



Australian Social Cohesion Summit 2025 Report



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Keynote



Jon Faine AM

Former Radio Presenter,
Broadcaster, Writer and
Public Speaker

Edited version of a keynote speech published in
the Conversation on Friday 31 October 2025



Protesters during anti-immigration rally, Melbourne, August 31, 2025. Michael Currie/AAP

Friday essay: Jon Faine on why our social cohesion should not be taken for granted

Mapping Social Cohesion 2025 Report Launch

Dr James O'Donnell,

Demographer, Australian National University



Fish bowl session notes

About the Fishbowl Sessions

The Fishbowl format at the Australian Social Cohesion Summit 2025 invited participants to engage in open, rotating conversations on three key themes: Neighbourhoods, Women, and Youth.

Each session brought together community leaders, practitioners and attendees to share lived experiences and explore how belonging, trust and participation are built in everyday life.

The insights captured below reflect the collective wisdom and practical ideas shared by participants and documenters on the day.



Neighbourhood



TOPIC

People are happier when they live in areas of high neighbourhood cohesion. How do we strengthen that cohesion?

Session A

Facilitator

Ali Ahmed - Senior Development Manager, University of Melbourne

Guests:

Rosita Vincent - Co-CEO and Founder, Neighbourhood Collective Australia

Michelle James - Manager, Neighbourhoods City of Melbourne

Session B

Facilitator

Rachel Scotland - Manager Community and Partnerships, The Huddle

Guests:

Kashif Bouns - Director of Strategy and Operations, Victorian Multicultural Commission

Emma Bacon - Founder and Executive Director, Sweltering Cities

Documenters

Ari Tsoulakos - Board member, The Interfaith Centre Melbourne

Dr Jackie King - Chief Executive Officer, JDK Research

Key Insights

Belonging starts locally

Neighbourhoods are more than streets or postcodes. They are living ecosystems shaped by shared rhythms, stories, and everyday acts of care. Participants reflected that “a neighbourhood without shared spaces is just a group of houses.” During COVID, people rediscovered local parks and neighbours; this reminded many that connection is not lost, only dormant. Cohesion grows when residents have confidence to enter community spaces and respond to invitations to connect. These encounters turn proximity into purpose.

Strengths, not deficits

Participants spoke about the “lost art of neighbouring”, meaning that in a fast-paced, digital world, we’ve drifted away from the simple acts of connection that once defined community life. Reclaiming this art means rediscovering how to show up for one another, turning proximity into genuine relationships and shared purpose.

“We don’t need to be the same for cohesion to be strong, but we do need each other.”

Micro-programs, multigenerational activities, and neighbourhood champions were seen as effective, low-cost ways to build cohesion.

Shared and safe spaces

Spaces like cafés, libraries, gardens, and community houses are vital for connection but are disappearing in fast-paced modern life. Participants emphasised that inclusive spaces, designed with communities rather than for them, allow neighbours to meet across cultural and social divides. In areas affected by climate and housing stress, maintaining accessible, safe gathering places is even more critical.

Equity, access, and inclusion

Barriers such as language access, postcode bias, and short-term funding models were seen as structural challenges that undermine participation. Attendees shared examples of residents relying on family members for translation or feeling unsafe volunteering outside their cultural communities. The message was clear: engagement must be inclusive by design with professional interpreters, translated invitations, and co-designed programs from the outset.

Local leadership and long-term investment

Neighbourhood trust takes time to build. Short-term, output-driven funding cycles rarely capture the real impact of cohesion work. Both sessions highlighted the need for multi-year investment, local leadership development, and systems change to allow communities to lead their own transformation.

“Communities shouldn’t have to wait for the government to act. They’re already doing the work.”

Connection through creativity and culture

Art, food and language help bring people together. Cultural and creative activities, such as festivals and local art projects, create spaces where people can share ideas and learn from one another. Neighbourhood houses, galleries and schools also help keep these connections strong.

Reflections

Both sessions highlighted the importance of Neighbourhoods and the need for space, time, and trust to re-emerge. Whether rebuilding after change, responding to inequality, or welcoming new residents, the path to stronger cohesion begins with everyday relationships and shared purpose.

Themes to take forward

- Invest in community-led, long-term initiatives.
- Support inclusive cultural and creative programs.
- Embed early consultation and co-design in local planning.
- Address structural barriers like postcode bias and inequitable funding.
- Strengthen translation and accessibility to ensure everyone is invited in.



Women



TOPIC

Why are women crucial to our social cohesion and to the successful transition of others joining our communities?

Session A

Facilitator:

Padmini Sebastian - Director,
Engagement and Partnerships,
University of Melbourne

Guests:

Farhat Firdous - Director, Story is Connection

Eva Hussain - Executive Director, Polaron

Session B

Facilitators

**Tigst Kebede & Nasalifya
Namwinga**
- Founders Pola Practice

Guests:

Caroline Zelinski - Writer & Journalist, The Age

Sherene Hassan OAM - Education Director,
Islamic Museum of Australia

Documenter

Hiranthi Parera - Change Consultant, Scanlon Foundation

Key Insights

Women as builders of cohesion

Across both sessions, women were described as the anchors of families and communities. They are often the first to volunteer, reach out, and notice when something is wrong. Participants reflected that women hold communities together, yet their contributions are often unseen or undervalued. “Who looks after the people that look after the people?”

Women are the quiet builders of social cohesion, connecting across cultures, faiths and generations.

Belonging, safety and trust

Safety was a strong theme. Women shared experiences of feeling unsafe in public spaces, workplaces and community settings. The group stressed that safety is the foundation for participation. When women feel safe, they are more likely to engage, lead and contribute to their communities. Trust also takes time. Building trusting relationships among women within communities and across cultures was seen as essential to lasting cohesion.

Leadership and representation

Migrant and multicultural women often face extra barriers like language, lack of social capital, discrimination, and institutional bias. Speakers shared that progress has not been as fast as hoped and that Women must step into leadership positions to create the change they want to see.

“The onus is on us to create the communities we want and focus on hope.”

Participants spoke about mentoring, creating opportunities for younger women, and encouraging quiet voices to take a seat at the table. Many saw mentoring and intergenerational connection as critical pathways to leadership.

Challenging inequality and bias

Discussions acknowledged that not all women experience the same challenges. There are “minorities within minorities”, and privilege differs between individuals. Participants called for honest conversations about racism, sexism and structural barriers and the need for change both from the grassroots and at policy levels.

“Don’t be led by guilt but use your privilege well because you can create change.”

The group shared that institutions must move beyond crisis responses and invest in prevention, fairness and inclusion.

Cultural humility and collective care

Cultural humility, openness and learning were common threads. Women spoke about the fatigue of carrying multiple roles as advocates, carers, and community leaders. They need spaces where they can decompress and “take the mask off.” They also reminded one another that self-care is not selfish; it is a requirement for sustainability.

“No one will give you the time and space. You need to create it for yourself.”

Courage, voice and choice

“Embrace the fear and do it anyway” Women called for freedom of choice without labels: the ability to be both strong and vulnerable, to lead and to nurture, to define womanhood on their own terms. “You will do it your way.”

Key Insights

Reflections

Both sessions celebrated women as architects of cohesion and agents of change. They reminded us that equality and inclusion require courage, trust and collaboration, and that change must come from both the grassroots and the top.

Participants left inspired to continue working together, stay connected, and support one another's leadership journeys.

The session closed with an Amharic proverb shared by Tigist Yilma:

"If enough cobwebs of a spider come together, they can trap a lion."

A powerful reminder that collective strength, especially women's

Themes to take forward

- Recognise and value women's unpaid contributions to community cohesion.
- Prioritise safety and access for women in all community spaces.
- Build intergenerational mentoring and leadership pathways.
- Invest in prevention, not just crisis response, for women's wellbeing.
- Address structural barriers to participation and leadership.
- Foster cultural humility, learning and collaboration across communities



Youth



TOPIC

Young people score 50 points above the average for acceptance, what can be done to harness that and build our social cohesion?

Session A

Facilitator

Kano Ravalji - Youth Commissioner, Victorian Multicultural Commission

Guests:

Phy Mei Liu - Director of Research and Program Evaluation, Future Women

Lydia Tesema - Founder and Strategic Communications and Engagement Expert, Below the Surface

Documenter

Ben Scanlon - G3 Committee Member, Scanlon Foundation

Session B

Facilitator

Elvis Tran - Project Officer, The Scanlon Foundation

Guests:

Robiel Abraham - CEO, African Youth Initiative

Salman Warsame - Co-Founder, Local Transit Co

Key Insights

Young people want real power, not token roles

Across both sessions, young participants emphasised that they want authentic influence, not symbolic involvement. Advisory groups and youth consultations are valuable only when young people can see their ideas acted upon. When organisations share real decision-making power, youth become more invested and help shape solutions that genuinely work.

“If young people are better, how do we employ them and increase their responsibilities so they can rise to the challenge?”

Belonging starts with family and community leadership

Family and community networks strongly influence whether young people feel included or isolated.

Supportive adults, mentors and role models provide the guidance that keeps young people connected to positive environments. Without those connections, they can become vulnerable to harmful online spaces or social isolation.

“Acceptance offers a chance to reconnect with community rather than succumbing to isolation.”

Participants shared that safe, caring adults such as teachers, youth workers, coaches, and community leaders have a significant impact on young people’s values and confidence.

Safe local spaces build connection and reduce harm

Young people need welcoming, local spaces where they can express themselves freely.

Youth hubs, schools, libraries and faith centres are vital places for belonging and identity exploration.

These spaces provide healthy alternatives to the negative effects of online isolation.

“Centre the most impactful voices and make them connected.”

Investing in accessible, co-designed youth spaces with trained mentors helps turn online acceptance into real-world connections.

Intergenerational and culturally aware leadership matters

Bridging generations through dialogue helps young people learn from the experiences of older community members. Many noted that some older generations carry their own trauma, so youth engagement must be trauma-aware and culturally sensitive. Intergenerational conversations create understanding, trust and a sense of shared responsibility for cohesion.

“How much shared decision-making do young people have that could strengthen acceptance of others?”

Building capacity alongside representation

Representation alone is not enough. Young people need mentoring, paid roles and structured training to turn participation into leadership. Without proper support, young leaders burn out or disengage. A structured pipeline of paid placements, leadership programs, and mentoring is essential to sustain their involvement.

Bridging bureaucracy and grassroots leadership

The group focused on how government and institutions can better connect with young leaders. Participants said that while local councils and state departments want to engage, their processes often feel rigid or inaccessible. Culturally aware mediators who understand both systems and communities can bridge this gap. They translate bureaucratic processes, build trust and help grassroots initiatives thrive.

“Government can be a strong ally if it does the work to engage and build community capacity, not just demand conformity.”

Flexibility prevents exclusion and fatigue

Rigid meeting schedules, unpaid roles and fixed commitments make it hard for many young people to stay engaged. Flexible models, drop-in sessions, micro-grants, and paid part-time opportunities allow more diverse participation. Young people want to contribute, but they need support that fits around study, work and family life.



Reflections

The Youth Fishbowls highlighted that young people are not only future leaders. They are leading now. They bring creativity, empathy and lived experience that can strengthen cohesion if institutions are willing to share power and trust them.

When youth leadership is supported with real authority, mentorship and flexibility, it drives stronger belonging and trust across generations.

“When young people have real influence, they translate acceptance into action.”

Themes to take forward

- Create funded youth leadership roles with real decision-making authority.
- Build structured, paid pathways for mentoring, training and governance participation.
- Support families and community networks that keep young people connected and safe.
- Invest in accessible, inclusive local youth hubs and programs.
- Employ culturally aware mediators to link institutions and grassroots communities.
- Co-design flexible engagement models that meet young people where they are.

Workshops

Program Design for Social Cohesion Initiatives

Anthea Hancocks -CEO, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

Aleem Ali -CEO, Welcoming Australia

How to design effective programs that address social cohesion at the community or local level. This session explored practical frameworks and real-world case studies, offering insights into what works, why it works, and how to tailor initiatives to meet the needs of diverse communities.



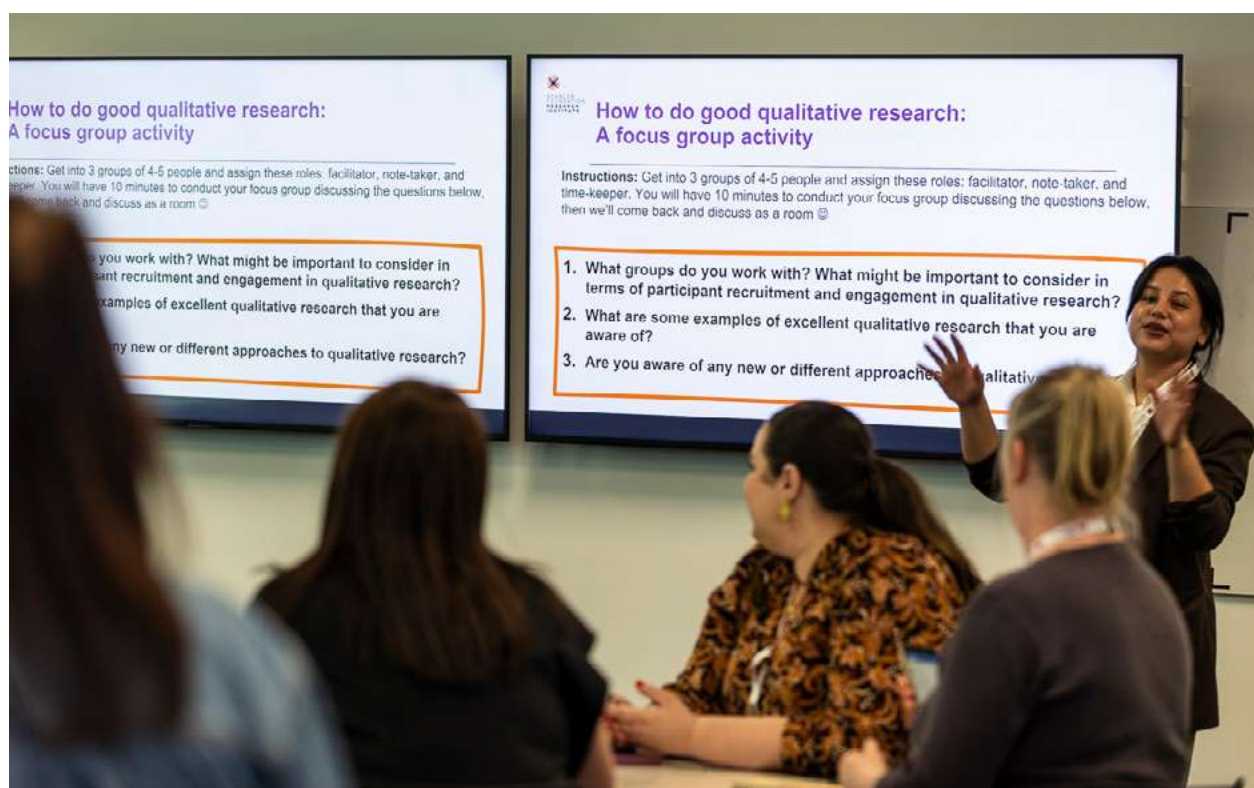
How To Do Good Qualitative Research

Trish Prentice - Senior Researcher, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

Dr Tamsin Dehar - Research Manager, Talbot Mills Research

Nyima Wangchuk - Research Consultant, Social Research Centre

Designed for those interested in conducting research or gaining a better understanding of how to approach it, particularly in the context of social cohesion. The workshop covered best-practice qualitative methods, including how to develop strong research questions, conduct interviews and focus groups, and analyse rich, narrative-driven data. Participants explored how qualitative research can capture lived experiences and deepen understanding of community dynamics.



How To Do Good Quantitative Research

Dr Rouven Link - Senior Research Analyst, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

Matthew Skidmore - PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics, Monash University

Ideal for those looking to conduct or better understand research, this workshop introduced best-practice approaches to quantitative methods with a focus on social cohesion. Participants learnt how to design effective surveys, apply sound sampling techniques, collect reliable data, and interpret statistical findings. The session equipped attendees with the tools to generate meaningful insights that can shape programs, policies, and community initiatives.



The Social Cohesion Compass

Dr John van Kooy - Senior Manager, Social Research, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

Phoebe Johnston - Research Analyst, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

How to use the Social Cohesion Compass, a data visualisation tool developed by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute to explore social cohesion and democratic resilience at the Local Government Area level. This session used practical examples of LGAs to unpack key indicators of social cohesion, helping participants interpret localised data and understand community strengths and challenges.



Morning sessions



Workshop - Program Design for Social Cohesion Initiatives



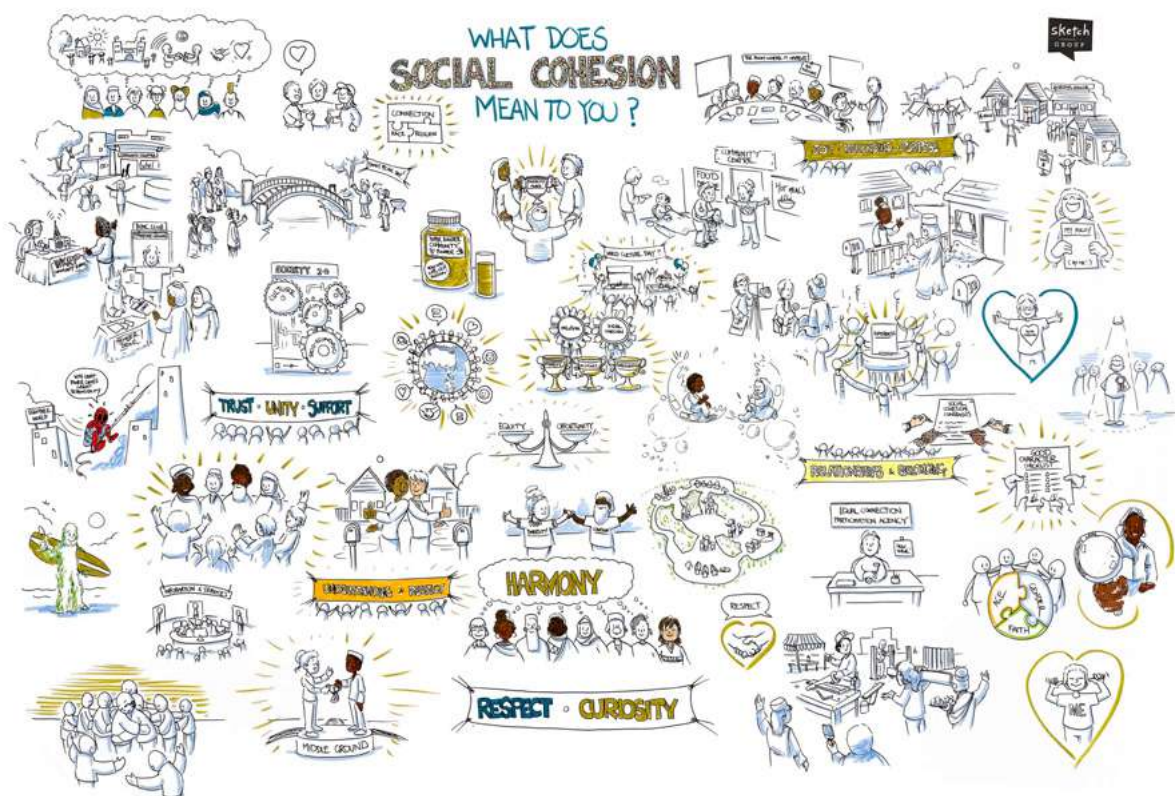
Neighbourhood Fishbowl session



IdeaSketch™ responses

“What does Social Cohesion mean to you?”





Event Feedback at a Glance

Overall Experience



4.5

Content relevance



4.9

“Learning about the local statistics for my council (growth area) and the idea of allowing the community to choose how they identify rather than segmenting into, for example, different cultural groups.”

Key takeaways



Engaging and uplifting more young people where possible



Inclusion through shared spaces and dialogues



Practical tools and ideas



Renewed motivation to act Practical tools and ideas locally



Connection is everyone's responsibility



Deeper understanding of social cohesion

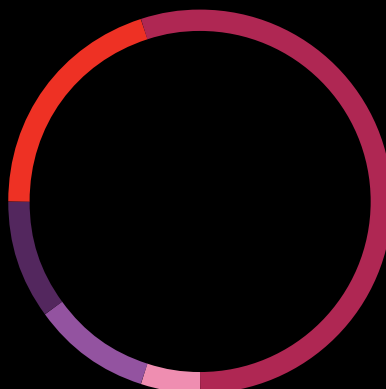
Conclusion



- **Belonging starts locally** – Social cohesion is strongest when connection is built through everyday relationships.
- **Trust grows through inclusion** – Open, transparent leadership and shared decision-making foster confidence.
- **Participation drives impact** – Collaboration across cultures, sectors and generations turns shared values into real outcomes.

Who attended

- Federal Government
- State and local Government
- Academia and research
- Community organisations
- Business/Private
- Social enterprises and Independent practitioners



- The recommendations for social cohesion at different ages and cohorts - this was incredibly insightful and practical.
- Engaging and uplifting more young people where possible
- The Compass is very interesting, and I will definitely be exploring this data. Great job making it so user-friendly!
- The opening addresses provided important context for the summit, particularly the commentary by Jon Faine and Kos Samaras. The urgency of action and appeal not to be complacent resonated particularly with me.
- Issue-based - mobilise people around an issue/goal. Act locally. Don't get bogged down in national/international issues - find common ground locally.
- Enabling opportunities for community leaders to come together more often to network.
- Maintaining and exploring further the sense of belonging for women attending the Community Hub



Participant voices

- Apply data to funding applications and reports.
- Opportunities to discuss solutions and what other jurisdictions are doing, but seemed more focused on what is wrong. Strong discussions on our understanding of social cohesion.
- Loved the fish bowl sessions, a unique concept and highly interactive.
- The provocation to stop labelling "CALD" and Focus on the issues has got me thinking about How we do things.
- The importance of creating the opportunity for connection and relationships to form. I'll use the social compass



Responses gathered through the post-summit survey. Attendees shared their reflections and feedback, helping to identify what resonated most strongly.

Social Media

Deliverables

Live Event Instagram Stories

That's us in the event



Deliverables

Event Content and Post-Event Post

Post-Event Thank you Instagram Carousel



Digital QR Summit Poster



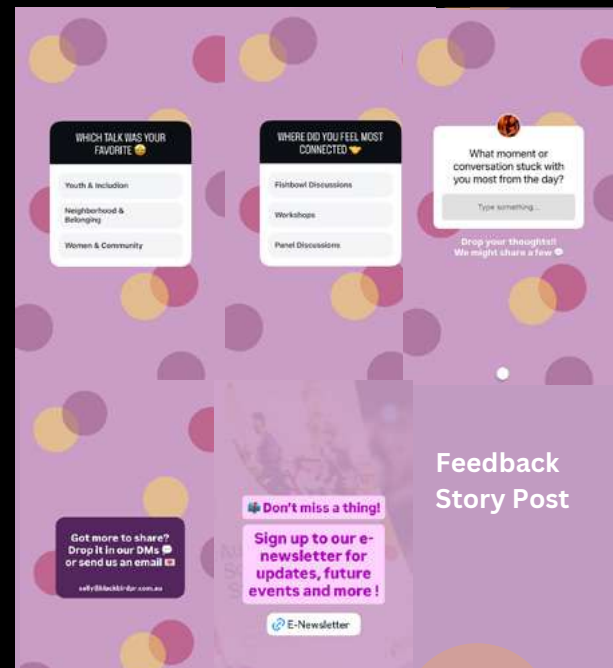
Australian Social Cohesion Summit Humantix Poster Banner



Post Event Reel Key Takeaways



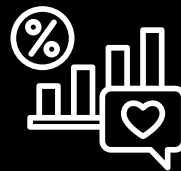
Feedback Story Post



Summit engagement data

18k +
views

660% 
Profile visits



Insights

Views	 12k
Interactions	 400
New followers	 220

Profile activity

Page and profile impressions	14,501
Post impressions	13,556 (+500%)
Post link clicks	842 (+300%)

Followers

3390

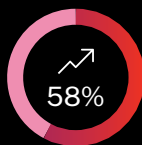
Avg engagement

6.7%

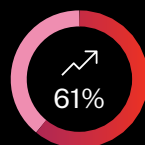
Views

22,348

Followers



Non-followers



Accounts reached

28,985

By Content Type

Posts

↗ 78%

Reactions & likes

↗ 83%

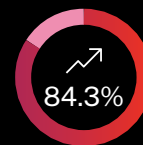
Shares

↗ 56%

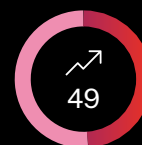
Interactions

145

Followers



Non-followers



Content Interactions

Post link clicks

800

Comments

236

Video Views

3413

Our Partners and Supporters

Major Partner



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Silver Partner



Social
Research
Centre

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In Kind Partners



Event Management



Industry-Linked Project Students



We extend our heartfelt thanks to our volunteers on the day.



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