

Exploring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion across the Aquatic and Leisure Ecosystem in Victoria

Swinburne Sport Innovation Research Group

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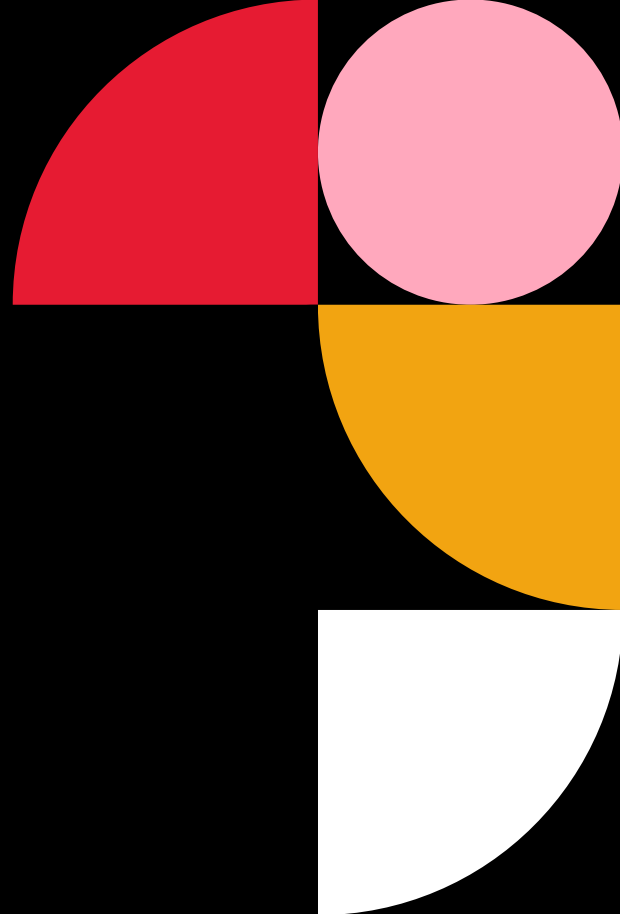
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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Sport Innovation Research Group, Swinburne is located on in Melbourne's east, and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors. We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

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All recommendations identified by the research team are based on data collected during the research, and this information is known to be correct at the time this report was prepared.

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Executive Summary

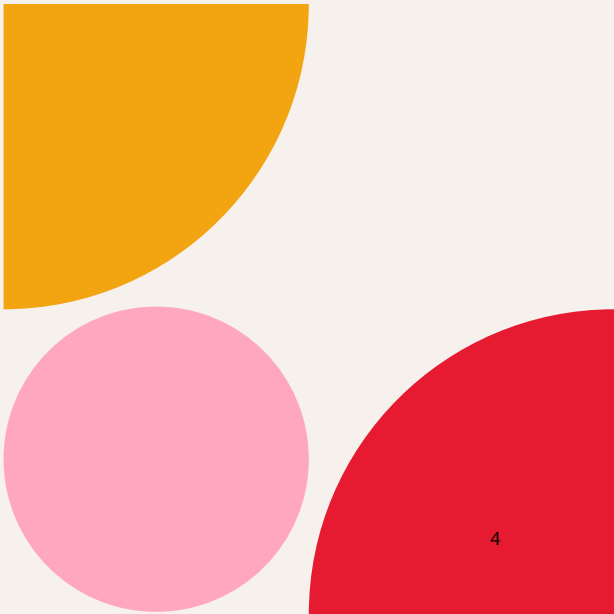
This research employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the current state of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) across Victoria's aquatic and leisure ecosystem, focusing on existing practices, policies, and inclusion efforts. Five key diverse community groups were explored: First Nations peoples, LGBTIQ+ communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations, Women and Girls (gender equity), and individuals with disabilities. Data were collected through quantitative surveys distributed to facilities, complemented by qualitative interviews, focus groups, observational site visits, and analysis of digital resources.

Findings indicate strong enthusiasm and commitment towards DEI among employees, yet highlight substantial gaps in strategic leadership, comprehensive policy frameworks, and consistent, intentional implementation of inclusive practices. DEI initiatives were often ad hoc, externally oriented, and unevenly applied across diverse community groups, with notable gaps in engagement particularly for First Nations and LGBTIQ+ communities. Additionally, workforce capability to effectively deliver DEI was limited due to insufficient targeted training, resources, and clear strategic guidance.

The report concludes that advancing DEI effectively requires coordinated sector leadership, robust and inclusive policy development, enhanced workforce capability through ongoing training and education, and continuous evaluation of DEI initiatives. The recommendations emphasise strengthening senior leadership commitment to DEI through evidence-informed decision-making, developing tailored strategies that reflect the needs of local communities, and fostering cross-sector collaboration through shared learning platforms. They also highlight the importance of aligning DEI initiatives with broader sector goals, including improved community wellbeing, physical activity participation, water safety, and enhanced social connection—outcomes prioritised by both VicHealth and Royal Life Saving Australia. Prioritising gender equity and implementing comprehensive monitoring frameworks are also critical steps. These strategic actions are integrated into a structured DEI Roadmap designed to guide the aquatic and leisure ecosystem toward sustained and equitable inclusion practices, supporting both internal workforce development and the creation of welcoming, inclusive experiences for all community members.

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Introduction

Aquatic and leisure facilities are vital community spaces that deliver significant health, social, and economic benefits. (PwC & RLSA 2021; Tower 2016; Sherry et al 2021). The benefits derived from these facilities and services are well documented (e.g., PwC Australia, 2021; Yeomans et al., 2024), and include improvements in physical and mental wellbeing, opportunities for social connection, and contributions to local economies. However, such benefits can only be fully realised when facilities are inclusive and accessible to all members of the community. Membership to these facilities has even been supported as being a necessary product, as opposed to a luxury (Yeomans & Karg, 2023). The aquatic and leisure ecosystem refers to the network of organisations, facilities, governing bodies, peak organisations, community partners, and service providers involved in the delivery, governance, and experience of aquatic and leisure services.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) refer to a set of interrelated principles that aim to recognise and value individual differences (diversity), ensure fair treatment and access to opportunities (equity), and foster environments where everyone feels respected, welcomed, and able to participate fully (inclusion). DEI has become central to everyday conversations in recent years, shaped by the influence of global socio-political leaders, governments, and broader societal change. In the context of aquatics and leisure, DEI practices are essential to ensure that people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and identities can engage safely and meaningfully.

Despite growing commitments to DEI across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem, these efforts are not equitably addressing the barriers faced by all groups. In particular, the needs of LGBTIQ+ communities and First Nations peoples are often overlooked or inadequately supported (Yeomans et al., 2024). This is especially important to acknowledge, as scoping reviews exploring drowning prevention have identified that factors such as culture, age, and injury burdens may intersect to influence risk and access to safety interventions (Scarr & Jagnoor, 2022). Such factors limit access to the benefits of aquatic and leisure activities and contribute to broader inequities in health and wellbeing outcomes.

This research explores how DEI is being operationalised at the facility level within the aquatic and leisure ecosystem. To support this analysis, Washington's (2022) DEI Maturity Model is used as a guiding framework. The model views DEI implementation as a staged developmental process, moving from early awareness through to full strategic integration. Applying this model allows the research to assess the current state of DEI across Victorian facilities and identify areas for further progress.

For the purposes of this study, diverse groups refer to populations that have historically experienced exclusion or marginalisation in sport and leisure contexts. This includes First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people, LGBTIQ+ communities, people with disability, and women and girls. These groups were identified through sector priority alignment and community consultation, and form the basis for assessing perceptions, practices, and progress in DEI engagement.

Background

DEI are increasingly recognised as strategic priorities across key organisations in the aquatic and leisure ecosystem. For example, Royal Life Saving Australia (RLSA) has introduced several initiatives, including its Industry Workforce Report, which aims to build a workforce that reflects the diversity of local communities by actively recruiting individuals from underrepresented backgrounds (Royal Life Saving Australia, 2023). The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 (AWSS) further reinforces this focus, identifying inclusion as a core guiding principle and calling for strengthened user education tools that support inclusive practices in aquatic facilities (Australian Water Safety Council, 2021). As a partner and funder of this current research, RLSA General Manager RJ stated,

“Increasing diversity and equity in aquatic settings not only benefits facilities commercially, but helps ensure no one is left behind in learning essential swimming and water safety skills. With better DEI practices, we can achieve broader social impacts across communities”.

At the state level, several government strategies reinforce the importance of inclusive and equitable practice. The Active Victoria 2022–2026 Strategy outlines government priorities to increase equitable participation and deliver accessible, respectful, and inclusive infrastructure (Victorian Government, 2022). The Victorian Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2029 calls for stronger institutional commitment to confronting racism and ensuring fair access to services and opportunities across sectors, including sport and recreation (Victorian Government, 2024). Similarly, the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023–2027 recognises the role of active recreation settings in supporting the wellbeing of all Victorians (Victorian Government, 2023). These strategies reflect a clear imperative for fostering inclusion across aquatic and active recreation settings.

Aligned with these broader strategic directions, organisations across the sector are also taking action. VicHealth’s 10-year strategic plan (2023–2033) outlines a commitment to driving fairer health outcomes by addressing systemic inequities and working alongside communities most affected. This external focus is complemented by VicHealth’s internal commitment to fostering an inclusive workplace culture that promotes diversity, equity, and inclusive decision-making. Along with key stakeholders and leading leisure management companies, Aquatics and Recreation Victoria (ARV), supports an annual Diversity and Inclusion in Leisure Forum (Aquatics and Recreation Victoria, 2025), while AUSactive has produced Guidance for Inclusive Business Practice (AUSactive, 2025), and AUSTSWIM offers specialised training such as the Teacher of Aquatics – Access and Inclusion course (AUSTSWIM, 2025). These examples signal a positive and growing commitment to DEI across the ecosystem. However, despite these efforts, there is limited research examining how these high-level commitments are being implemented and experienced at the facility level. In addition, much of the current academic literature remains focused on sport (e.g., Fletcher, 2014; Spaaij et al., 2014; Spaaij et al., 2018), as opposed to aquatics and leisure, further underscoring the need to better understand how DEI is being operationalised across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem. Simply, whilst some DEI initiatives are underway across the sector, further action is needed to ensure that facilities go beyond legal compliance and actively foster welcoming, inclusive environments.

To address this, the current research was undertaken in collaboration with industry, leveraging the principles of translational research. To ensure broad sector representation and meaningful input, the research team established a project advisory group. We appreciate those individuals and organisations listed in the acknowledgments for their contributions to this research project.

What Does Previous Research Tell Us?

Research emphasises that inclusion should be an integral leadership competency, deeply embedded rather than merely performative (Storr et al., 2021). Garib (2013) argues that the effectiveness of diversity management in leisure contexts hinges on managerial perceptions, with positive managerial attitudes towards diversity linked to better organisational outcomes. However, intentional diversity practices remain limited. Spaaij et al. (2016) observed that diversity work in community sport and leisure organisations is frequently peripheral and accidental, revealing significant gaps between policy rhetoric and actual practice.

Anderson et al. (2018) found resistance among aquatic managers toward implementing LGBTIQ+-specific initiatives, highlighting a broader reluctance to meaningfully embed DEI into facility operations. Supporting this, Jeanes et al. (2018) and Spaaij et al. (2020) argue that inclusivity is often superficial, noting significant barriers including institutional resistance, discourse-driven noncompliance, and discrimination in sport and leisure contexts. These findings are echoed by Storr et al. (2021), who illustrate persistent misalignments between organisational discourses and practices.

In addressing gender-diverse community experiences, Caudwell (2020) emphasised the importance of safe and inclusive spatial environments in aquatic settings. Naess (2022) expanded this discussion, underscoring the distinction between measurable diversity metrics and the nuanced relational dimensions required for genuine inclusion.

More recently, Yeomans et al. (2024) and Rivera et al. (2024) have highlighted ongoing challenges faced by aquatic and leisure venues in effectively engaging diverse groups, including LGBTIQ+ and First Nations communities. Their studies reinforce the necessity of aligning programmatic offerings with the expressed needs of marginalised populations to ensure equitable access and participation. Moreover, Mabefam (2025) stresses the importance of solidarity as a means of challenging marginalisation and promoting structural inclusivity.

UK Active's recent report further supports the need for comprehensive, integrated approaches rather than isolated DEI initiatives, advocating for holistic organisational practices encompassing leadership, governance, representation, and active engagement across all organisational levels. Despite these positive sector-level commitments, there remains a clear gap in understanding how effectively these principles translate into everyday practice at the facility level, underscoring the need for targeted research and evaluation.



Research Questions

The research questions for this project were:

What are the current levels of **DEI engagement** across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem?

What are the current **DEI practices** across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem?

What current **DEI challenges and opportunities** exist across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem?

Methods

This research used a mixed methods research design. The research was given full ethical clearance from the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference 20248042-19138).

To guide the interpretation of the current state of DEI across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem, this research draws on Washington's (2022) DEI Maturity Model. The model outlines five stages of DEI development: **Aware**, **Compliant**, **Tactical**, **Integrated**, and **Sustainable**. Each stage reflects a deeper level of organisational commitment, planning, and cultural embedding. Applying this model supports a structured assessment of how DEI is currently understood and enacted across the sector, and where further development is needed. Use of this model supports analysis of ecosystem engagement by helping to identify not only whether DEI actions were present, but also the extent to which they were embedded into organisational strategies and cultures.

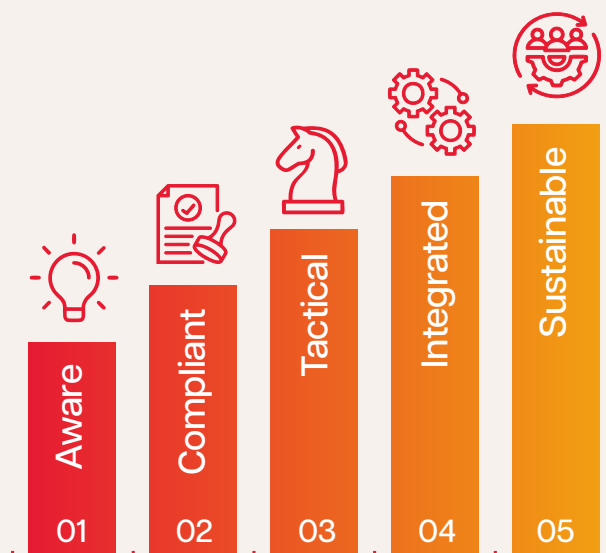
An Overview of the Project Mixed Methods Approach:

Part 1. Employee Survey

Part 2. Interviews and Focus Groups

Part 3. Facility Observations & Desktop Review

To contextualise these findings, the research team utilised Washington's (2022) DEI Maturity Model, which outlines five progressive stages:



- 1. Aware:** Initial recognition of DEI's importance.
- 2. Compliant:** DEI is primarily driven by compliance with legal and regulatory standards.
- 3. Tactical:** DEI is linked to specific business initiatives in isolated areas.
- 4. Integrated:** DEI is systematically embedded across all internal and external organisational practices.
- 5. Sustainable:** DEI is continuously improved, representing best-in-class sector practices.

Employee Survey

The Aquatic and Leisure Facilities Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Survey was developed and administered to gather comprehensive insights into employees' perceptions and experiences, as well as the current state of DEI practices within aquatic and leisure facilities across Victoria.

To achieve this, the survey comprised structured questions that covered demographic characteristics, employment details, perceptions of DEI practices, and experiences regarding DEI within their facilities and the broader industry context. The survey instrument drew upon existing academic research related to diversity, human resources practices, discrimination, and was further refined via an advisory group consisting of industry experts.

Survey distribution was coordinated through contract-managed organisations, such as Belgravia Leisure, the Y, and Aligned Leisure as well as governing bodies such as the Royal Life Saving Australia (RLSA), AUSTSWIM, and Aquatics and Recreation Victoria (ARV). Employees across various employment statuses (permanent, fixed-term, casual), roles, and geographical locations (metropolitan, regional, remote) were invited to participate.

Survey respondents (n=322) were employees of aquatic and recreation facilities in Victoria, Australia (Table 1). These respondents were majority (75%) female or woman, from metropolitan areas (68%) and likely to be either permanent (50%) or casual (44%) employees. A mix of ages and tenures of employees was evident, as well as representation of employees who identified as having a disability (11%), being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (18%), being Indigenous (11%) and part of the LGBTIQA+ community (14%).

Female employees were dominant across swimming and water safety roles (82%) and customer service officer and/or sales roles (82%), with a more even gender distribution evident for region, area and/or venue management (59%). A number of service providers and contract management organisations are represented in the dataset, including Aligned Leisure, Belgravia Leisure, BlueFit, Clublinks, local Government Authorities/ Councils and The Y Victoria.

Table 1. Breakdown of Respondent Employment Types in the Aquatic and Leisure Ecosystem

Swimming and Water Safety Teacher	22%
Pool Lifeguard	14%
Duty Manager	10%
Customer Service Officer and/or Sales	10%
General Administration	8%
Region, Area and/or Venue Management	7%
Other	7%
Group Exercise	5%
Aquatics Operations Officer	5%
Café	4%
Cleaning and/or Maintenance	4%
Gym	3%
Creche	1%



Ecosystem Interviews and Focus Groups

Qualitative data were gathered from 16 individual interviews and three focus groups, involving a total of 27 participants (groups of 6, 3, and 2 participants, respectively). The sample included 8 men, 18 women, and 1 non-binary participant, representing a range of lived experiences across race and ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. Participants were recruited through an arm's-length process via email outreach, as well as through newsletters, websites, and social media channels of relevant industry partners.

Observations in Facility and Online

Ethnographic observations were conducted through facility visits. We used a purposive sample across three categories and requested a list of facilities across these categories from partner organisations to be included in the sample. Facilities were grouped into three categories based on their progress in DEI: those just beginning, those actively engaging, and those leading with advanced practices and policies. The research team selected 15 sites across the three categories and from a range of private providers, and council run facilities.

The research team devised an observation protocol, which included a range of factors and aspects to DEI, which assessed indicators of DEI across the facilities. The protocol included elements such as signs and visual markers of DEI, accessible change facilities, communication related to DEI, accessibility elements such as ramps into the facility, pools and change facilities. Finally, an extensive manual review of websites and online materials for aquatic and leisure facilities was conducted in September 2024, as part of a digital resource review. This review aimed to identify visual representations and communication regarding DEI, providing insights into external-facing DEI indicators.

Key Findings

The employee survey, qualitative inquiry, and observations provided a rich source of information about behaviours, attitudes and practices of employees and facilities in relation to DEI across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem.

The following four primary themes emerged: Commitment, Implementation, Gender Equity, and Leadership; these will be discussed on pages 11 - 19.



Commitment

The first theme explores the emerging **commitment** to DEI across the aquatic and leisure sector, focusing on issues of funding, organisational awareness, internal support mechanisms, and resistance to change.

Despite broader recognition of the importance of DEI, it is not consistently prioritised within the operational practices of aquatic and leisure facilities. The survey examined perceptions of organisational authenticity in engaging with DEI, focusing on customer connection, organisational integrity, perceived social norms, and alignment with the ecosystem's broader role in supporting equity and inclusion (Figure 1). While survey respondents expressed generally positive attitudes towards

DEI, this sentiment did not consistently translate into tangible organisational behaviours or sustained action. For example, while survey respondents strongly agreed that aquatic and recreation organisations should engage and support diversity, equity and inclusion (6.2/7) and believed supporting DEI was an obvious thing for them to do (6.2/7) (Figure 1), only 46% of respondents believed there were opportunities to express their thoughts on diversity issues and 35% acknowledged the existence of specific diversity goals within their organisation. These findings are consistent with characteristics of the Aware stage of the DEI Maturity Model, where there is recognition of DEI's value but limited translation into sustained or strategic action within organisations.

Figure 1. Average Ratings of DEI Engagement Authenticity: Customer Connection, Integrity, Norms, and Sector Alignment



Commitment continued

In addition, two areas scored less favourably: the representation of diversity within the workforce, and the perception of DEI efforts as authentic rather than performative or commercially motivated. For workforce representation, these concerns were

particularly notable among staff in remote locations (3.60), Duty Managers (4.27), and permanent employees (4.60), who reported lower-than-average perceptions of their organisation's DEI, or specifically their engagement with diverse groups (Table 2).

Table 2. Perceptions of DEI Commitment and Workforce Diversity by Employment Type

	I think aquatic and recreation organisations should engage and support diversity, equity and inclusion.		I think the aquatic and recreation industry has a diverse workforce and diversity is well represented.		The facility is likely to not be authentic when engaging with diversity, equity and inclusion.	
Measurement	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation
Swimming and Water Safety Teacher	6.49	1.09	4.86	1.66	3.45	2.16
Pool Lifeguard	6.42	1.19	4.83	1.54	3.20	2.09
Duty Manager	6.25	1.52	4.27	1.69	3.28	2.15
Customer Service Officer and/or Sales	6.21	1.61	4.80	1.63	3.40	2.23
Aquatics Operations Officer	6.41	1.26	4.56	1.58	2.88	2.03
Group Exercise	6.26	1.56	4.53	1.81	3.25	2.32
General Administration	6.17	1.51	4.72	1.55	2.86	2.09
Region, Area and/or Venue Management	6.47	1.00	4.49	1.76	3.04	2.14
Other	6.43	1.26	4.50	1.64	3.84	2.29

Further, a regression analysis showed that perceptions of authenticity and alignment with DEI values were strong predictors of key organisational outcomes. The items shown in Table 2 explained between 44% and 46% of the variance in both employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) and willingness to recommend the organisation's products and services, highlighting the operational relevance of DEI to organisational performance and advocacy. Respondents identified there was a large amount of passion for DEI and creating inclusive and accessible facilities, however cited that the main focus for facility management remains financial performance.

“There is an enormous level of passion around DEI and creating inclusive and accessible centers. The tricky part is, I don't know to what degree that DEI is entrenched and embedded in an organisational wide approach and the financial point is, there is still a fiscal responsibility”.

(participant interview)

Peak Body Support

Participants also expressed a need for greater support to actively promote DEI initiatives across the ecosystem. Many reported lacking specific knowledge or confidence to engage meaningfully in this space, and called for clearer guidance, training, and opportunities to learn from peers. The call for clearer guidance and capability-building reflects the Compliant stage of the DEI Maturity Model, where DEI activity begins to take shape but is often driven externally and lacks internal capability development. To improve this, suggestions included increased collaboration with peak bodies, the formation of communities of practice, and investment in knowledge translation initiatives to support DEI capability-building at the facility level.

Perceptions of the role of peak bodies in supporting DEI were moderate. On average, respondents rated industry bodies at a 4.7 out of 7 for providing clear direction and assistance in addressing DEI challenges (SD 1.6), and 4.5 out of 7 for the accessibility of DEI resources (SD 1.8). These findings suggest a need for improved communication, stronger visibility of available tools, and more proactive sector-wide leadership to ensure organisations and individuals feel adequately supported.

The data also revealed some confusion about the identity of peak bodies, with respondents referencing a mix of certification organisations (e.g., AUSTSWIM, FitRec), industry associations (e.g., ARV, AUSactive), local councils, and facility management contractors. Therefore, this data suggests that people working in different roles within the aquatics and leisure ecosystem look to and connect with a range of different peak and representative bodies in the industry. As a result, consistency of messaging and approaches would be valuable and useful to support those working in facilities.

“I believe it’s about time a peak body specifically designed to support the industry around inclusion, and not just disability or LGBTIQ+, but we need a peak body that is dedicated in this work”.

(participant interview)

Compounding this were reflections in many conversations that historically, the ecosystem had not worked well together, and sometimes there was (perceived) unhealthy competition between facilities and/or contract management organisations. Moving forward, if this can be achieved, it would assist organisation to overcome the reported overreliance on external partnerships.

“I am a bit disillusioned at times as to how we make the more significant changes in the industry at large because... it relies on people working together in pretty significant ways. And I haven’t been convinced that this industry is particularly good at that yet”.

(participant interview)

Furthermore, while 58% of respondents indicated awareness of partnerships or collaborations between diverse community groups and their facility, few could name specific organisations. The key issue was a blurring of partnerships and programs. Specifically, while some programs are run by external providers, respondents often could not identify the providers themselves. This lack of clarity may limit opportunities to showcase these collaborations, advocate for their impact, and strengthen relationships. A clearer understanding of these partnerships could help employees and customers engage more effectively with community groups while also creating stronger pathways for partners to connect their members with aquatic and recreation facilities. Noting there are already several peak bodies across the ecosystem, rather than creating another one, it will be most efficient to establish a nationally coordinated multi-stakeholder working group, which represents the key bodies, in a way to come together to provide strategic direction for the ecosystem.



Resources and Funding

Within the broader theme of organisational commitment, limited availability of dedicated resources and funding to support DEI initiatives was a prevalent topic. Most organisations did not allocate budget lines for DEI work and instead relied on external funding to support specific programs. Only 24% of survey respondents indicated that their facility had funding dedicated to meeting diversity goals. So around 1 in 4 facilities have a budget line dedicated to DEI work, which is a good starting point. This issue closely relates to earlier findings on commitment, where attitudinal support for DEI did not translate into behaviour or action. Participants emphasised the need for dedicated DEI roles within the sector, with funding attached to support these positions. This is logical, as fewer than 40% of survey respondents reported awareness of a designated person responsible for diversity at their facility. However, there was a lack of consensus on the necessity of such roles. As one participant noted,

“...you don’t need a DEI person to open a centre. You need a lifeguard, and you need a duty manager, and you need a customer service representative, and DEI potentially can be built in and absorbed through other people...”.

(participant interview)

This perspective highlights a broader perception across the ecosystem that DEI remains peripheral.

“...maybe there’s an expectation, that councils need to put that in there their tender response documents where there has to be a dedicated person...a level of education that’s needed for them to actually deliver a dedicated DEI role, or a couple of DEI roles”.

(participant interview)

In practice, few examples were provided of DEI-specific responsibilities being embedded into existing roles or targets to support regional strategic plans (e.g., Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans). This was clear in the survey where 37% of

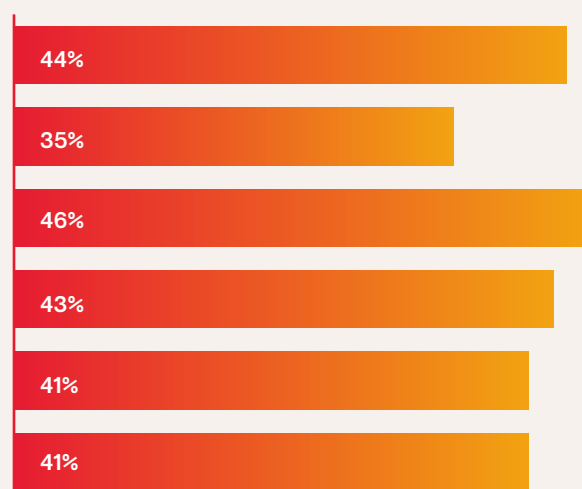
respondents indicated that there was an internal appointment to look after diversity issues, and 43% indicated that human resources attend to and supports diversity matters. While some interview participants discussed ways their facilities had attempted to allocate DEI responsibilities informally, there was little evidence of consistent or systemic integration across the sector. Therefore, it is important to emphasise the moral imperative of engaging with DEI practices, as failing to do so may exclude diverse groups from accessing the many benefits that aquatic and leisure facilities offer. The drive for strong engagement from both commercial and moral imperatives should be seen as part of a more holistic drive towards safer, healthier, and happier communities.

Further, interview participants frequently noted that the absence of regulatory drivers meant that DEI work was deprioritised, with minimal consequences for organisations that failed to engage in inclusive practices. To strengthen DEI uptake, structural supports such as targeted funding, industry incentives, or stronger procurement requirements tied to council tenders may help embed accountability and encourage ecosystem-wide commitment.

Survey data further support the disconnect between commitment and implementation. When asked about outward-facing DEI communication (Figure 2), fewer than half of respondents were aware of a written diversity policy within their organisation. Awareness was lowest among aquatic operational staff, with only 33% of Duty Managers reporting knowledge of such a policy. Across several indicators, frontline aquatic employees consistently demonstrated lower levels of DEI awareness than their colleagues in management or front-of-house roles, which may directly affect the quality and safety of the participation experience for attendees at aquatic and leisure venues. The lack of awareness regarding formal DEI policies highlights the absence of internal integration typically seen at the Tactical or Integrated stages. Most organisations appear to remain in the early Aware stage of the DEI Maturity Model, where policies may exist but are not widely communicated or operationalised.

Figure 2. Awareness of external DEI communication/engagement

A written diversity policy	44%
Specific diversity goals that management aims to meet	35%
Messages for employees on websites or newsletters emphasising diversity importance	46%
Messages directed to the public emphasising diversity importance	43%
Artwork, decorations, or objects in the workplace that emphasise diversity importance	41%
Protocols in meetings or events that promote DEI through statements and images	41%



The translation of verbal commitments to tangible actions, sometimes led to pushback also.

“In theory, we’re inclusive, and we want to do this, and we want to do that, but when push comes to shove, and we actually want ... action ...Then I received a lot of pushback”.
(participant interview)

Implementation

The second theme, **implementation**, focuses on how participants understood and perceived the execution of DEI practices, programs, and processes across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem. Consistent with prior research (Spaaij et al., 2016), findings indicate that DEI implementation is often haphazard and sporadic. Rather than forming part of a holistic strategy, DEI was frequently viewed through a narrow lens, with facilities prioritising select forms of diversity over others.

Our data found that engagement with DEI was often reactive, typically aligned with short-term funding opportunities rather than embedded within a long-term organisational strategy. Such implementation may be evident of the Compliant stage of the DEI Maturity Model, with DEI practices introduced primarily to meet legislative or funding requirements rather than as part of a broader organisational strategy. More concerning, participants across all interviews frequently referenced justifications for inaction, aligning with Ahmed's (2012) concept of 'institutional inertia'.

"... it's an add on, and I think once it's then done, unless it's embedded effectively, they jump onto the next funding cycle to go, oh, well, we've gone from women and girls to LGBTQIA+ to diverse communities".

(participant interview)

One distinction noted in the data was the difference between council-run facilities and private providers. Observational site visits and participant feedback indicated that council-operated centres were generally more proactive and consistent in their DEI engagement than their privately-run counterparts. This may be attributed to councils having greater flexibility to respond to

community needs and evolving social priorities, often with fewer contractual constraints. Unlike private operators, who may be bound by the terms of fixed contracts, councils can more readily initiate targeted programs and allocate resources without the need for formal contract variations. This structural agility may contribute to their stronger and more visible DEI efforts and is worthy of further investigation.

"Where it's often a council run facility, we find that can be quite different experience. A good example is working with [council run facility] who seem to want to make the improvements internally. Whereas when we're working with the third-party operators, it's a matter of, OK, well, we've been directed to do this by Council. We don't really want to, but we're here and we'll do it and you can just tell by the attitude on the day".

(participant interview)

Building on differences between providers, survey respondents were asked to rate industry and workplace engagement with diverse groups (i.e., to what extent to you think that the X engages and includes the following groups). Reviewing these findings (Table 3) shows that employees perceive their own facilities as more engaged across diverse groups, on average, compared to the aquatic and recreation industry at large. These differences are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test) for First Nations peoples (0.025), LGBTQIA+ communities (0.011), and people with a disability (0.042). However, no significant difference was found for culturally and linguistically diverse people (0.074) or for women and girls (0.988).

Table 3. Perceived Industry vs. Workplace Engagement with Diverse Groups

	The Aquatic and Recreation Industry		The Facility of Employment	
	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation
First Nations peoples	4.14	1.70	4.31	1.90
Culturally and linguistically diverse people	4.93	1.61	5.08	1.68
LGBTQIA+	4.75	1.63	4.96	1.66
People with a disability	5.14	1.62	5.31	1.67
Women and girls	5.68	1.40	5.67	1.51

“unfortunately, it’s a bit of a lucky dip as to whether you have a really great experience or a really, really bad one, and that might result in you feeling safe and like you belong and can be part of aquatic facilities and environments you pursue”.

(participant interview)

Split by role, employees occupying roles including Swimming and Water Safety Teachers, Customer Service Officers, and Group Exercise personnel reported, on average, a larger difference between their facility’s engagement across diverse groups compared to the aquatic and recreation industry at large. Engagement with First Nations peoples and LGBTQIA+ communities received consistently lower ratings compared to other groups, particularly from Pool Lifeguards, Duty Managers, and those in Region, Area, and Venue Management (Table 4). These lower scores likely reflect gaps in awareness, limited targeted strategies, and a lack of visible actions addressing the needs of these communities.

Table 4. Perceived Industry vs. Workplace Engagement with Diverse Groups by Employment Type

	First Nations peoples		Culturally and linguistically diverse people		LGBTQIA+		People with a disability		Women and girls	
	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation	Mean (out of 7)	Standard Deviation
Swimming and Water Safety Teacher	4.50	1.85	5.26	1.63	4.94	1.67	5.38	1.46	5.89	1.21
Pool Lifeguard	4.24	1.87	5.09	1.68	4.89	1.73	5.41	1.52	5.45	1.54
Duty Manager	4.25	1.94	4.87	1.77	4.73	1.98	4.97	1.92	5.22	1.71
Customer Service Officer &/or Sales	4.59	1.75	5.37	1.52	5.21	1.53	5.21	1.85	5.73	1.60
Aquatics Operations Officer	4.44	1.81	5.00	1.71	5.06	1.61	5.29	1.67	5.26	1.80
Group Exercise	4.64	2.10	5.14	1.93	5.24	1.70	5.54	1.58	5.74	1.63
General Administration	4.49	1.50	5.00	1.59	5.29	1.44	4.92	1.80	5.54	1.47
Region, Area &/or Venue Management	4.22	1.83	5.16	1.55	4.86	1.53	5.58	1.64	5.74	1.60
Other	4.16	1.88	5.20	1.52	4.52	1.64	5.40	1.58	5.69	1.16

In addition, scores from employees who self-identified as members of diverse groups (i.e., the respondent indicated in the survey that they identified as part of the respective diverse group) were lower across all categories compared to those who did not identify as part of any diverse group. Table 5 shows

these differences when rating the extent that their organisation engages across diverse groups. While the small sample sizes warrant caution in interpretation, the finding suggests that individuals from underrepresented groups perceive a lower level of engagement and inclusion than their peers.

Table 5. Workplace Inclusion Ratings by DEI Group Identification (out of 7)

	First Nations peoples	Culturally and linguistically diverse people	LGBTQIA+	People with a disability	Women and girls
Disability (n=37)	4.00	4.94	4.28	5.12	5.15
CALD (n=59)	4.34	4.80	4.74	4.54	5.11
Indigenous (n=36)	4.32	4.48	4.97	4.86	5.15
LGBTQIA+ (n=46)	3.53	4.61	4.33	4.91	5.14
Non-identifying	4.43	5.24	5.21	5.58	5.93

Diverse Groups

Among all diverse groups explored in this research, **disability** emerged as the area with the most visible engagement. Participants cited numerous examples of initiatives and infrastructure improvements aimed at enhancing accessibility. However, the emphasis remained largely on physical access rather than shifting workplace cultures or attitudes. Participants called for sustained engagement with disability communities to ensure facilities remain spaces of choice and priority for people with disabilities and their families.

"I still think there's the mentality that well, we've got disability rails, we're done, we've ticked the tick, the box, we don't need to do anything further than that. And it's a really unfortunate attitude that is still present today".

(participant interview)

Some promising practices were noted in **multicultural engagement**, particularly in culturally diverse areas. Participants described initiatives such as subsidised swimming programs for lower socio-economic groups. However, these programs were often developed reactively in response to community need, rather than being part of a strategic, research-informed DEI plan. This smaller number of facilities showed early signs of the Tactical stage of the DEI Maturity Model, where targeted programs or initiatives are in place, but these are not yet embedded into organisational culture or leadership.

In some instances, the framing of such programs risked reinforcing discriminatory narratives rather than fostering genuinely inclusive environments. Exemplifying this, one participant stated:

"But just because of the colour of their skin, they're seen as a threat and a vulnerable community group... As a practitioner working in this space, we're having to spend a lot of time combating that language that's been put out by our peak bodies".

(participant interview)

This aligns with Scarr and Jagnoor (2023) who argue for a reframe of how vulnerability is discussed in aquatic and leisure contexts. Rather than applying broad labels to entire communities, vulnerability should be understood as layered and multifaceted, as shaped by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors that vary between individuals and groups (Scarr & Jagnoor, 2023). Accordingly, there is a need for language and practices that reflect the diverse realities and structural conditions that shape access to aquatic and leisure benefits.

Consistent with earlier findings, participants repeatedly stressed the need for a more intersectional and holistic understanding of DEI. Many felt that current approaches were too narrow, failing to address the interconnected nature of identity and exclusion.

"... when people think of diversity and inclusion, they think someone has a disability and that's it. Well, they just don't, they may not speak English too".

(participant interview)

LGBTIQA+ inclusion was positively identified via a small number of initiatives (e.g., 'pride nights' and the 'rainbow roadmap'). However, implementation was inconsistent, even within management organisations operating multiple facilities. While some sites pursued training and accreditation, others did not. Participants also reported significant challenges in implementing LGBTIQA+ inclusion due to perceived hostility, the politicisation of inclusion efforts, and fears of offending stakeholders.

"I think they know the direction they want to go in, but I think the current climate around offending people is an inhibitor. Yeah, I think there's such an uproar. You can't say this. You can't, you know, people are scared".

(participant interview)

First Nations inclusion and reconciliation emerged as the least developed area of DEI engagement across the Victorian aquatic and leisure ecosystem. Site visits and participant interviews confirmed limited evidence of engagement or visible commitment to First Nations peoples or history. Participants reported experiences of racism, lack of consultation, and missed opportunities to build meaningful connections with their local Indigenous communities.

"But generally speaking, I'd say that First Nations is probably left out a little bit in terms of how the sector engages with them".

(participant interview)

To assess the visibility of DEI, researchers conducted a digital resource review of 11 governing body and contract management websites, alongside 59 individual aquatic and leisure facility websites. Of these, 42 (60%) included an Acknowledgment of Country, 5 (7%) displayed LGBTIQA+ flags or indicators, and 8 (11%) featured a diversity statement or policy, most commonly related to disability. These figures suggest only moderate representation of DEI across the sector's digital platforms.

A total of 108 DEI-relevant programs were identified across the 59 facility websites:

- + 74 targeted disability inclusion (68.5%)
- + 12 focused on women and girls
- + 7 were aimed at culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities
- + 2 were specific to LGBTIQA+ inclusion
- + 1 targeted First Nations inclusion

This distribution reflects an imbalance, with disability receiving the majority of attention and other groups being significantly underrepresented. Of the 108 programs, 63 (58%) were internally delivered by the facility, while 45 (42%) were run by external service providers.

Observational data reinforced these trends. While there was commendable visibility of accessibility indicators (e.g., ramps, signage, and equipment) there was limited visual representation of other forms of diversity (e.g., Indigenous artwork and symbols or spaces for cultural activities or gatherings). Few facilities used multilingual signage, culturally inclusive imagery, or visual cues that signalled inclusion of LGBTQIA+ or Indigenous communities.

Overall, the findings in this section suggest that while examples of good practice do exist, DEI implementation across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem remains uneven, often reactive, and disproportionately focused on certain identities and marginalised groups. A more coordinated, intersectional, and strategic approach is needed to ensure that DEI becomes a central, not peripheral, part of the ecosystem's identity and daily operations. This uneven and reactive implementation reflects an ecosystem largely situated between the Aware and Compliant stages of the DEI Maturity Model, where efforts are sporadic and often concentrated on more visible or externally funded diversity dimensions.

Gender Equity

Gender equity emerged as the third theme, with many participants highlighting persistent structural and cultural barriers faced by women in the sector. Although women are well-represented across the ecosystem their experiences were not uniformly positive.

A common observation was the existence of gendered role patterns, where specific positions were perceived as being predominantly occupied by one gender. Leadership roles, in particular, were widely reported as being dominated by white men, reinforcing gender imbalances at the upper levels of decision-making

"... very male dominated in your leadership positions, and then all your centre positions, all your contract managers are female".

(participant interview)

"the more I realized, like, Oh no, there is that glass ceiling. And it was that kind of, we support women, look how progressive we are, but then you realize you were never going to get past a certain point. It was, like, we're progressive to a level, but like, you can't come into the top end kind of thing".

(participant interview)

Several women participants raised concerns about unequal pay for equal roles, limited access to maternity leave, and the absence of robust family-friendly workplace policies. These limitations often drove women to seek employment in council-run facilities, where better maternity support and conditions were perceived to exist. Several women also described a workplace culture that reflected a persistent "boys club" environment, which they linked to broader sporting culture norms. While some acknowledged that this culture had diminished in recent years, many emphasised its lasting legacy and the way it had become institutionalised in parts of the industry. Moving forward, targeted gender equity strategies will be essential to dismantle these entrenched patriarchal structures and foster a more inclusive and equitable sector.

"... they seem to put women in leadership positions where they can have them as puppets, where they toe the company line, and where they're the yes women versus people speaking out and speaking up".

(participant interview)

Interestingly, while support for women was rated highly, there was relatively low awareness of specific programs designed to enhance their career opportunities. Only 23% of respondents were aware of recruitment targets for women, 29% reported knowing of mentoring programs or career development initiatives for women, and 25% were aware of women-specific support groups (Figure 2). This gap suggests that while perceptions of gender equity may be strong, there is limited awareness or visibility of structured efforts underpinning that perception. Further exploration is needed to determine what underlies this disconnection. Gender equity is an important pillar of DEI work, and has been prioritised by various levels of government. Research demonstrates the important outcomes when there is equal representation of women at the highest levels of an organisation. For example, the Victorian Government's Office for Women in Sport and Recreation commissioned research to explore the impact of their 'balance the board' policy. The research found that having gender diversity on boards contributes to more effective decision making, communication, positive culture and better risk management. (Change Our Game, 2023)

Leadership

The fourth theme identified was **leadership**, particularly the role of senior leaders in shaping, supporting, and enacting DEI. Participants emphasised the significant influence that leadership attitudes and behaviours have on organisational culture, employee perceptions, and the practical implementation of DEI initiatives.

There is some work needed to shift the view of efforts from tokenistic to meaningful, systemic change. Leadership was widely viewed as a key enabler or barrier to inclusive practice, and numerous respondents pointed to the absence of sustained engagement, clear policies, and strategic planning. One participant metaphorically described the sector as a “boat without rudders,” noting that while staff often support and value DEI, they lack the leadership guidance necessary to enact it effectively. This highlights the need for a national DEI roadmap and stronger, sector-wide leadership to provide structure and direction.

“I talk about the aquatic industry being a boat without the rudder. So we’ve got the passion, but we haven’t got the rudder of strategic policy.. working together on the strategic pieces that it would actually make the change that we’re seeing in some other areas of the of the world and industries”.

(participant interview)

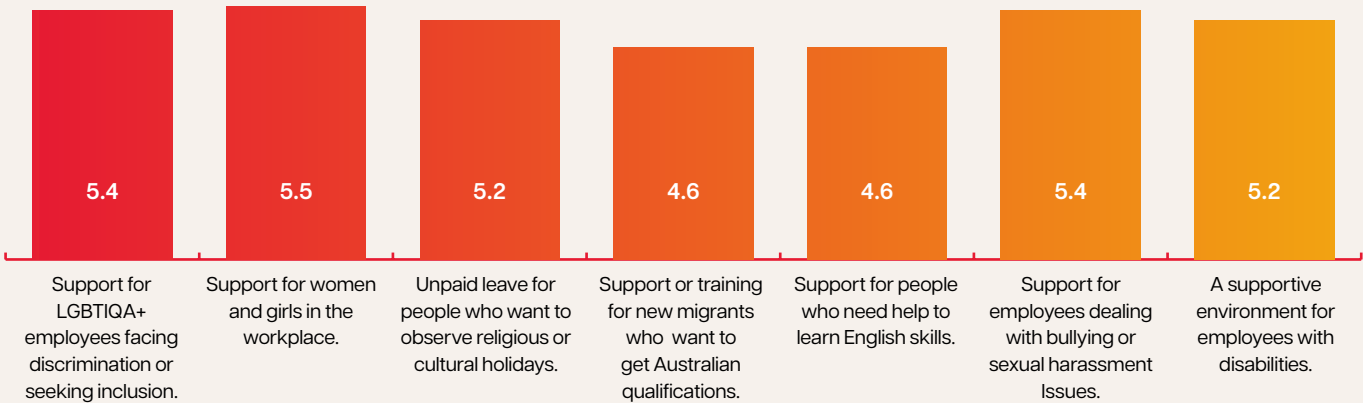
Despite the support for DEI at operational levels, many participants expressed concern about the limited opportunities to upskill or deepen their understanding of inclusive practices. Several participants reported a lack of access to DEI training, expert consultation, and structured learning opportunities. While some organisations have begun designing DEI modules and training, these efforts remain inconsistent across the sector.

“...providing education opportunities for access and inclusion, ... we’ve got a full course built around that [organisation] and a couple of the other providers, and which, to some degree, touch on culturally diverse and Indigenous communities, doesn’t touch on LGBTQIA+, which is frightening for our industry, because a lot of fear and lack of knowledge is in the pride community, particularly around women’s only swim nights”.

(participant interview)

In terms of workplace support for diverse employees, survey results indicate a mixed picture (Figure 3). Respondents agreed that their organisations offer strong support for women and girls (5.5 out of 7) and for employees dealing with bullying or sexual harassment (5.4 out of 7). However, lower ratings were observed for support mechanisms directed at Culturally and Linguistically Diverse employees. This included assistance in developing English language skills (4.6 out of 7) and training pathways for migrants to gain Australian qualifications (4.6 out of 7).

Figure 3.
Perceived Workplace Support for Diverse Employees



Differences in employee perceptions of organisational support also varied by location. Metro-based employees reported higher agreement that their workplaces support staff with disabilities, employees facing harassment, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. In contrast, regional facilities scored higher in supporting new migrants and those needing English language assistance, as well as in offering unpaid leave for religious or cultural holidays. Remote facilities consistently reported lower levels of support across most areas, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that consider geographic disparities.

Recruitment and onboarding were also raised as areas requiring attention. Some participants admitted to uncertainty and lack of confidence in recruiting and supporting staff from diverse cultural backgrounds. As one participant noted,

“...we’re at the front talking about diversity and inclusion and equity, and then you look around the room and go, we’re not really reflecting that... although there’s a desire to, we want to. I just don’t think we know exactly how to do it yet”.

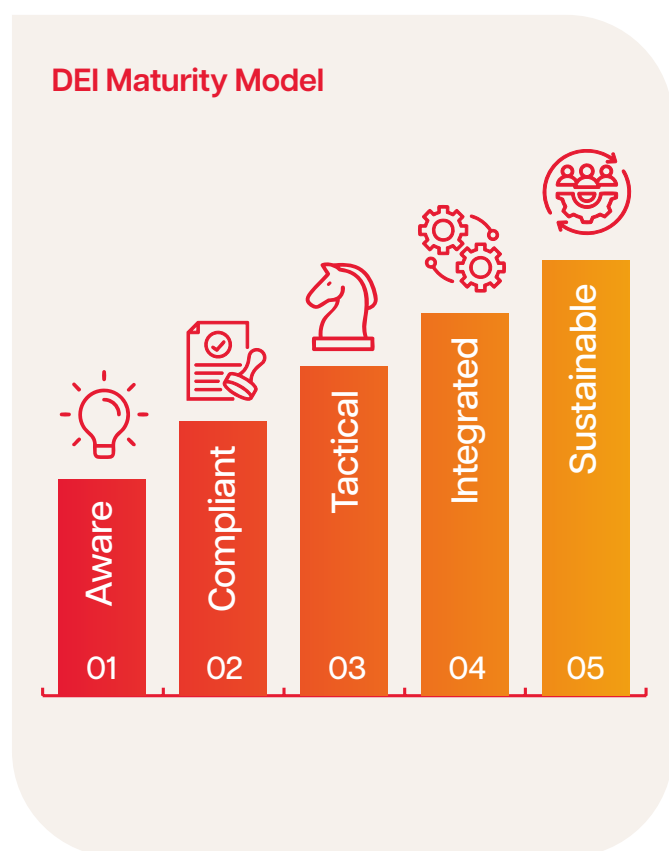
(participant interview)

This reinforces the need to embed DEI training into induction processes and provide clear guidance on inclusive hiring practices. Overall, movement beyond the Tactical stage of the DEI Maturity Model will require sector-wide leadership, policy coherence, and embedded support structures. Without these elements, advancement toward Integrated or Sustainable DEI maturity remains unlikely.

How does the ecosystem track?

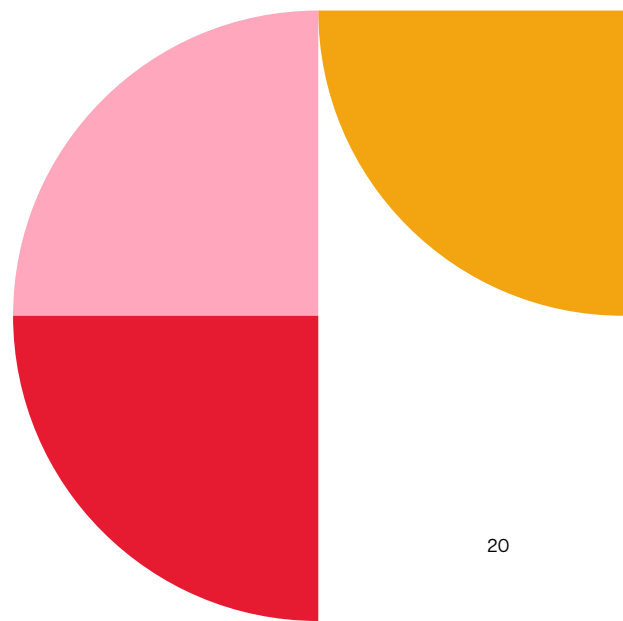
The DEI Maturity Model

Overall, this research found notable but inconsistent engagement with DEI across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem. While many staff demonstrated genuine enthusiasm and commitment, implementation of DEI programs and practices was frequently described as a “lucky dip”, lacking strategic direction, clarity, and consistency. A major barrier identified was the absence of structured policies, clear leadership, and sufficient training and support to enable effective daily DEI integration. As a result, participants, employees, and community members are likely to have very different experiences depending on the facility. The quality of these experiences is critical to fostering a sense of inclusion, safety, and ongoing participation in aquatic and leisure environments.



While some individual facilities or organisations demonstrate DEI practices that align with the Compliant or even Tactical stages, these efforts are not widespread or coordinated across the ecosystem. The absence of ecosystem-wide policies limited internal DEI integration, and minimal data collection on DEI outcomes, indicate that these examples are isolated and sporadic rather than indicative of systemic maturity. As such, the broader ecosystem lacks the consistency and strategic infrastructure required to categorise it beyond Stage 1: Aware. At this stage, there is growing awareness and intention to engage with DEI, but implementation tends to be fragmented and focused on outward-facing programs or communications, rather than embedded into internal systems, workforce capability, and organisational culture. Further, while there are positive practices regarding the creation of community-focused programs for select diverse groups, primarily disability and multicultural communities, engagement with other communities, particularly First Nations and LGBTQIA+ groups, remains notably limited.

Comparatively, recent UK research (UK Active, 2025) places their leisure sector slightly ahead, at an “EDI Activator” stage, which was indicated by clearer strategic engagement and structured programs. Victoria’s aquatic and leisure ecosystem shows potential but remains hindered by an external-only approach. To move forward effectively, and work towards more diverse Victorians participating, working and leading in aquatics and leisure facilities, the sector must adopt structured, strategic, and evidence-based approaches, embedding DEI into daily operations, organisational culture, and leadership practices.



Recommendations

These recommendations are structured to reflect the staged progression of the DEI Maturity Model, providing a pathway from awareness to sustainable practice across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem.

Recommendation Area	Details	Maturity Stage	Example Actions	Priority Timing
Strengthen Gender Equity Efforts	Position gender equity as a foundational entry point for broader DEI progress by addressing structural barriers, role stereotyping, and the underrepresentation of women and gender-diverse people in leadership.	Compliant → Tactical	Example: Conduct gender audits, implement targeted leadership workshops focusing on bias reduction, and revise hiring practices to promote equal opportunities.	Short-term
Establish Ecosystem-Wide Strategic Commitment and Governance	Create a nationally coordinated multi-stakeholder DEI Strategic Working Group led by peak bodies and inclusive of sector leaders, facility operators, and community partners – to establish strategy, guidance, and resources for owners and operators of aquatic and leisure facilities. This will help improve communication, increase visibility and strength of available support tools, and more proactively engage sector leadership to ensure organisations and individuals feel adequately supported to improve DEI outcomes. Publicly commit to a unified DEI vision linked to broader industry goals such as social connection, cultural safety, water safety, community wellbeing, and active recreation.	Aware → Compliant	Example: The National Aquatic Industry Committee establishes a working group to define clear goals and coordinated actions to enable greater DEI maturity, providing opportunity for key stakeholders to engage and provide input.	Short-term
Develop a Coordinated DEI Policy and Strategy Framework	Co-design a national DEI strategy that includes clear targets for accessibility, workforce representation, and community engagement across all marginalised groups. Develop and disseminate standardised DEI policies that support staff in preventing and responding to discrimination and customer-facing challenges.	Compliant → Tactical	Example: Introduce policies on inclusive language and facility signage, with templates adapted from organisations like Welcoming Australia or Proud2Play. Example: Introduce anti-discrimination policies, gender equity policies and Reconciliation Action Plans to show commitment to diverse groups.	Short-term
Integrate DEI into Programs and Service	Embed inclusion principles into core program design, especially for water safety and learn-to-swim. Use local demographic data and participation trends to tailor programs. Ensure that all DEI efforts address the needs of underrepresented communities, with focused action where engagement is currently limited. Apply a gender lens to program design and staffing, addressing barriers such as role stereotyping and access limitations.	Compliant → Tactical	Example: Collect, analyse, and act on demographic and participation data. This should also involve community and user consultations throughout program development, and consideration to intersectionality. Example: Implement tailored engagement strategies for First Nations and LGBTIQ+ communities; Embed inclusion checkpoints in program and policy design (e.g., anti-discrimination policies and Reconciliation Action Plans). Example: Conduct gender audits of leadership and participation data; implement gender equity plans; address stereotypes in staff roles and program offerings.	Medium-term

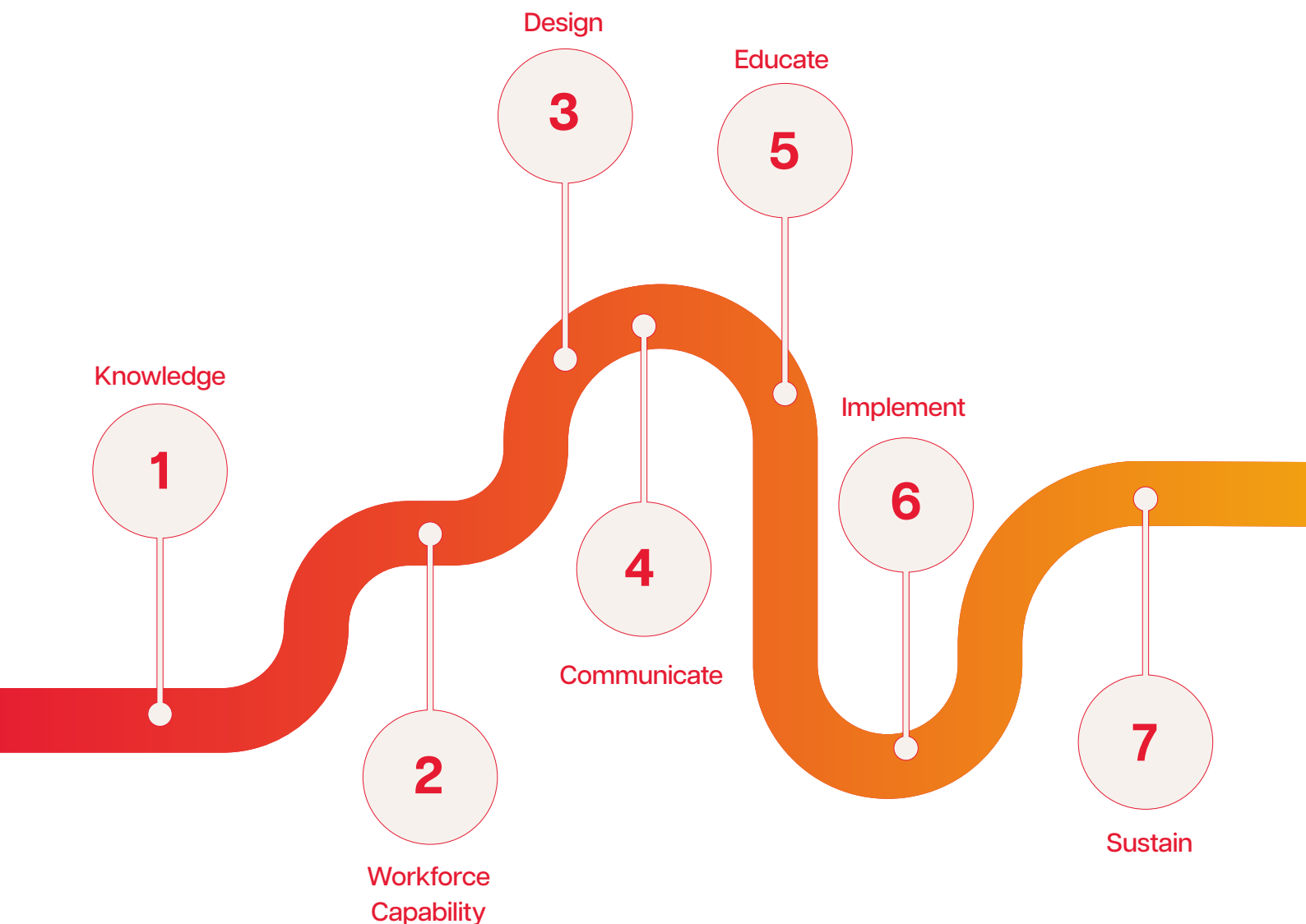
Recommendations Continued

Recommendation Area	Details	Maturity Stage	Example Actions	Priority Timing
Build Workforce Capability Through Training and Education	Industry Skills Bodies should ensure training and accreditation packages for aquatic and leisure roles include DEI components to better embed universal DEI knowledge, awareness and skills regarding inclusion, safety, and cultural competency. Include DEI in staff onboarding and industry training packages for professional development. Deliver targeted DEI training for senior leaders and executives, with a focus on inclusive leadership, accountability, and driving cultural change from the top. Strengthening leadership commitment requires more than data and research; it also depends on intentional awareness-raising and training to guide strategic direction, inclusive employment practices, and targeted investment.	Compliant → Tactical	Example: Proud2Play could co-deliver training to increase understanding of LGBTIQ+ inclusion in aquatic spaces. Example: Senior leaders complete scenario-based DEI training co-designed with the Diversity Council of Australia, focusing on inclusive decision-making and strategic planning. Example: Entry qualifications such as Swim Teacher and Pool Lifeguard should have embedded awareness and competency assessments targeting inclusion.	Medium-term
Improve Communication and Visibility	Clearly communicate DEI goals internally and externally, making their relevance to water safety, public health, and community wellbeing explicit. Strengthen the visibility and credibility of DEI efforts by improving how organisations communicate their commitment across digital platforms and within physical spaces. Transparent, inclusive messaging and visual cues play a key role in shaping perceptions of safety, welcome, and belonging.	Aware → Tactical	Example: Conduct regular digital audits of websites, social media, and public communications to assess whether DEI values are visible, consistent, and reflective of community diversity.	Short-term
Foster Collaboration and Shared Learning	Establish Communities of Practice across states and regions to share learning, challenges, and emerging models of good practice. Leverage partnerships with specialist community organisations (e.g., Centre for Multicultural Youth, Koorie Heritage Trust, Proud2Play, Diversity Council of Australia, Welcoming Australia or Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA), among others) to deliver culturally relevant, context-specific DEI learnings.	Tactical → Integrated	Example: Welcoming Australia and Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA) co-facilitated a peer-learning forum that enabled facility managers to reflect on their digital communications and improve inclusive language across websites and promotional materials.	Medium-term
Monitor, Evaluate, and Sustain Progress	Develop and embed a shared DEI evaluation framework, with agreed indicators for demographic reach, staff confidence, participant satisfaction, and program equity. Integrate DEI reporting to governance boards or facility/asset owners (e.g., Local Council). Complement traditional evaluation with narrative-based methods that highlight lived experience, impact stories, and inclusive innovation.	Tactical → Sustainable	Example: An LGA implements targets for membership and employment of diverse community members aligned to local community demographics. Progress towards these targets is then captured and reported. Example: Share impact stories and case studies to complement evaluation data.	Long-term

DEI Roadmap

The preceding findings highlight the fragmented and inconsistent implementation of DEI practices across Victoria's aquatic and leisure ecosystem. While there is clear intent and enthusiasm, efforts often lack internal integration, sustained investment, and produce uneven engagement across diverse groups, leaving DEI outcomes to chance rather than design. To address this gap and support a more strategic, system-wide approach, we have developed a DEI Roadmap grounded in both the research findings and the DEI Maturity Model framework. This roadmap serves as a practical, and simple, translation of the recommendations into an actionable sequence of steps

- 1. Knowledge:** Understand your community and customer demographics.
- 2. Workforce Capability:** Build cultural competence and workforce diversity awareness.
- 3. Design:** Develop inclusive strategies, robust policies, and meaningful community engagement plans.
- 4. Communicate:** Clearly articulate DEI vision and commitments internally and externally.
- 5. Educate:** Provide ongoing DEI education and training, supported by community partnerships.
- 6. Implement:** Institutionalise DEI in daily practices with clear targets and accountability.
- 7. Sustain:** Regularly evaluate and document DEI outcomes, adapting strategies for continuous improvement.



Conclusions

This report provides important insights and evidence regarding the current state and maturity of the aquatic and leisure ecosystem in relation to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Positively, the ecosystem demonstrates active engagement with DEI, primarily through targeted community programming. This programming, where implemented, is generally well-designed and effectively executed. However, the report highlights significant variability in how DEI practices are adopted, with many initiatives implemented inconsistently or narrowly, often failing to reach all diverse groups equally.

Further, the research highlights a clear passion and readiness within the workforce to advance DEI efforts. By strategically developing this sector-wide capability, the ecosystem can ensure all aquatic and leisure facilities become genuinely

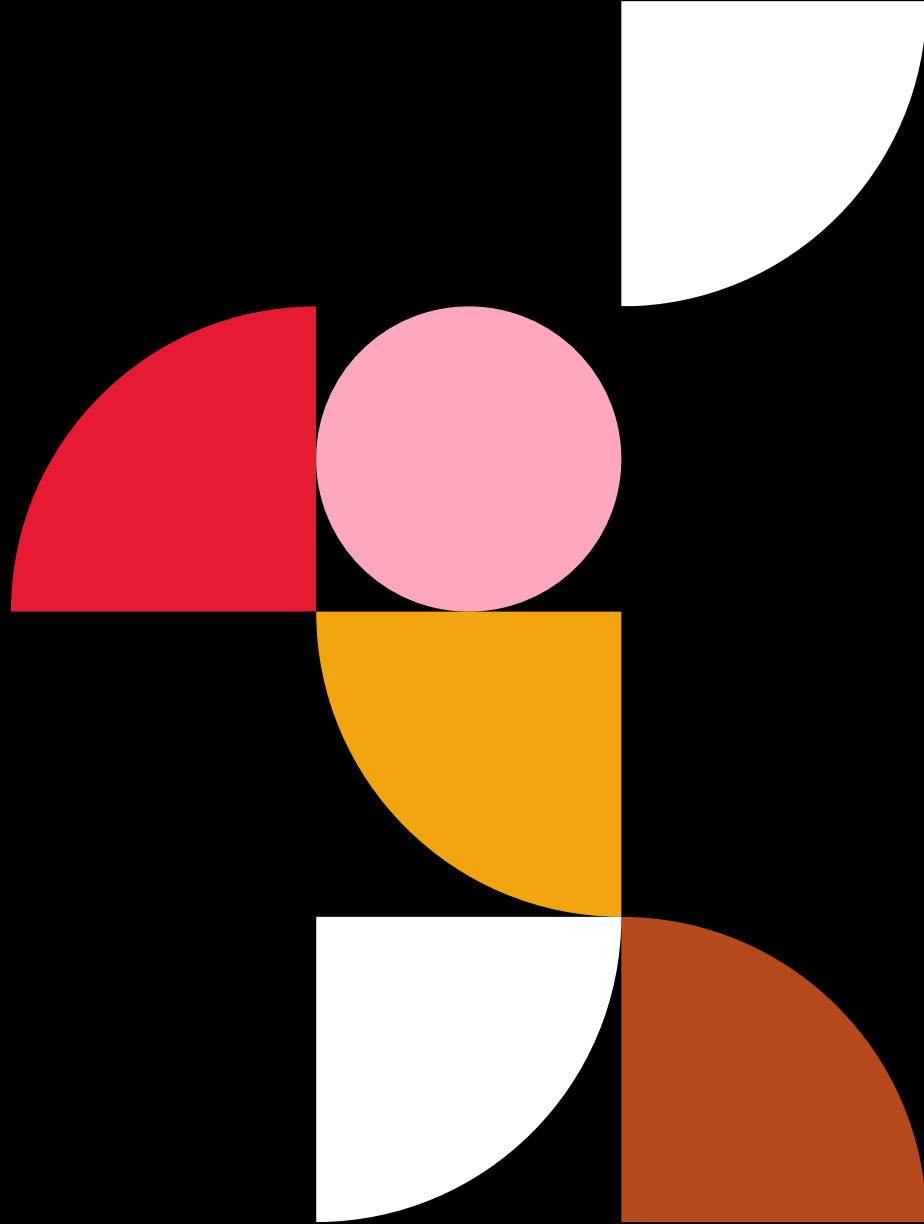
accessible, welcoming, and safe spaces for the entire community. So that, by extension, more community members can have a safe, welcoming, inclusive and positive experience that is free from discrimination.

While this research offers valuable insight into DEI practices across Victorian aquatic and leisure facilities, the findings are context-specific and shaped by the state's policy, demographic, and operational environment. As such, caution should be taken in generalising results to other states or territories without considering local differences. Future research could explore comparative analyses across jurisdictions to deepen understanding of national trends and variations in DEI implementation.



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All recommendations identified by the research team are based on data collected during the research, and this information is known to be correct at the time this report was prepared.

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