The Experiences of Participants and Facilitators in the Leaders in Communities (LinC) Programme

Survey Synthesis Version 2

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Overview of the survey

The Leaders in the Community (LinC) project was established in Ōtautahi in 2014, promoting a vision of 'thriving leaders active in flourishing communities'. It delivers several programmes to local leaders, using a strengths-based approach to develop community leadership and facilitate networking opportunities.

In late 2020, LinC and the University of Canterbury (UC) began a research project to explore the experiences of LinC participants. The project was co-designed by LinC and UC with an aim to ensure the knowledge in the programme is available for communities needing to address complex issues, and inform the five-year plan for LinC from 2021-2026. It has two phases: an online survey distributed to all LinC alumni, followed by focus groups with a select group of alumni. This synthesis summarises findings from the first phase only.

The online survey included a measure of leadership self-efficacy, followed by several open-ended questions regarding the impact of LinC on programme alumni. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics, and distributed to 335 programme alumni via email. The survey ran for one month, with a reminder email sent to alumni one week before the survey closed. The response rate from this first wave was 19.7% (66 responses), which was then reduced to a data set of 59 participants.

The first version of this synthesis was distributed to LinC in early August 2021. LinC raised two concerns about the response rate: first, some alumni were listed twice on their contact list and there were actually 270 alumni contacted, not 335, and second, they had experienced difficulty in reaching some alumni due to changes in contact details. LinC and UC then agreed to open the survey for a second wave of data collection following an effort by LinC to reconnect with some of these alumni. The online survey was re-opened for 10 days and received 36 additional responses. Two of these were incomplete and deleted from the data set. The final data set used in this version of the synthesis is therefore 93 participants, a response rate of 34.4%, which is in line with response rates from other internet-based surveys (Shih & Fan, 2012).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (Ref 2020/145).

Conflict of interest statement: One of the UC researchers, Associate Professor Billy Osteen, is also a member of the LinC Leadership Lab. All analyses were conducted by Dr Hilary Dutton.

Participant demographics

Basic demographic data regarding the alumni who completed the survey was collected and is presented below.

Table 1.

	Total Sample % (n=93)
Gender	
Female	76.3
Male	21.5
Prefer not to answer	2.2
Ethnicity*	
Pākehā/New Zealand European	68.8
Māori	6.5
Pacific peoples	10.8
Asian	7.6
Middle Eastern, Latin American, African	2.2
European Non-New Zealand	12.9
Other	9.6
Age	
18-25	2.2
26-35	17.2
36-45	28.0
46-55	28.0
56-65	18.3
Over 65	4.3
No answer/Prefer not to answer	2.0
Years since LinC participation	
Less than 2 years	45.2
2-4 years	25.8
More than 4 years	21.5
No answer	7.5

* Figures do not add up to 100 as participants could choose more than one ethnicity

Quantitative findings

The analyses presented in this section were conducted with the full data set of 93 participants.

The quantitative measure used in this survey was developed in collaboration between LinC and the UC research team, based on literature regarding leadership self-efficacy (see bibliography at the end of this report). It was comprised of 11 items representing dimensions of leadership self-efficacy. Respondents were asked to rate

the degree to which their participation in LinC impacted them on a 5 point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *profound and sustainable impact*). The means for each dimension are presented in Figure 1.

Mean responses for almost all of the dimensions fell under *some initial impact*. The highest rated dimension was 'awareness of my strengths and their contribution to my community leadership' which approached *lots of impact* as the mean rating. 'Confidence, thinking and/or practice in your community leadership' and 'alignment of leadership roles with my passions, calling or strengths' were also rated highly. The lowest rated item was 'initiating and leading community change in unpredictable contexts'.

We also analysed responses to the leadership self-efficacy items according to when respondents had participated in LinC. The comparative means are displayed in Table 2. These figures show general consistency across the subgroups. For the most recent LinC alumni, all means except one fell between 3 and 4, indicating LinC had some impact on their leadership self-efficacy. This was strongest for an awareness of their own strengths and weakest for leading community change in unpredictable contexts. The group of alumni who had participated between two and four years ago overall showed the lowest impact of LinC, with a mean slightly lower than the most recent cohort. In particular, they appear to struggle with self-efficacy associated with leading in unpredictable contexts, creating shared vision and goals in the community, and creating change in bicultural and diverse contexts. For those participants who had been a part of LinC over four years ago, the enduring impact of the programme was most strongly associated with self-awareness of strengths and contributions to community leadership and aligning leadership with personal passions and strengths. In fact, these impacts were the highest of any group. Almost all items were higher for the cohort from four years or more ago, suggesting that self-efficacy grows over time as participants accrue experience and opportunities to use the skills from LinC in the field.

Overall, the group of alumni who had participated in LinC two to four years ago had the lowest leadership self-efficacy across all items, while those who had participated over four years ago had the highest. It is worth bearing in mind however, that the group of participants who had participated more than 4 years ago was also the smallest, and typically represent those who are still engaged in local community work after a considerable period of time.
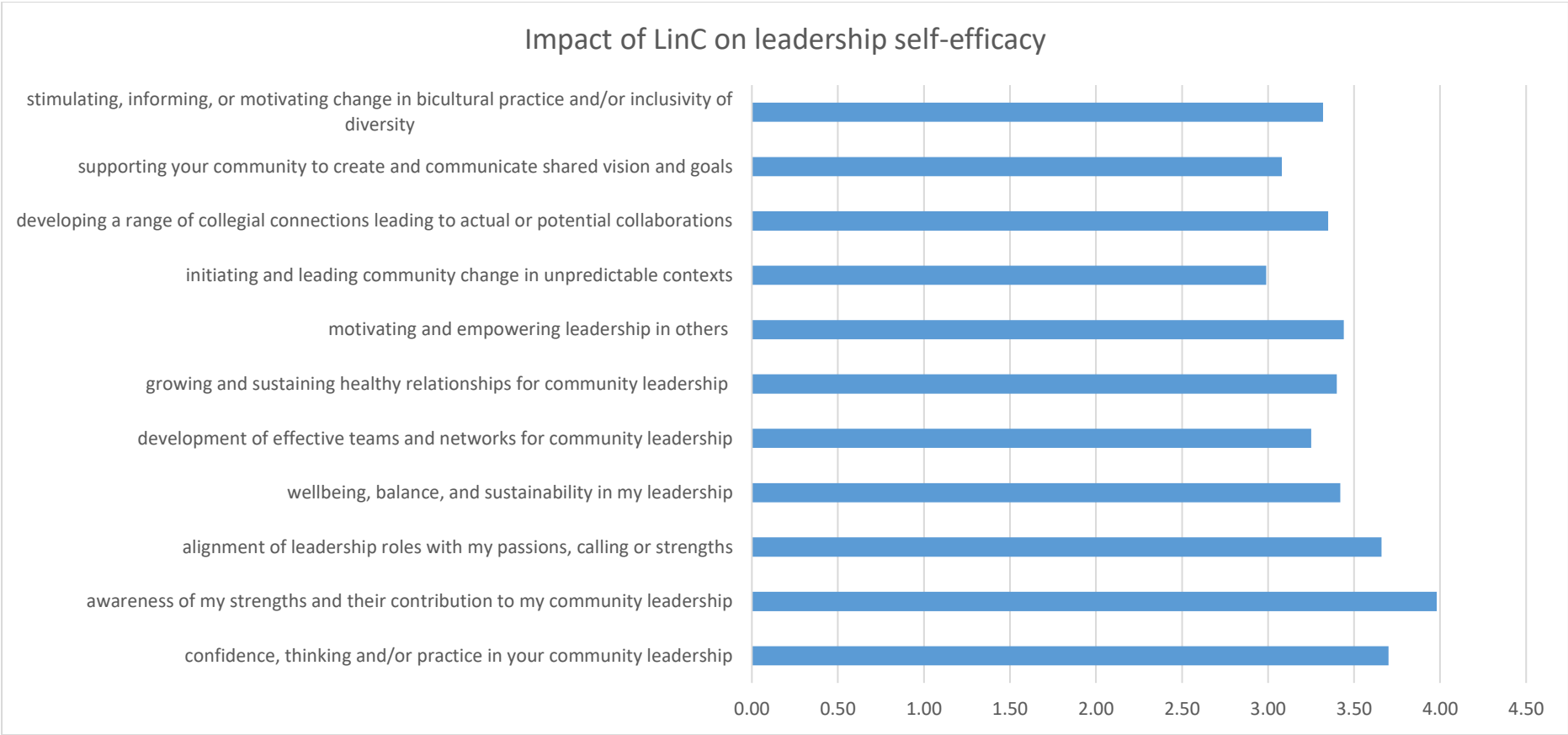
Figure 1

Impact of LinC on leadership self-efficacy

Table 2

Leadership self-efficacy item	Mean score for subgroups according to time since participation in LinC		
	Less than 2 years (n=42)	2-4 years (n=24)	More than 4 years (n=20)
Confidence, thinking and/or practice in your community leadership	3.52	3.67	3.90
Awareness of my strengths and their contribution to my community leadership	3.79	3.88	4.30
Alignment of leadership roles with my passions, calling or strengths	3.45	3.52	4.00
Wellbeing, balance, and sustainability in my leadership	3.31	3.29	3.70
Development of effective teams and networks for community leadership	3.00	3.13	3.70
Growing and sustaining healthy relationships for community leadership	3.33	3.21	3.60
Motivating and empowering leadership in others	3.38	3.29	3.25
Initiating and leading community change in unpredictable contexts	2.93	2.62	3.30
Developing a range of collegial connections leading to actual or potential collaborations	3.19	3.17	3.80
Supporting your community to create and communicate shared vision and goals	3.02	2.71	3.45
Stimulating, informing, or motivating change in bicultural practice and/or inclusivity of diversity	3.45	2.96	3.26
Overall mean of leadership self-efficacy items	3.31	3.22	3.66

Qualitative findings

The findings presented here are based on the analyses conducted in the original report. A preliminary read-through of the additional data showed most comments from LinC alumni were consistent with the categories described here, based on the original 59 responses. Therefore, the analyses remain the same, with some useful exemplar quotes from the additional survey responses integrated into the findings.

The survey included three questions for written responses:

> Q1: How would you describe the most significant impact your involvement with LinC has had on you and your leadership in communities?

> Q2: What impact are you making or hoping to make in the future?

> Q3: What is your current leadership role/context?

Participants also had an opportunity to provide general written feedback at the end of the survey. The response rate to these questions was high, but varied in depth and detail. Responses to each of these questions are summarised below, highlighting themes in the data. Themes are not limited to those that represent the popular responses in the data: some are small themes, mentioned only by a few participants, but are notable and worth further consideration or reflection.

Question 1: Impact of LinC on participants

The first question posed to alumni was about the impact of participating in LinC programmes. 53 of the 59 participants provided a response to this question. Their responses have been collated under five themes: personal development, peer connections, diversity and difference, new opportunities, and working with communities.

Personal development

Personal development was the most common theme mentioned in participant responses. Within this theme, there were four primary ways in which participants saw themselves develop as a result of being in the LinC programme. Unsurprisingly, *leadership* was often mentioned by participants. They commented on how LinC informed and reinforced their leadership practice, sometimes by showing them alternative approaches to leadership which they had not considered previously.

> Often in the spaces I was working I was encouraged to be a certain type of leader … LinC gave me the courage to also step outside of my work space to look at how I really wanted to lead

> I went on a journey which helped me understand my leadership style better.

The development of their leadership skills was also often connected to another impact of the programme: *identifying strengths*. While this was predominantly inwardly focused whereby LinC encouraged participants to see their own strengths, some also commented about how this enabled them to see and appreciate the

strengths in others.

> Finding my inner strengths in which to leverage and provide value to my immediate communities, as well as acknowledge, understand and respect the strengths of others.

> Learning my strengths and working harder on my weaknesses has opened up a level of my personal development not previously understood, I knew I had it in me, but the words made me realise what I had in me.

Participants specifically mentioned the value of *reflection* in their personal development. As one participant summarised, reflection was not limited to their work: "LinC gave me 'permission' to pause and reflect on, not only my leadership practises but myself as a whole person." Sometimes, the reflection process conducted within the LinC programme was appreciated, while other participants commented on how LinC reinforced the importance of ongoing personal reflection.

> Showed me the importance of finding time/space to stop and reflect on challenges that I'm facing.

The fourth impact of LinC on participant's personal development was contributing to a sense of *confidence* in themselves. Participants did not elaborate on this with much detail, but it appeared to be interconnected with the other elements of personal development; that is, understanding their strengths and clarifying their leadership identity through a process of reflection ultimately resulted in participants feeling more confident in themselves.

Peer connections

The second theme that was evident in responses to this question was peer connections. Participants remarked about how connecting other people in community development and leadership impacted them, particularly with respect to support and networking. Participants were affirmed and energised by the *support* they received from their LinC colleagues. This was appreciated by participants who were feeling unsure or burned out by their community leadership work. As one participant described the impact of peer support:

> LinC kept me going through many times I felt like I was nearly broken. Running a high-profile NGO project on fumes with practically no support, LinC was a safe place I could go, even when things seemed impossible and I was nearly out of steam … having one day a month where I could get together other people shouldering the same weight, talk about what I was dealing with, and get advice about how to move forward made all the difference in the world.

The second valuable aspect of peer connection through LinC was the opportunity to build *networks* with other participants. Although participants were working in a shared space of community development, they were still able to form new connections for collaboration and collegiality through the LinC programme. Participants described this as "inspiring" and "useful", and of great value considering

"so much of community leadership is about who you know". Another participant summarised the networking aspect of LinC, saying:

> My involvement in LinC has been instrumental in making connections with others who are working in the community development space. Before LinC, there wouldn't have been an opportunity to meet these colleagues and learn from each other. What we have learned are different ways to contribute to communities through shared leadership.

Diversity and difference, new opportunities, and working with communities.

While most of the comments regarding the impact of LinC fall under the previous two themes, there are some notable smaller themes. *Diversity and difference* was mentioned by several participants. Their comments were brief but referenced:

- How to be good treaty partners
- Improved awareness of bicultural practice
- Greater cultural awareness
- Value of diversity in community practice

A more extensive comment from the additional survey responses summed this up as:

> The most significant impact was the diverse community of people it exposed me to - diverse in culture, ethnicity, thinking, ways of working. This diversity has enabled to learn from others and their experiences so that I can better understand my role and my place in the world and the impact I might have. As an immigrant, LinC introduced me to te ao Māori, the Treaty and it's impacts and the history of the land I have chosen to be my home.

A few participants mentioned *new opportunities* as the main impact of engaging with LinC. For some, this meant taking a new direction with their career, pursuing opportunities that aligned more clearly to the values and strengths they identified during their time with LinC. Other participants noted that a contact they made through LinC resulted in a collaboration. Finally, w*orking with communities* was mentioned by participants who noted that the primary impact they experienced as a result of LinC was how it shaped the way they understood and engaged with their community.

Comments on LinC programmes

Some participants mentioned specific aspects of LinC and how they were impactful on them. Most of these comments were about Action Learning Groups, including statements such as:

> My ongoing involvement with an Action Learning Group has had the most significant impact in terms of dealing with issues, reflecting on situations and receiving ongoing peer support.

> The most significant impact was through the connection felt and absolute gold questions asked in the Action Learning Groups.

Strengths Finder was also mentioned, with participants describing it as "most affirming" and "great in progressing my understanding of my purpose and where my strengths serve me best".

> Through Strength Finders, I have increased in my confidence to recognise and embrace my strengths and share these with those around me, including members of my community.

Q2: Future impacts

Following the question about the impact of LinC on participants, we asked them what impact they are hoping to make in the future. 49 participants responded to this question, and their answers generally fell into six themes: community connections; equity and diversity; empowerment; places and spaces; education and training; and impact beyond the local.

Community connections

This theme represents the various relational impacts that participants described in their responses. This includes building community, establishing *networks*, and forging *collaborative* relationships within the community. These responses indicated that participants perceive connectedness as a vital part of promoting strong communities and that they saw themselves as a facilitator of such connectedness.

> Connecting people & place with a clear vision of betterment

> Working with the community to continue to build a socially cohesive and connected community

Equity and diversity

A number of participants commented on impacts associated with equity and diversity. On some occasions, this related specifically to the bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, including comments regarding Te Tiriti o Waitangi, decolonisation, and bicultural practice. In other instances, responses mentioned specific ethnic communities—notably the Muslim and Pasifika communities in Ōtautahi—that they wanted to direct their impact towards.

> I would like to support the growth of more Pacific leaders, and actually just more leaders for the community. I would like to create access to STEM as a career pathway through the programmes and projects that we lead for Pasifika whanau.

> To enable places and spaces for the self determination of Pacific peoples and creating a more equitable society by inspiring others to find what inspires them

Others spoke more generally of their intention to support and promote diversity and equity when working with communities.

> I see myself continuing to run or support campaigns for social / environmental

> justice at both a local (Christchurch) and national level. Would like to make sure I am building up the next generation of social change activists at the same time.

> Developing the leadership of our diverse and intersectional communities.

Empowerment

There was a strong thread regarding empowerment and support throughout the responses. Participants were keen to not only provide support to communities that needed it, but also use their competence to ensure communities were *empowered* to grow and develop their own vision.

> Empowering others to own their future

> Helping people at the grass roots to create big change

Sometimes this manifested as *capacity building*, with participants wanting to impact on the community by ensuring future generations of leaders were prepared.

> I would like to support emerging leaders to their point of activity and then providing them with the space to take on formal and informal leadership roles.

> To create an environment where I'm no longer required, people have the resources and guidance to assist themselves

Places and spaces

A number of responses reflected not only aspirations for interpersonal impacts, but impacts on the spaces in which people live, work, and play. These responses indicated that LinC alumni understand the interconnectedness of people and places. Sometimes this was associated with sustainability:

> Creating artworks that form the bones of future ecosystems, participating in landscape-scale regeneration projects, bringing joy to people, and playing a small role in averting the global ecological crisis.

In other instances, the future impacts were associated with the liveability and infrastructure of the community:

> Creating a vibrant, supportive community space for all in the centre of the city.

> Enable and encourage a shift towards less short car journeys within our beautiful city.

Education and training and impact beyond the local

These two themes were less common but also represent important impact that LinC alumni aspire to. A few participants saw formal *education* spaces as critical to having an impact. For instance, one participant noted "hoping to support Canterbury secondary educators who are frustrated with the current education system to make the change they so very much want to." While most participants were focused on impacts within the Ōtautahi and Waitaha area, others felt they could extend their reach *beyond local networks*. This included making changes at a "systems level" and

connecting communities with government agencies.

Q3: Current leadership role

Participants were asked about their current leadership role and context. Using the responses received from 52 participants, a list of roles and contexts was created. Their responses are reflected in Figures 2 and 3.[1] Unsurprisingly for a group engaged in a leadership programme, most participants were in a management or leadership role in their community work. There was more variation in the context of their leadership. Most responses fell into three clusters: environment and sustainability, social services, and education, training and employment.

General comments

Respondents also had an opportunity to provide general comments on their experiences with LinC. A small number of comments were received (n=11). While the other qualitative questions received predominantly neutral or positive comments about experiences with LinC, this open-ended question attracted more critical responses. These critiques included:

- Experiences that were disjointed (on one occasion, this was attributed to Covid-19 disruptions)
- Uncertainty about direct and indirect effects from participating in LinC
- Programme emphasis on personal wellbeing rather than cultivating leadership
- Limited usefulness for experienced leaders
- General lack of impact and transformation

Summary of synthesis

This survey was designed for LinC alumni to give feedback of the ongoing impact participation in LinC has had on their community leadership. It also stands to inform LinC on their future planning to ensure participants are deriving meaning and usefulness from the programming they offer. Overall, the survey found LinC is having a strong and, for some, enduring impact on alumni. It appears to have particular value in strengths-based promotion of confidence in leadership, as well as opportunities for connection, networking, and collaboration. LinC alumni occupy leadership roles across diverse contexts and are highly motivated to empower the communities they work with.

The findings of this synthesis will inform phase two of the research, focus groups with a subset of alumni who expressed their interest at the conclusion of this survey.

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[1] Values may not equal 52 as participants provided varying degrees of detail about their current leadership role and context

Figure 2.

Leadership Roles of LinC participants
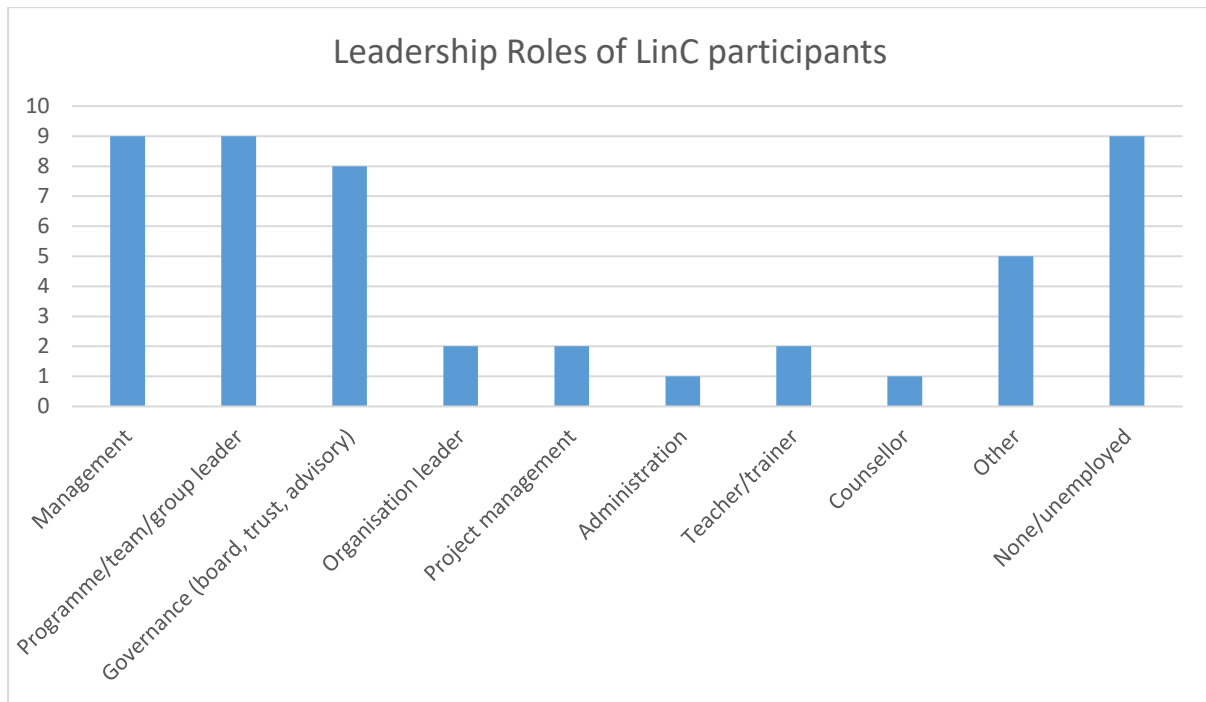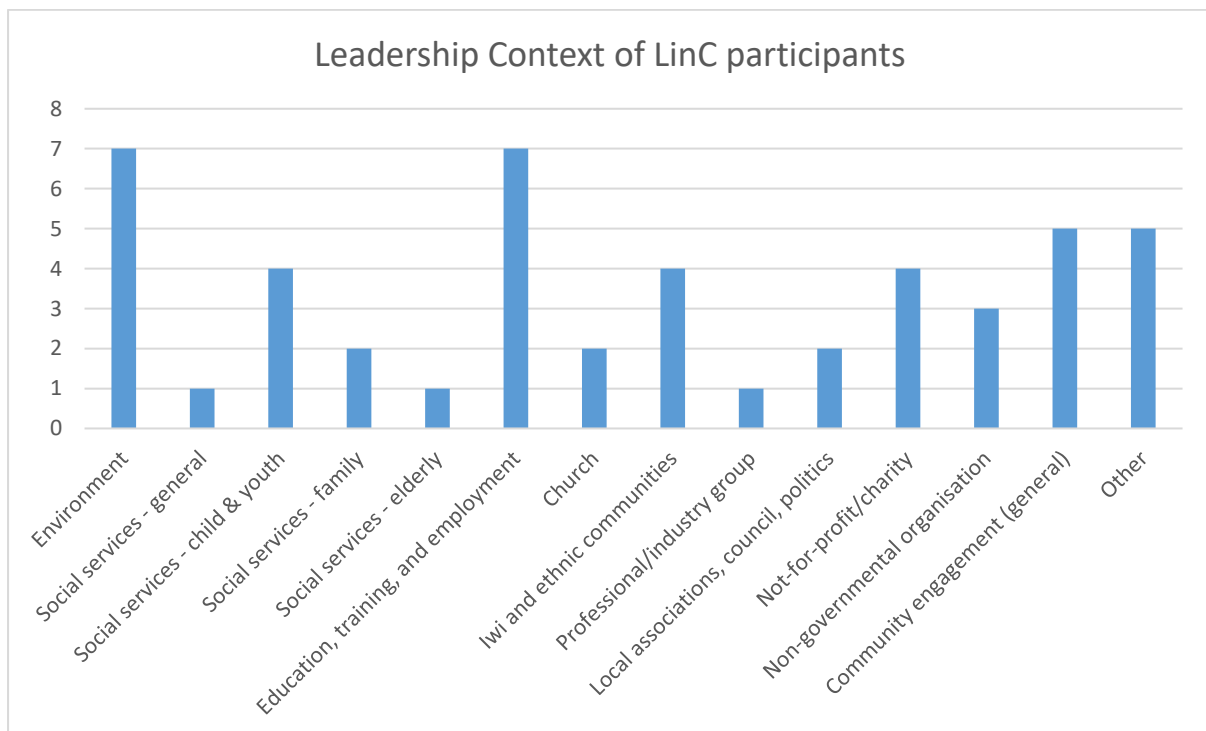
Figure 3.

Leadership Context of LinC participants

Notes on the author and analysis

Dr Hilary Dutton (Ngāti Tūwharetoa) is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Canterbury, College of Education, Health and Human Development. Her research is focused on youth development, with an emphasis on youth mentoring and how to facilitate high quality youth-adult relationships. She is the co-author of *Ngā Tikanga Whānaketanga: He Arotake Tuhinga (A review of Aotearoa New Zealand Youth Development Research)* and made contributions to the New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network's *Guide to Safe and Effective Practice*. Hilary also teaches adolescent development and youth work at the University of Canterbury.

Analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Version 26 and NVivo 1.3.

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