



# THE POWER OF SONG

## an evaluation of the *With One Voice* program

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The Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy  
*beyondblue*

*“It’s fantastic, the choir. I really hope it continues  
and that it’s well supported. Because it is really, really  
important to a lot of people.*

*For some people it’s just a hobby, but for people like me...  
it’s also very important for self-esteem and confidence  
and everything. And community is so important.  
I think that’s what we lack in this world, in this era.”*

*Interview response*

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## Background

Creativity Australia is working to build a happier, healthier, more inclusive nation. The *With One Voice* program bridges the gap between people experiencing disadvantage and those more fortunate through community singing. The program uses the proven neurological and physiological benefits of singing to improve participant wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence and social participation.

## About The Evaluation

While many community choir programs are established to enhance individual and community health and wellbeing, a significant and possibly unique outcome of the *With One Voice* program has been a rise in connection to networks, services, and even employability for marginalised participants.

In partnership with Swinburne University of Technology's Centre for Social Impact, and funding support by *beyondblue* and the Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy, Creativity Australia has undertaken an evaluation of the *With One Voice* Program. This research forms the baseline for a more in-depth independent analysis, potentially to be completed with the assistance of an ARC Linkage Grant.

The *With One Voice* program commenced in 2008 with one choir in central Melbourne with just 50 members. Today, there are 12 *With One Voice* choirs in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, with more than 600 participants. Choirs are located in central, accessible locations and/or in areas of targeted need/identified disadvantage.

The choirs are currently led by a team of four conductors (two male, two female), with a further four soon to be contracted.

Our lead conductor and musical director has been employed since the program's inception, and the others have each had a tenure of several years to date. Several conductors have returned to their roles after maternity leave, showing a strong commitment to the program. Conductors have dynamic skills in the areas of musicianship, community music development, social engagement and pastoral care.

## Objectives and Methodology

The research included 10 in-depth qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey completed by 176 participants (see appendices) across three states to determine the relationship between participation in the *With One Voice* program and the likelihood that participants will:

- Experience an enhanced sense of wellbeing
- Increase their social capital and relational networks
- Engage with social welfare and mental health support systems
- Increase their employability (especially for long-term-unemployed and other marginalised participants)
- Gain employment

Interviewees were approached and invited to participate by Creativity Australia. They were drawn from four choirs (Dandenong, Footscray, Melbourne and St Kilda) and included three males, six females and one transgender person. The age range was 24 to 65. Five were employed and five were unemployed. None of the interviewees declined the offer to be part of the research.

## PATRONS

Marigold Southey AC | Professor Allan Fels AO | Hugh Morgan AC  
Emeritus Professor John Hay AC | The Late Dame Elisabeth Murdoch AC DBE

## FOUNDER

Tania de Jong AM





The interviews were semi-structured around a core series of 12 questions that were informed both by previous research into the benefits of participatory arts and community wellbeing and by discussions with Creativity Australia staff, *With One Voice* choir participants and the research project's Advisory Group.

A total of 530 choir members across 11 choirs were invited to participate in the survey. Participants were able to complete the survey either in hard copy at choir or electronically via an email sent by Creativity Australia. The survey structure included a range of questions that allowed for quantitative analysis by way of check-box responses, using Likert type scales.

Where Likert type scales are used, a statement is made in the positive and respondents are provided with five check-box options on a five-point scale, from Strongly Agree through to Strongly Disagree. The study report used adjusted relative frequency for reporting of percentages (rounded to the nearest whole number) of responses to individual questions.

The results were analysed to identify (1) who are the participants in the *With One Voice* program, (2) what are the benefits and challenges, and (3) the individual components (elements of success) that contribute to producing those benefits.

The research found that the benefits to participants were enhanced wellbeing, greater social inclusion, increased community support and, indirectly, improved employability.

The key ingredients that made this possible were (1) the singing that "...creates a supportive community of shared interest, and for the resultant sense of joy and achievement"; (2) conductors that are skilled in both music and community development who can create an atmosphere of (3) diversity, equality and mutual respect.

### **Demographics and Program Benefits**

The program includes a diverse mix of people. Nearly 40% of participants were not born in Australia and approximately 30% are financially fragile, being unable to raise \$2,000 in one week for an emergency (ABS 2004). Of the respondents, 90% spoke English at home, 79% were female and 73% were aged 40-69. Approximately 35% of respondents reported engaging with social welfare and mental health support systems.

*30% of participants are financially fragile, being unable to raise \$2,000 in one week for an emergency.*

Comparing this sample to Creativity Australia's membership data, this shows a skew in the sample towards those people who are most comfortable with their English literacy and who have internet access at home (possibly because they were able to easily complete the survey).



The study showed participation contributes to enhanced wellbeing and reduced stress, depression and anxiety, with 81% of people experiencing improved wellbeing, 95% of people “always feeling better after choir” and 98% of people saying it is a great way to de-stress.

*When people joined the With One Voice program, 39% said they felt “awful”, “not very good” or “neither”; this figure reduced to 10% at the time of the study.*

Participants were also asked to rate the improvement in how they felt about themselves, comparing how they felt when joining a *With One Voice* program to how they felt at the time of the survey. This question revealed that 39% of participants reported feeling “awful”, “not very good” or “neither” (combined totals) when they joined; this figure reduced to only 10% at the time of the study. In comparison, 61% of the study cohort started out feeling “pretty good” or “fabulous” (combined totals), which increased to an overwhelming majority of 90% at the time of the study.

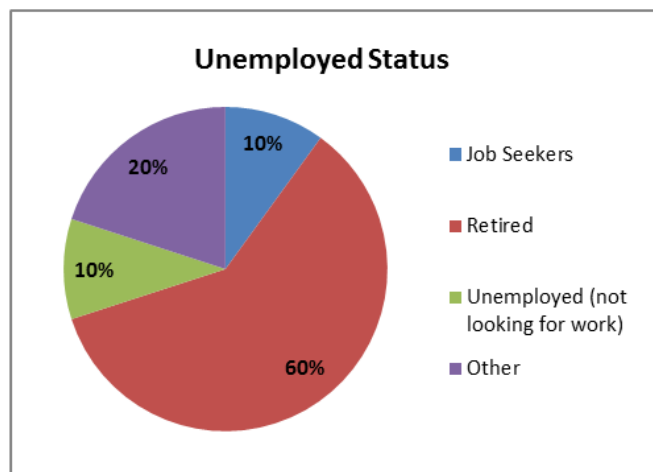
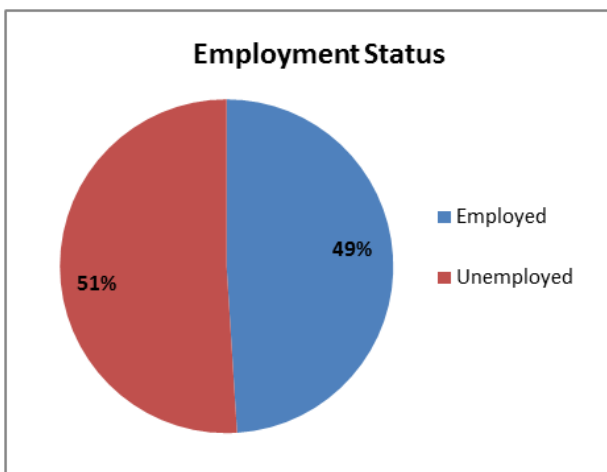
The choir also created significant network and relationship benefits for participants with 91% saying it was a great way to bond with other people and 84% saying they had developed new relationships and friends.

### Elements of Success

The three key elements of success that create the benefits reported by participants are:

1. the power of singing
2. the skills of conductors to lead musically and build community
3. the diversity of participants

The findings of this study are that the model of mixing diverse individuals is one of the major, distinctive strengths of this program. A *With One Voice* choir is not a community of “the disadvantaged”, it is a diverse community.





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The interviews and the survey data highlight that the absence of discriminatory labels are important to the experience; i.e. an individual is not labelled “unemployed”; “retired”; “single mother” or “mentally ill”; what is important is that each individual is a choir member.

Neither the power of singing, nor importance of a skilled conductor, can be underestimated. Without the shared interest in singing, diverse people would not come so willingly, and without the ability of the conductor to create a welcoming, inclusive and safe space, community altruism and positive exchange would be much less likely. The sense of community makes it easier for those who are otherwise anxious or apprehensive to break from their routines and to engage with others in a safe environment.

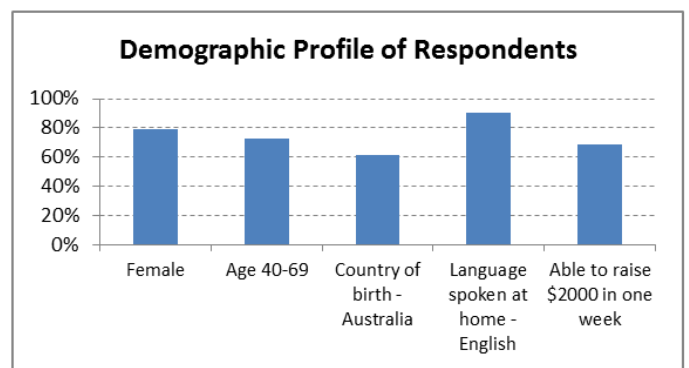
For participants, the networks created through the weekly gathering of diverse people meant that the *With One Voice* program became an even more valuable resource in times of need, especially for those who didn’t have strong family or community supports elsewhere in their lives. One participant described the choir as “network of people you can go to for different things. Not me just going to them but other people coming to me. So me now being a contact person for other people, so if someone needs something then they know that they can come to me and I find that quite lovely as well.”

The establishment of the Wish List as a component of the choir program supports community altruism and good will. Through the Wish List people can ask for anything they need in life, and other members of the group are able to grant wishes. Interestingly, while approximately one third of choir participants report participating in the formal Wish List, as either a giver (29%) or as the granter (32%) of a wish, close to two thirds (65%) reported that they provided a combination of emotional and practical support outside of the formality of the Wish List.

*Of those who indicated that they provided support outside of the Wish List (65%), 40% indicated the nature of the support they provided was “emotional”.*

The proportion of participants who reported giving outside the Wish List (65%), is more than double the proportion who report receiving support within of the Wish List (31%).

This suggests that participants prefer to be viewed as the “giver” rather than the “recipient” of help. These results are significant because it indicates the importance of enabling individuals to give back to others and therefore see their value and worth as equals amongst a community.





As one participant remarked, “*With One Voice* choir reminds me that my life isn’t about the stress and pressures of high profile corporate events and activities.

It is more than that. It is the relationships formed, the simple acts of kindness, the emotions and feelings of everyday people in the simple gesture of coming together in song. It has given me a much needed perspective that I had lost over the years.”

*The With One Voice program became a valuable resource in times of need; it’s a “network of people you can go to for different things. Not me just going to them but other people coming to me.”*

### Conclusion

The results of this initial study provide clear evidence that the *With One Voice* program creates:

- Enhanced wellbeing
- Greater social inclusion
- Increased community support

This research provides a great basis for Creativity Australia to shape its future operations and secure more ongoing support for a program with evident and significant potential to contribute to making communities happier, healthier, more cohesive and productive throughout Australia.

### The Next Steps

Creativity Australia will use this research to deepen the understanding of the extent to which the *With One Voice* program achieves the program outcomes. Further analysis will assess the correlations between outcomes for individuals who are financially fragile, have engaged with mental health services and who are unemployed. This will create a richer picture of the benefits of the *With One Voice* program for participants experiencing disadvantage.

The survey report suggested that further research opportunities could include:

- A detailed exploration of the extent to which outcomes in enhanced wellbeing can be replicated to achieve more significant and broad based mental health benefits
- A comparative study to identify the relative advantages and disadvantages of different models of community choirs and/or other collective creative activities such as art, dance or drama
- Research to identify the ‘ripple effects’ of the benefits of choir participation on broader community networks
- A deeper examination of whether community choirs may be of particular utility to re-framing concepts of what a valuable life may involve outside of the economic imperative of workforce participation. The current study indicates this may be particularly relevant for people who are: long term unemployed; under-employed; occupied full time in parenting; or who have retired from paid work.

View the Full Survey and Interview Schedule at [www.creativityaustralia.org.au/swinburne-research-project](http://www.creativityaustralia.org.au/swinburne-research-project)