understood and met, including through sustained funding and program evaluation and refinement
5. Strategise how what we do and learn can be applied to other communities facing social and structural disadvantage, and to broader public health and social issues and emergencies

A key part of the program is delivering projects in collaboration with multicultural communities to explore their public health needs and design innovative solutions. This report describes the VOICE community project we conducted with young people from Pasifika backgrounds in the south-east of Melbourne.

## 2.0 Background

Throughout the pandemic, Pasifika communities have faced numerous challenges including financial insecurity, job losses, strain on families living in close quarters and negative impacts on mental wellbeing (Akuhata-Huntington et al., 2020). COVID-19 restrictions including lockdowns and travel bans made it difficult for community members to connect face-to-face (Enari & Faleolo, 2020). Social isolation was particularly challenging given that collectivism and large community gatherings are central to Pasifika identity and wellbeing (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). Young people from Pasifika communities have also experienced challenges including disruptions to education, racism and discrimination and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Doery et al., 2022; Siegert et al., 2022). Importantly, throughout COVID-19, the Pasifika community have also demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity, suggesting they should be involved in generating responses to community challenges (Enari & Faleolo, 2020). In this community project, we aimed to work with Pasifika young people to identify and explore their experiences, needs and priorities and to develop solutions to support pandemic recovery.

## 3.0 Methods

To identify and respond to the needs of Pasifika young people, VOICE adopted a participatory and iterative approach. We employed a Pasifika young person to conduct research with their own community. The project officer was supported by the team to develop research skills to shape project methodology, facilitate data collection and synthesise key findings. Throughout the duration of the project, VOICE partners and the project officer participated in team workshops and meetings to refine the focus of the project and methodology to ensure we responded to the needs of our participants.

Our project was embedded within Le Mana Pasifika, a project at CMY that aims to support young people from Pasifika backgrounds to connect with their communities and strengthen their understanding of their culture (Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2023). This initiative recognises the importance of self-determination and involves working





closely with the Pasifika community, including young people, to develop programs and activities. Le Mana Pasifika also runs the Wayfinders, a leadership group of Pasifika young people who advise and advocate for Pasifika young people in the south-east of Melbourne. Throughout the pandemic, Le Mana Pasifika staff (including the VOICE project officer) worked closely with Pasifika community leaders, stakeholders and young people to understand the challenges the community encountered and support required. This existing work meant that the project officer had strong relationships with Pasifika young people and was able to approach community members for feedback and meaningful input throughout the project. Specifically, the Le Mana Wayfinders Leadership Group has played an active role in supporting this project with their ongoing advocacy of key issues affecting Pasifika young people.

### **3.1 Data Collection and Analysis**

To shape data collection methods, the project officer drew on Pacific Indigenous knowledge to centre Pasifika ways of knowing and operating (Smith, 2021). For this project, we used talanoa research methodology, where information is collected through conversations, talking and exchanging ideas or thinking (Vaiolati, 2006). Two talanoa sessions were facilitated by the project officer in October 2022, with support from other Le Mana Pasifika, Monash University Action Lab and Burnet Institute staff. Through talanoa, the project team sought to develop an understanding of Pasifika young people's experiences during the pandemic and identified current and emerging community needs and priorities. Thirty young people attended the talanoa sessions, which were held at a local community centre. Data collected during talanoa were collaboratively synthesised to summarise Pasifika young people's needs during pandemic recovery.

Following the talanoa sessions, the team adopted a co-design approach to identify and create potential solutions to the challenges Pasifika young people faced during pandemic recovery. Co-design involves working collaboratively with the intended users of a particular service or product to improve the design and achieve better outcomes with community (Chauhan, Leefe, Shé, & Harrison, 2021). The project officer was supported by the team to create a co-design workshop guide which included a range of interactive activities. To foster creativity, practical application, and critical thinking, workshop activities were also shaped by the project officer's understanding of Pasifika young people, their areas of expertise and their lived experiences. This workshop aimed to encourage young people to share their ideas and develop a pilot program that could be implemented and tested with Pasifika young people. The full day co-design workshop was delivered in January 2023, at a local youth hub, with seven young people attending. The workshop was facilitated by the project officer, with support from other Le Mana Pasifika, Monash University Action Lab and Burnet Institute staff. Data collected from participant activities and facilitator notes taken during the session were entered into a Miro Board (an online interactive board) for collation and analysis. The project officer used these findings to create a draft program that could be implemented and tested with Pasifika young people. The draft program was also shown to the broader VOICE team, CMY staff and shared back with young people from the Wayfinders group for feedback and refinement.

Summary of key project activities:

1. Recruitment of Pasifika young person as a project officer to conduct research with Pasifika young people
2. Ongoing training and mentoring of the project officer to build appropriate skills and capabilities
3. Team workshops to establish a focal point for the project
4. Broad engagement with young people to understand their experiences and needs (utilising culturally appropriate Pasifika 'talanoa' method)
5. Synthesis of data collected during the talanoa sessions
6. Identification of a focus for co-design activities where a smaller group of young people could come together and develop something (e.g. a program, a product, a service) which could be implemented in their community to respond to their identified needs
7. Deployment of co-design with young people
8. Further development of a co-designed program, product or service by the project team
9. Testing and iteration of the program, product or service



## 3.2 Participants

Participants (n=30) in the talanoa sessions were recruited through existing community networks of CMY and snowballing techniques. Participants were offered a cash payment or a voucher to support their attendance.

Participants in the talanoa sessions came from a wide range of backgrounds with varying countries of birth and migration experiences. Participants represented the three cultural areas of the Pacific Islands: Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Among the young people participating in the talanoa sessions were those from Fiji, Nauru, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, and the Cook Islands. In addition to those born in Australia, a few were born in New Zealand and migrated to Australia with their parents at an early age, and several others were born outside of New Zealand and Australia.

While the sessions were open to any young person aged between 12 and 30 years, those attending were all between the ages of 18 and 30. The participants included recent high school graduates, university enrollees and graduates, multicultural aids in schools, aged care workers, photographers, dance teachers, and community service workers, among others. A small number of people were unemployed as well.

Participants in the co-design workshops (n=7) were recruited from the Wayfinders Leadership Group. These participants were also offered a cash payment or voucher to support their attendance, albeit of a greater amount to reflect the higher commitment and participation involved in co-design. Co-design participants were culturally diverse, aged between 18 and 30 years and reported a wide variety of employment and educational activities.

## 3.3 Ethics

All participants reviewed an explanatory statement about the project and signed a consent form. The VOICE project received ethics approval from the Alfred Hospital Ethics Committee (Project 150/22).

## 4.0 Key findings

The early team workshops identified a focus on pandemic recovery as being relevant for the Pasifika community. In this section we present key findings from the talanoa sessions followed by key findings from the co-design workshop.

### 4.1 Talanoa<sup>1</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Pasifika young people have shown remarkable resilience in the context of economic, social, and cultural hardships during lockdowns and restrictions. The participants described diverse experiences and discussed many significant issues that affected their families and communities. Although some of these experiences were common amongst the wider community, others reflected their particular cultural and social context. Pasifika young peoples' needs during the pandemic and recovery have been strongly shaped by their often limited access to services and supports, their mistrust of government and differing intergenerational experiences and beliefs which have been influenced by migration journeys and time spent in Australia, New Zealand and Pacific island nations.

### Perceptions of COVID-19

Young people held a variety of theories about COVID-19, from more mainstream through to scepticism. COVID-19 dialogue and information circulating in the communities changed over time, including misinformation and conspiracy theories. Young people also described trusting each other and encouraging open discussions about all sources of information.

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<sup>1</sup> Summarised findings from talanoa are reported here; the full results can be requested from CMY or found online [https://www.cmy.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CMY\\_LeManaProjectNarrative\\_Part\\_I\\_digital\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.cmy.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CMY_LeManaProjectNarrative_Part_I_digital_FINAL.pdf)



## Education

Participants described the pandemic's impact on Pasifika young people in primary and secondary schools over the past two years, as well as the impact on parents and guardians. In some cases, young people believed online learning at home increased parents' accountability and attention to their children; in other cases, it increased pressure on parents and young people, including through financial costs and access to appropriate technology.

Many young people had to take on additional responsibilities in the home and in the community during the pandemic. In particular, Pasifika young women described being expected to assist with domestic duties and other roles. This led to young women having less time for study and class attendance (both in high school and post-secondary education), which negatively impacted their academic outcomes and mental health. Young women described these as cultural expectations that were heavily gendered. Some young people withdrew from education and entered employment to assist their families financially.

Participants raised concerns that schools lacked culturally appropriate approaches and engagement strategies to support Pasifika students, often perceiving Pasifika students negatively. This contributed to a sense of disempowerment and inability to participate in school activities.

## Employment and finances

During the pandemic, many young people became the main breadwinners for their families as one or more parents lost work or became unemployed. Although some young people noted they were able to obtain assistance through several government schemes, others described a lack of awareness of what was available, limited access to technology, and difficulty navigating government services.

Young people described how lockdowns and restrictions led to significant increases in bills due to the constant home presence, rising living expenses and increased spending due to boredom and lack of access to social engagement. While a number of young people described taking on additional employment to cover expenses, the talanoa sessions identified a significant need for education and resources around financial literacy for Pasifika young people.

Young people described varying experiences with working from home, including burnout and mental health impacts, as well as missing the social aspects of their roles. Although young people believe they were supported in their daily work tasks, they also felt their workplaces lacked cultural awareness and understanding when dealing with issues affecting them.

## Family experiences

Many Pasifika households contain multiple generations and more than one family in the household. In this context, it can be challenging for young people to navigate two identities: Australian-born Pacific Islanders or Australian-raised Pacific Islanders influenced by their traditional ethnic background and culture. The difficulty in navigating intergenerational differences was a common theme identified throughout the talanoa sessions.

In a traditional Pasifika household, it is often the role of women to be carers (elders and young children), leaders of domestic duties, and cooks, as well as other functions. In contrast, men are expected to provide financial stability and security. Many young Pasifika women experienced mental health issues due to the cultural differences in domestic expectations and roles between men and women.

Participants also described families forming closer bonds, learning more about each other's cultures, languages, and families during the time spent together, and siblings developing stronger bonds. Thus, young people supported each other a lot more throughout the pandemic.



## Culture

Young people described how a sense of community among Pasifika people is based on trust, physical interactions and social connections. As a result, many felt that strict pandemic measures took away a significant part of their culture during this period because of the restrictions and rules in place. The young people discussed how pandemic measures adversely affected the engagement of the community, families, and individuals and that this impact has persisted despite restrictions lifting. Young people described a need for culturally appropriate community events. Promoting cultural and traditional protocols, such as beginning and ending sessions with prayer, could make these events more effective. Participants described the importance of acknowledging community leaders and traditional chiefs or heads of systems or hierarchies of ethnicity at such events.

## Social relationships

In order to maintain their mental health, young people described the challenge of prioritising friendships and physical closeness over adhering to rules and restrictions. Several young people revealed that they still found it challenging to enter public spaces, participate in social settings, and had fears related to crowds and public spaces. Many young people had experienced post-COVID anxiety, making it difficult for them to build new relationships, engage socially, and reconnect with others.

Other participants turned to their faith and religion to better cope with their circumstances, forming prayer groups, friendship catch-up sessions, and talanoa forums using online tools. Young people consider that social connection is a critical tool to engage with young people moving forward. Pasifika young people also believed that more community events (as described above) would help them to feel more comfortable entering social spaces and encourage them to reconnect with fellow young people and community members.

## Health and wellbeing

Throughout the talanoas, young people frequently described ongoing and severe impacts on their mental health. Young people began to unpack how the pandemic highlighted ongoing problems at home and among family members. Since mental health is a cultural taboo, many young people found it difficult to discuss their feelings and emotions openly with others and often received dismissive comments from older family members.

Some young people turned to other methods of coping including vaping, smoking, excessive drinking and food consumption, online gaming and excessive spending. Many young people talked about putting on a 'brave' face, disregarding their health and wellbeing in the process.

## Access to services and supports

A lack of awareness of services and support available throughout the pandemic was consistently raised during the talanoa. Participants were unsure which services they were eligible for, which may have been influenced by previous experiences of service ineligibility and exclusion due to visa or migration status. Young people described wanting a greater level of communication from the government through mainstream news sources and services, as well as other forms of media such as social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to name a few. Confidence in using mainstream support services was also identified as a significant issue. It became clear that many people felt distrustful and lacked knowledge about how to access and use services effectively.

Some young people did use government and mainstream support services however, they felt like these services were bland, sterile, and sometimes they felt like these services were not youth-friendly or culturally competent. These experiences often discouraged them from utilising services beyond initial interactions.





## Summary of issues identified in talanoa sessions

Findings generated from the talanoa sessions suggest there is a need for more culturally appropriate and culturally competent schools, workplaces and support services. Young people identified key community needs in relation to mental health and wellbeing and more opportunities for development of social, family and community relationships and dialogue.

These talanoa sessions, along with other engagement with Pasifika young people in the activities of the Le Mana Pasifika program at CMY, have identified the need to support and strengthen the next generation of Pasifika leaders, promote their voices and continue to build resilience within the community. Talanoa sessions were well received by participants, and they wanted more sessions to serve as a regular gathering place for young Pasifika people.

### 4.2 Transitioning from talanoa to co-design

Following the talanoa sessions, VOICE partners reflected on the key issues identified by Pasifika young people to provide direction and focus for the co-design workshop. Given the breadth of issues identified by the group and eagerness of the young people to advocate for community needs and create social change, partners agreed that the co-design workshop would focus on collaboratively designing modules for an empowerment, leadership and mentoring pilot program for Pasifika young people aged 18 years and over.

### 4.3 Findings from the co-design workshop

The co-design work plan was developed to tap deeply into the knowledge, experiences, and expertise of the participants to inform program modules focused on empowerment, leadership and mentoring.

## Leadership Skills and Qualities through the Eyes of Young People

For participants, strong communication skills were identified as one of the most desirable qualities of a competent leader (e.g., listening, clarity and effectiveness, empathy, relatability and open-mindedness). Participants also valued leaders with strong interpersonal skills, for example, someone who can create connections with others by sharing experiences, being vulnerable, and having a sense of humour. Participants also shared their experiences of leadership in their workplaces, school environments, communities and other contexts.

The participants stressed the importance of leaders being resilient, while also being self-aware and seeking support when needed. In addition, young people noted that being an effective leader requires the ability to have honest and constructive conversations, to set boundaries and clear expectations. Young people need support in setting and pursuing goals, building confidence, and navigating challenges and pressure on an individual basis.

Young people agreed that a leader should care deeply about their culture and have experience and understanding of the subtleties of their culture. The ability to relate to people of all ages and cultures is crucial to being a leader, as is the ability to represent one's culture and community. Young people wanted more platforms for expressing themselves so they could tell their stories, share their experiences, and feel comfortable enough to express themselves as they are.

## Safety in Community and Leadership

Participants reported that low numbers of Pasifika professionals in health and community services and a lack of cultural competence are common barriers to service engagement. Genuine and consistent engagement can build trust and help to engender a sense of safety. This can be achieved through setting ground rules before an engagement and allowing young people to seek support or exit the space without judgement. The use of familiar spaces (e.g. churches or sport clubs) can help young people to feel safe and able to speak their own language and practise their culture, as well as ensuring basic needs are met (e.g. access to transport, proper compensation).



## Creating Stronger Families and Communities

Participants expressed the need for appropriate support to facilitate and mediate activities with families and communities. Participants described wanting to bring together a diverse array of perspectives and stakeholders to share stories and experiences. As well as integrating creativity, language, storytelling, and talanoa, such events would be a collaboration with other stakeholders. Connecting with other groups that conduct engagement activities would be useful to share experiences.

## Safe and Culturally Appropriate Engagement Approaches

Participants discussed the use of talanoa as a sustained and culturally-appropriate practice to engage Pasifika young people and identify paths forward. Participants explained how talanoa can be used in a variety of settings to facilitate intergenerational conversations, provide a platform for decision-making, help enforce change and help to resolve conflicts. Participants also spoke about how talanoa can be hierarchical, can lack inclusivity and that not all participants have the opportunity to express their concerns. Participants believed very few people benefit from talanoa in the ways that it is currently used.

Young people expressed the need for safe, non-judgmental, and inclusive talanoa spaces. Young people suggested removing the hierarchies within talanoa and establishing clear rules and boundaries to ensure all participants are equal. Nevertheless, culture and tradition would still be acknowledged and emphasised in the facilitation process. Participants agreed that talanoa sessions should end with a call to action that takes into account the struggles and lived experiences of the participants. Participants considered that a youth-led talanoa would require them to be trained in facilitation and mediation that incorporates both the cultural and western perspectives of the young person.

## Summary of findings from the co-design workshop

Findings from the co-design workshop suggested that participants wanted further training and support for Pasifika young people to become community leaders and create social change. Specifically, they identified opportunities to enhance their engagement skills with younger community members, to strengthen their knowledge of Pasifika and western cultures, to facilitate talanoa and traditional protocols and to strengthen capabilities in advocacy, community events, workshops, and on-ground delivery.

## 5.0 Leadership program

### Planning

Following the co-design workshops, the project team debriefed and reflected on young people's understanding of leadership, safe spaces, community connections and engagement approaches. Key findings were shared with other members of CMY to identify how young people's ideas could be integrated into a leadership program. Co-designed modules built on existing materials and activities within CMY. The project officer reviewed existing resources and training programs from CMY that could potentially be adapted to meet the needs of Pasifika young people. For example, the CMY Shout Out Program trains multicultural young people in storytelling, facilitation and self-care. Similarly, members of CMY's youth advisory groups are trained in communication, conflict negotiation and problem solving. Relevant activities were also identified from Le Mana Pasifika's school programs including Pasifika culture and identity and navigating two worlds. Drawing on these existing resources and the data generated through talanoa and co-design with Pasifika young people, we developed five modules to support young people to build their leadership and facilitation skills. The project officer also discussed initial ideas for the program with the Wayfinders group to obtain their input during program development and planning.



## Format for delivery

Given the importance that young people placed upon community connection, the program was designed to be implemented in small group settings where young people could build and maintain relationships with other Pasifika young leaders. Young people had also identified that leaders require a strong support network, thus we suggested the program should be facilitated by Le Mana Pasifika staff who have existing relationships with the group and are trained to support young people. Short feedback activities are built into sessions to check in with young people and assess how they are feeling. Participants previously reported that consistent engagement helps to establish trust among their community, therefore it was essential this program was implemented over six weeks rather than a one-off session. During the co-design workshop, the project partners also reflected that the program should include practical activities to keep young people engaged and energised. We initially conceptualised that the program would be delivered through a blended model of online and face-to-face, however feedback from group members suggested that the program including activities be delivered face-to-face only based on the engagement feedback from all involved. This delivery would also be consistent with CMY and Le Mana Pasifika's delivery of other programs.

## Modules

During talanoa and co-design sessions, young people identified that intergenerational gaps between younger and older people were a major issue in their community, particularly related to mental health and wellbeing. Consequently, modules were designed to support young people to facilitate intergenerational conversations including active listening skills, conflict resolution and enhance engagement skills with young people, become leaders in their communities and navigate and celebrate culture and identity. Additionally, young people also suggested that there were limited culturally-appropriate and youth-friendly methods of engagement. As such, a key focus of the leadership program was to support young people to upskill in facilitation of talanoa and break down hierarchies but with respect for culture, elders and existing leaders. A breakdown of the modules created for this program is outlined as follows:

<b>Pasifika VOICE: Empowerment and Mentoring Program</b>			
<b>Title</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Delivery Format</b>
<b>Pasifika Youth Leadership: Empowering Agents of Change</b>	Develop leadership skills and facilitation techniques to support Pasifika young people in becoming effective leaders and facilitators in their communities.	3 Hours maximum	Face-to-Face
<b>Navigating Two Worlds: Empowering Pasifika Youth in Cultural Intersection</b>	Gain a deeper understanding of navigating Pasifika and Australian cultures, and develop strategies for effectively navigating cultural intersection.	3 Hours maximum	Face-to-Face
<b>Storytelling for Change: Empowering Pasifika Youth through Advocacy</b>	To develop the participants' understanding of advocacy and storytelling as effective tools for promoting change and leadership within the Pasifika community.	3 Hours maximum	Face-to-Face
<b>From Ideas to Impact: Creating Pasifika Events with Purpose and Passion</b>	Develop project management skills and knowledge among Pasifika young people to plan and execute community events effectively.	3 Hours maximum	Face-to-Face



## 6.0 Facilitator Reflection

As a facilitator deeply connected to my Pasifika roots, my journey in the Pasifika VOICE project has been an enlightening and transformative experience. I want to share the valuable lessons we learned and inspire diverse stakeholders, including young people, other agencies, government departments, community groups, and organisations, to engage Pasifika young people in the most effective and empowering ways.

One crucial aspect that became apparent was the need for co-design, a new concept and form of engagement for Pasifika young people. To achieve better outcomes, we realised that patience, relationship building, and trust from participants were paramount. By establishing genuine connections and fostering mutual respect, we could collaboratively shape the project and honour the voices and aspirations of the Pasifika community.

Throughout our journey, it became evident that strengthened culturally competent schools, workplaces, and support services are vital. Understanding and catering to the unique needs of Pasifika young people and the community are essential steps toward creating inclusive environments that empower them to thrive. It is incumbent upon us to embrace cultural competence and ensure that these institutions value and uplift Pasifika individuals.

Mental health and wellbeing emerged as critical community needs. We witnessed the ongoing and severe impacts on young people's mental health and recognised the challenges they face in discussing their feelings openly. To address these issues effectively, stakeholders must prioritise enhanced support services. Providing safe spaces for open dialogue and engagement is crucial in fostering mental wellbeing and resilience among Pasifika youth.

A deep desire for more opportunities to develop social, family, and community relationships through dialogue and engagement was palpable throughout the project. Pasifika young people yearned for platforms that would facilitate connections and allow them to explore shared experiences and aspirations. It is incumbent upon us, as stakeholders, to create these spaces and empower young people to forge meaningful relationships.

Supporting and strengthening the next generation of Pasifika leaders emerged as a central focus of our work. It is essential to ensure that their voices are heard, and their potential is fully recognised. By empowering young leaders and providing mentorship, leadership programs, and platforms for youth engagement, we can foster their personal growth and community development, ensuring a brighter future for the Pasifika community.

The talanoa sessions held throughout the project proved to be transformative experiences. These sessions, deeply rooted in Pacific Island traditions, provided a safe and culturally familiar space for Pasifika young people to share their experiences, dreams, and concerns. The overwhelmingly positive response highlighted the need for regular talanoa sessions, serving as gathering places that foster ongoing dialogue, support, and collaboration.

One profound insight that emerged was the acknowledgment that there may not be enough bicultural workers to meet existing community needs. However, what truly matters is the genuine connection and understanding fostered between service providers and Pasifika young people. Regardless of their cultural background, any service provider who makes Pasifika youth feel acknowledged, heard, and understood can provide a safe and appropriate service. It is the relationships we build that truly make a difference.

Trust, deeply ingrained in the Pasifika culture, emerged as a vital element that strengthens connections and fosters a sense of belonging. Trust is nurtured through interconnectedness, where community members rely on one another for support, guidance, and collective well-being. Cultural ceremonies, rituals, and customs often involve trust-building elements such as sharing personal stories, respecting elders, and upholding community values. By honouring and embracing these practices, we can create environments where trust thrives, enabling the Pasifika community to come together, support one another, and navigate challenges with unity and strength.

Navigating intergenerational differences and cultural expectations within Pasifika households presented unique challenges for young people's mental health and well-being. Balancing rules and restrictions with social connections, especially in the wake of post-COVID anxiety, added complexities to building new relationships and maintaining mental





well-being. Recognising and addressing these challenges through tailored support services and initiatives is crucial for Pasifika youth's holistic well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasised the importance of open discussions on mental health and the need for culturally competent support services. Pasifika young people require consistent engagement, where they are at the centre of their conversations and allowed to create their own narratives. By empowering them and providing platforms for self-expression, we acknowledge their agency and ensure that their voices are heard and valued.

Building trust with the Pasifika community, especially young people, requires time, consistency, effort, and a deep understanding of their unique cultural context. Relationships and trust are not just outcomes but also integral parts of the process. By genuinely centering Pasifika people, their stories, and their narratives, we lay the foundation for trust and foster better outcomes in our engagement efforts.

From the very beginning, our partners at Burnet and Monash ActionLab have been outstanding collaborators. They embraced an approach that prioritised Pasifika young people, allowing them to be the center of their conversations, create their own narratives, and share their experiences in a culturally safe and appropriate manner. This collaborative approach fostered trust, ensuring that the project's outcomes were impactful and aligned with the community's needs.

In conclusion, the Pasifika VOICE project has been an awe-inspiring journey, driven by the active participation, resilience, and enthusiasm of the Wayfinders and the broader Pasifika community. Our experience highlighted the importance of culturally sensitive approaches, the power of dialogue and community engagement, and the significance of representation and inclusivity. The Wayfinders left an indelible mark through their dedication to culture, unwavering spirit, and immense potential as future leaders and change-makers. The success of the project is a testament to the strength, resilience, diversity, knowledge, and unwavering commitment of the Pasifika community.

Finally, let us heed the lessons learned and embrace culturally sensitive approaches in our engagement with Pasifika young people. Together, we can create a more inclusive and empowering future for the Pasifika community, where their voices are valued, and their dreams can flourish.

As a facilitator, I acknowledge the privilege of being in this role, and I want to assure the community that it was never taken for granted. Being a member of the community and being in a role such as the facilitator comes with a great responsibility, and all efforts were made to ensure that duty was fulfilled.

The youth leadership program designed as an outcome of the project is a testament to the Wayfinders and all those who were part of this transformative journey. I am inspired by their dedication to culture, unwavering spirit, and immense potential as future leaders and change-makers.

I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Le Mana Pasifika, the Pasifika community, Pasifika young people, and CMY (Centre for Multicultural Youth) for their invaluable contributions and unwavering support throughout the project. Your collaboration and dedication were instrumental in making this journey a resounding success. Together, we have created a safe and empowering space for young Pasifika people to share their stories, dreams, and aspirations.

Let us continue to work hand in hand, united in our commitment to creating a brighter future for the Pasifika community. By centering Pasifika young people, respecting their narratives, and honouring their voices, we can foster a community where diversity, inclusivity, and trust flourish. Together, we can achieve greatness.

## 7.0 Conclusion

This participatory project aimed to understand the needs of Pasifika young people and develop solutions to support pandemic recovery. We trained a Pasifika young person to facilitate research with their own community. Through talanoa sessions, we identified that Pasifika young people experienced a range of challenges throughout the pandemic across education, employment, cultural identity, service access, social relationships and mental wellbeing.



The co-design workshop identified opportunities for services to support young people to develop leadership skills, celebrate cultural identity, resolve conflict and facilitate intergenerational conversations. These findings have been translated into an Empowerment and Mentoring program at CMY designed to be implemented with Pasifika young people. Overall, this project highlights the importance of engaging with Pasifika young people to understand their needs and create meaningful solutions together.

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