

## LIFE IS A PROJECT: ENABLING LIFE SKILLS IN CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITIONS<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of project management as an enabling skill for individuals in the process of cross-cultural transition. It explores theoretical models of cultural adaptation, research into psychological and socio-cultural impacts of cross-cultural transitions, the challenges of being a non-native English language speaker, the concept of “skills for life” training and studies on the impact of project-based learning in education. The paper provides observations from an experimental exercise in teaching project management skills to a group of non-native English language speakers. It concludes with a view on the merit of project management skills in a cross-cultural context and thoughts on further development of the concept.

**Key words:** *cross-cultural, acculturation, project management, cultural transition, skills for life*

**JEL codes:** J150, L310, M140

### Introduction

"To awaken quite alone in a strange town is one of the pleasantest sensations in the world. You are surrounded by adventure" (Stark, 2011, p.11). Individuals make cross-cultural transitions to new locations for many reasons. Like British travel writer, Freya Stark, they may be motivated by a desire for adventure and discovery. Others undertake these transitions as longer-term sojourns or migration for a variety of economic, political, social and environmental motivations (Dontsov & Zotova, 2013).

These transitions present the newcomer with practical and social challenges which can significantly constrain their well-being and productivity. This conceptual paper provides an introductory exploration of the extent to which the acquisition of basic project management skills, methods and tools may enhance the capabilities of individuals to articulate, analyse, plan and manage “life” projects such as cross-cultural transitions. It explores the extent to which such skills acquisition might serve to release or develop latent capability in “at risk” individuals or groups, and seeks to identify the potential for

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realising measurable personal, social and economic benefits for the individual and society as a direct result of such capability activation. Academic research on the concept and quantifiable benefits of project management as a “life” skill is limited.

Project management methodologies are mostly commercial-focused. There is great scope for further research to explore the feasibility of this concept, potential social or “life” applications, benefits quantification methods, and the applicability of leading project management frameworks to these “life” projects. This paper presents a novel and introductory exploration of the feasibility and potential benefits of providing adapted project management skills training to assist individuals with one specific example of everyday life, the cross-cultural transition.

## **Research results and discussion**

### ***The challenge of cross-cultural transition***

Individuals decide to relocate to foreign countries for many and varied reasons depending on their personal circumstances. The study of Dontsov and Zotova (2013, p.78) identifies standard of living, financial stability, future opportunities, wealth creation, the chance to start a new life, education, employment, security and family reunion as major drivers for undertaking these transitions. In the United Kingdom (House of Commons, 2016, p.14) the primary reasons for migration inflow between 2005 and 2015 have been work, study and family reunion.

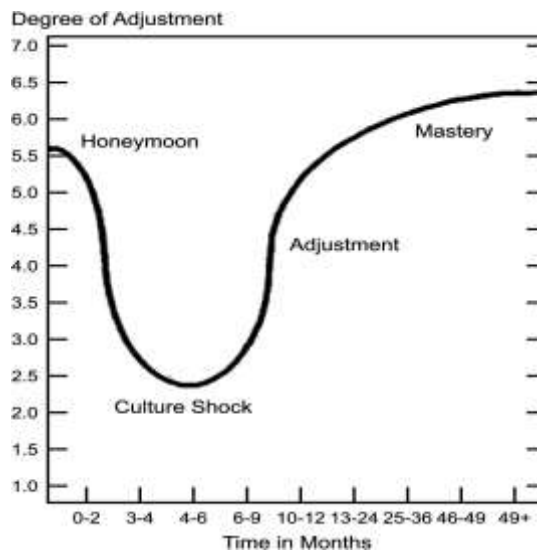
The practical challenges of relocation to a new country include the fundamental needs such as finding accommodation, employment, healthcare, transport and financial services. The social challenges include making new friends, developing a support network and adapting to cultural differences. The success of the transition depends on the individual’s ability to overcome these challenges in a process of adaptation and establishment of independence.

Studies have identified that the process of cross-cultural transition can pose significant threats to the psychological well-being of individuals as they attempt to overcome feelings of homesickness, prejudice, loss of self-esteem, anxiety, helplessness, depression, loneliness, stress and sleeplessness (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Brown and Holloway (2008, pp. 33-45) describe the international transition process as “one of the most traumatic events in a person’s life”, concluding that almost all of the 13 subjects in their study suffered symptoms of “mental ill health” as a direct result of their relocation. The study of Ramos, Cassidy, Reicher and Haslam (2015) identifies the failure of post-migration experiences to meet pre-migration expectations as a primary cause of “acculturative stress” leading to mental illness. They cite social rejection, prejudice, language difficulties, and cultural differences as the major inhibitors to expectations being met and achievement of well-being in the new location.

According to Sam and Berry, (2010, p.472) acculturation is “the process of cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures”. They identify four different acculturation styles – integration, assimilation, separation and

marginalization. They conclude that integration, which involves preserving one’s original culture whilst participating actively in the new culture, is generally the most successful strategy.

Studies of the process of cultural adaptation have resulted in the development of numerous process models. Figure 1 illustrates the U-Curve cross-cultural adjustment theory, originally associated with the work of Lysgaard (1955, cited by Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p.227). Many subsequent models such as those of Brown, Adler, Torbiorn and Mohamed approximate or elaborate on this original four-phase model (Brown & Holloway, 2008, p.34).



Source: Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p.227

**Fig. 1. The U-Curve of Cross-Cultural Adjustment**

The “honeymoon” phase is characterised by an initial sense of excitement and adventure, as in the case of Freya Stark, waking up to the “sights and sounds” of Baghdad. The “culture shock” phase refers to the sense of trauma experienced as the realities of everyday life take hold and the individual’s inability to cope with the new environment trigger negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, loneliness and stress. The “adjustment” phase is characterised by a sense of re-orientation and recovery as the individual learns to cope and make progress within the new cultural environment. Finally, in the “mastery” phase the individual achieves a new sense of purpose, independence and self-esteem, akin to the self-actualisation status of Maslow’s motivational needs theory (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Maylor, 2010; Van Tonder, 2013).

As is the case with most academic models, the U-Curve model will not be applicable in all contexts. Brown and Holloway (2008, p.45) question the validity of the honeymoon phase, asserting that stress and culture shock is greatest at the start of the transition process, outweighing any initial feelings of euphoria. Black and Mendenhall (1991) review various case studies where the adaptation process resembles a J-Curve or an inverted U-Curve under different cultural contexts.

What remains true in all cases is the notion that the culture shock phase represents a significant risk factor for successful adaptation to new environments. Factors such as language difficulties, prejudices, social isolation and cultural difference may significantly inhibit the adaptation process, causing damage to self-esteem and psychological well-being, and in doing so, further inhibit progress to the adaptation and mastery phases. Colic-Peisker (2009, p.176) identifies employment as the primary determinant of life happiness and transition success for refugee groups in Australia. Benson-Rea and Rawlinson (2003, p.71) identify English language skills as a critical barrier to employment and hence, transition success, for 85% of skilled migrants in New Zealand. Some transitions will fail, having never progressed from the “limbo” phase of culture shock and its attendant negative emotions.

What strategies can be deployed to mitigate culture shock and push individuals up the U-Curve towards adaptation? Black and Mendenhall (1991) stress the importance of maximum exposure to the host culture as a source of “social learning” through behavioural observation. Ward and Kennedy (2001, p.640) identify task-oriented planning, active coping strategies, and a sense of humour as being highly supportive of well-being and cross-cultural adaptation. Van Tonder (2012, p.346) highlights the “important supporting role of friends, networks and community structures”. Ramos et al. (2015, pp. 30-32) reinforce the criticality of social support, cultural identity, host contact and “second-language confidence” in successful cross-cultural transitions.

### ***Cross-cultural transition and the skills for life concept***

In 2001, the English Government launched a national seven-year “Skills for Life” education strategy to improve the literacy, numeracy and language skills of seven million adults identified as being “at risk” of economic disadvantage, social exclusion and ill health. The programme was developed in response to a national report by Sir Claus Moser which concluded that 20% of the adult population of England possessed lower literacy, numeracy and language skills than an average eleven year-old child. The Skills for Life strategy targets specific groups regarded as being at greatest risk of disadvantage and exclusion – the long-term unemployed, benefits claimants, prisoners and supervised offenders, public sector employees, low-skilled employees, the homeless, refugees, asylum seekers, non-native English speakers (ESOL) and disadvantaged communities (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2001).

From the lens of cross-cultural transitions, the “at risk” targeting of refugees, asylum seekers and non-native English speakers is of interest. The English Government is recognising the “life skills” gaps of these groups which inhibits their “active participation in twenty-first-century society” (DfEE, 2001, p.3). With respect to these groups, the Skills for Life strategy focuses on literacy and language skills education as the primary enabling mechanism for greater social inclusion, psychological well-being, independence and ultimate adaptation. A national framework of ESOL curriculum, certification and free skills training for adults was implemented as a tactical solution to the skills gap. ESOL training materials focused on day-to-day life skills and contained primarily cross-cultural style and content. According to the English National Audit Office

[NAO] (2008, p.20) review, approximately 300,000 target group individuals attained ESOL Skills for Life certifications between 2000 and 2007. There is no qualitative data provided within this report for measuring the success of this programme in bridging the “life skills” gap.

In terms of human capital theory, an investment in the language skills of non-native English speakers might be viewed as enhancing their cultural capital. These skills will in turn enhance their social capital as socialising and making new friends becomes easier. Eventually these language skills are likely to enhance economic capital in the way of increased employment and further learning opportunities (Ryan, Sales, Tilki & Siara, 2008).

In the context of cross-cultural transitions, “skills for life” education can provide much more than just local language and everyday living skills. It can provide individuals with positive host community contact, new skills and opportunities for social networking and support, greater second-language confidence, greater self-esteem and independence. Skills for life can help individuals to overcome the obstacles of culture shock and climb the U-Curve of socio-cultural adaptation.

### ***Cross-cultural transition and project management skills for life***

Ward and Kennedy (2001, p.640) identify “task-oriented planning” as a positive strategy for coping with cross-cultural transitions. What tasks might be applicable to cross-cultural transitions and what skills might be useful to plan and manage them? Is it feasible to plan and manage these transitional tasks as “life projects”?

According to Maylor (2010, p.3) “Life is one big project. The trick is in managing it.” This concept promotes a view of Life as a series of related tasks which can be planned and managed as a project. The Association for Project Management [APM] (2012) defines a project as “a unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve planned objectives”. Similarly, the Project Management Institute [PMI] (2008, p.5) defines a project as “a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result”. In the sense that Life is temporary, unique and has a purpose, Maylor’s quotation is valid. In the business world, the discipline of project management has been developed primarily as a structured method for planning and managing complex organisational changes. In fact, the tools, techniques and skills of project management can be applied with equal efficacy to any endeavour that meets the project criteria of temporariness, uniqueness and purpose, including “life projects”.

In recent years, studies have recognised the project management skillset as a useful and enabling “skill for life”. Schools are increasingly incorporating project-based learning [PBL] into their core curriculum. According to Bell (2010) PBL in schools fosters the early development of critical “21<sup>st</sup> century” life skills such as collaboration, communication, teamwork, problem solving, independence, goal setting, time management, negotiation, creativity, analytical thinking, planning and organisation. She cites United States and British studies which identify superior academic achievement

and higher motivation levels in PBL-approach schools. The study of Wurdinger and Rudolph (2009) reiterates this “life skills” focus of PBL, with 85% of respondents identifying life skills such as “creativity” and “finding information” as the most important learning outcomes, as opposed to 10% for the traditional academic skills.

Whilst the concept of project management as an enabling life skill has been emerging increasingly in the schools education environment, there is little reference to its specific applicability in an ESOL or cross-cultural transition context. However, the life skills identified by Bell (2010) are precisely the type of enabling skills required by individuals navigating the U-Curve of cross-cultural transitions.

Critical transitional activities such as finding a job and learning a language (Benson-Rea & Rawlinson, 2003; Colic-Peisker, 2009) may be framed and managed as temporary endeavours undertaken to achieve unique results. Using a simplified and practical set of project management skills and tools, individuals may be taught how to define achievable objectives, how to breakdown their goals into a manageable set of related tasks, how to plan and schedule these tasks, and how to manage and control their plans through to fruition. This structured approach is equally applicable to transitional tasks such as finding a home, learning a skill, planning an education, starting a business, or making new friends. A project-based approach to “life tasks” can provide the positive “task-based planning” and active coping strategy endorsed by Ward and Kennedy (2001).

The acquisition of basic project management skills *per se* cannot resolve the primary cross-culture transitional barriers of language proficiency (Benson-Rea & Rawlinson, 2003), social isolation (Brown & Holloway, 2008), cultural learning (Black & Mendenhall, 1991) and economic stability (Colic-Peisker, 2009). It can, however, empower individuals with a toolset to manage transitional tasks systematically, generating a remedial impact on the sense of “helplessness” and “disorientation” (Brown & Holloway, 2008, pp. 38-39) experienced by those stuck in the culture shock phase. As “life projects” are incrementally achieved, self-doubt and stress will be progressively replaced by self-worth, self-confidence and satisfaction, on a path to cross-cultural adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p.240). In this sense, the application of project management skills to transitional tasks may be viewed as an active coping strategy, confronting the “stressors” of cross-cultural transition (Sam & Berry, 2010, p.474).

Further to the empowering utility of the skills themselves, the process of skills acquisition itself is likely to prove cathartic and restorative to an audience engaged in the process of cross-cultural transition. As observed by Bell (2010) and Wurdinger and Rudolph (2009), the project-based learning approach helps develop critical social, cultural and organisational skills such as teamwork, collaboration, communication, responsibility, creativity, self-confidence, time management and problem solving. Project management skills training workshops should incorporate a strong, hands-on, PBL focus with a practical team-based project delivery component to maximise this developmental opportunity.

### ***Life is a Project: a London pilot***

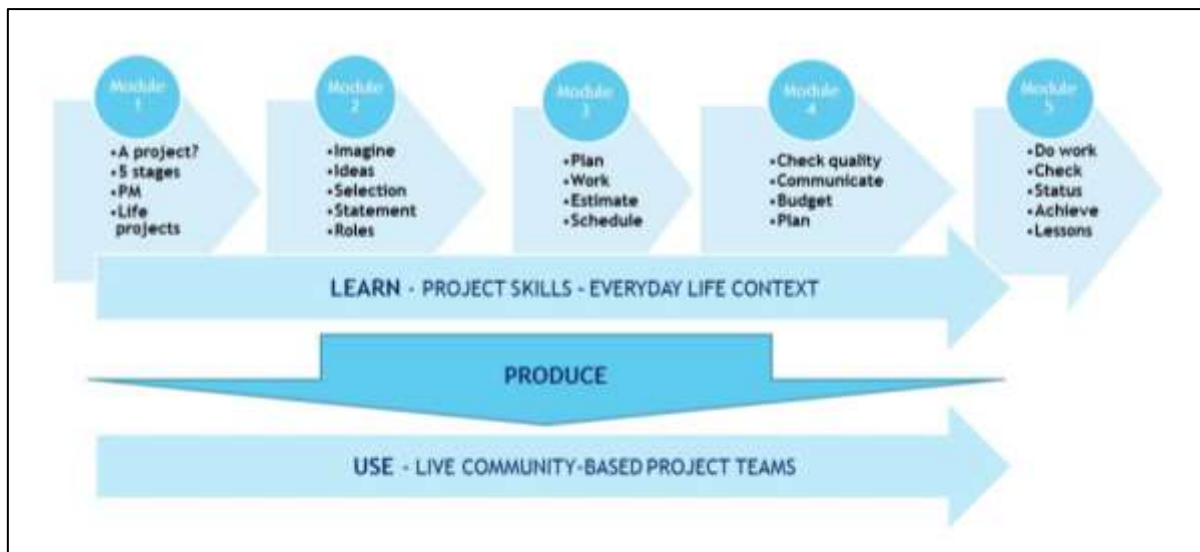
England's national "Skills for Life" strategy was developed to tackle the multiple agendas of skills, employability and social cohesion (Cooke & Simpson, 2009, p.1). The marginalization of minority groups, including non-native English speakers, due to poor literacy, numeracy and language skills was regarded as a significant drain on global competitiveness, welfare services, and social cohesion. The ESOL component of the strategy targeted the economic, socio-cultural and psychological needs of non-native language speakers through the provision of basic skills training. Whilst ESOL training targets were met, observers such as Appleby and Bathmaker (2006) and Cooke and Simpson (2009) noted a gradual shift in policy focus away from the socio-cultural and psychological needs of ESOL learners, towards employability and economic competitiveness targets.

### ***LIAP concept***

In recent years, the author of this paper, an experienced project management practitioner and English language teacher with a special interest in cross-cultural project teams, developed the concept of empowering marginalized non-native language speaking groups with a basic set of generic project management skills and techniques, as an enabling "skill for life" in support of their cross-cultural transitions. The Life is a Project [LIAP] programme framework was developed to test the feasibility of this concept. An initial review of existing literature, language training resources, project management training resources, case studies and consultation with a variety of professional bodies and practitioners from these disciplines, failed to identify existing programmes or resources suitable for this specific purpose. Existing "life skills" programmes and materials which had been developed for native-language-speaking schools environments were deemed too complex and were contingent upon the availability of additional resources and specialist teacher networks.

### ***LIAP approach***

To test the LIAP programme concept, it was decided to conduct an introductory series of weekly project skills workshops over a five week period of time. A basic curriculum was developed to introduce the concept of a project-based approach to life-task planning and achievement. Visual training materials were developed to demonstrate a simple, five step Imagine-Plan-Do-Check-Achieve project life-cycle approach to defining goals and deconstructing complex life tasks into manageable pieces of work. Training materials utilised strong visual content and language was graded to a level not exceeding the capabilities of an ESOL Level 1 learner (Upper Intermediate). Workshops were structured to maximise learner collaboration using a PBL approach. A key outcome of the programme was for learners to collaborate on the delivery of a real-world community project of their choice. Figure 2 summarises the introductory LIAP workshop approach.



Source: LIAP programme framework developed by author based on PMI and PRINCE2 methodologies

Fig. 2. “Life is a Project” pilot programme framework

### **LIAP course content**

*Module 1:* This module introduced students to the concept of a project as a temporary endeavour. The concept of a simple 5-stage Imagine-Plan-Do-Check-Achieve project lifecycle was introduced. Scope, Time, Cost and Quality were introduced as elements to be managed with practical “life” examples. Each student identified their own “life project” to develop throughout the pilot.

*Module 2:* The second module introduced the concept of project teams and roles such as the Project Sponsor, Project Manager, Stakeholders and team members with practical applications to their own “life project”. Students were introduced to the concept and content of a simplified Project Statement document. They were assisted to produce their own document.

*Module 3:* The third module introduced a simplified version of the work breakdown process, using post-it notes to breakdown high-level deliverables into sequenced, scheduled and estimated activities. Practical examples were provided and students were assisted to apply these techniques to their own “life project”.

*Module 4:* The fourth module further developed the scheduling task and introduced the concept of a Project Management Plan with identified approaches for managing Quality, Communication, Schedule and Budget.

*Module 5:* The fifth module introduced simple tools and techniques for managing and controlling projects according to plan, checking quality, reporting status, managing meetings and problem resolution through to completion. Students were taught the concept of lessons learned as part of project closure and celebration.



### **LIAP delivery**

In January 2016, the LIAP pilot programme was delivered to a group of 10 ESOL learners in Ealing, West London. No-cost participation was offered through local community venues. Training facilities were provided by a local library and workshops were conducted by an experienced project management volunteer resource. Participants were adults from 6 different native language origins with English language proficiencies ranging from ESOL Entry Level 1 to ESOL Level 1 (Elementary to Upper Intermediate).

During the LIAP workshops, participants were introduced to fundamental concepts of project management, tools and techniques. Examples were provided of everyday life tasks being managed as projects. Participants were assisted to define personal life projects as the focus case material for development and practical activities throughout the programme. They defined specific life projects such as achieving English language proficiency, finding employment, starting a business, planning a party and achieving entry to post-graduate studies. Using simple project management techniques, participants worked in teams to breakdown complex life goals, or “deliverables”, into a series of related tasks which could be estimated, scheduled, enacted and monitored through to completion. As well as developing plans for individual life projects, the programme culminated with the planning and delivery of a community-based project – a fund-raising “Refu-tea” party in support of the British Refugee Council.

The emphasis of the entire programme was empowerment through a “task-based planning” (Ward & Kennedy, 2001) approach to cross-cultural transitions. The primary objective was to share with participants a new set of skills to help combat the “helplessness” aspect of cross-cultural adaptation. The opportunity to practice English language skills in an open, supportive environment (Cooke & Simpson, 2009) was framed as a secondary benefit. Whilst the teaching of English language skills was not included in the course framework, questions were fielded and concepts explained by the workshop leader.

### **LIAP observations and reflections**

The LIAP workshops supported the concept that a simplified and language-graded set of project management skills and techniques could be taught to ESOL learners. Whilst workshop learners displayed a range of communicative abilities, the visual style and practical PBL structure of the workshop provided practical, non-verbal support for the learning objectives. Active participation in team-based activities and successful production of personal plans validated that concepts were being understood and applied. Participants expressed their frustrations with the inhibiting effect of lack of language fluency in cross-cultural transitions. Their views were consistent with the “marginalised” and “not being *audible*” observations of Cooke and Simpson (2009, p.2).

All workshop participants positively embraced the idea of learning project skills as a new coping and enabling mechanism in support of their cross-cultural transition. They were clearly enthused by the opportunity to become more “audible” in a supportive,

cross-cultural learning environment. As observed with most “life skills” training initiatives in schools (Bell, 2010), vocational settings (Simona, 2015), and community-based (Stewart, 2012) environments, the greatest benefits of these initiatives are the development, or restoration, of self-confidence, self-esteem and psychological well-being. In one case, a workshop participant used her new skills and further developed her workshop project plan, to open a dance school, through to real-world fruition. Her new enterprise was due to commence business in September 2016.

One obstacle encountered was the initial tendency of participants to view the programme as an English language training course. Regular reinforcement of the project skills for life concept overcame this misconception. Another obstacle was that the no-cost, volunteer-led nature of the initiative resulted in sporadic attendance patterns from some participants. As a proof-of concept, this initiative was unfunded. Materials were developed and presented as a voluntary endeavour. Training facilities and materials reproduction were provided by a local library at no-cost. The limited scope and resourcing of the initiative constrained its ability to measure, to a greater extent, the validity of project management as an enabling life skill for cross-cultural transitions.

Whilst the in-course feedback from most participants and exceptional post-course success of one participant strongly supported the concept of project management as an enabling life skill, there was not sufficient academic rigour, hypotheses definition or outcome measurement around this initiative to support any robust and defensible conclusion. This was largely a consequence of the necessarily informal nature of the undertaking and the lack of available volunteer resource. Support should be sought from professional associations and community organisations to embrace the concept, encourage similar initiatives, disseminate case studies and materials, and provide volunteer resources. Academic investigations should include a wider sample of cross-cultural contexts, and methods for measuring the impact of project skills training on the longer-term attainment of transitional project goals, psychological well-being and socio-cultural adaptation. This would likely require a study timeframe of months or years.

On the basis of this preliminary initiative, the concept appears worthy of further exploration and more rigorous study. The LIAP programme materials are being made available to practitioners, academics and non-profit associations. It is hoped that individuals and organisations with a genuine interest in the concept of disseminating project management skills for social good will see merit in this initiative and assist with further research and development of the concept and its further practical application in the realm of cross-cultural transitions and beyond.

## **Conclusions**

Cross-cultural transitions are undertaken for a wide variety of needs or wants based reasons. In most cases, these personal journeys are characterised by a process of socio-cultural and psychological adaptation to the new environment. In some cases, the challenges of this adaptation process can impact the psychological well-being of

individuals to a degree that threatens the success of their transition. For many, there is a sense of helplessness and the risk of being stuck in a “trough” of culture shock. Empowering individuals with new “life skills” is a positive strategy for mitigating this risk. A project-based approach to life objectives is one such skill. The process of learning to confront transitional challenges with skills to articulate and plan achievable, incremental pathways to life goals, can be empowering and revitalising to individuals’ well-being. There is a great opportunity for those with project management skills and an interest in social good to undertake community-based skills-sharing initiatives which may positively enhance the lives of others. The concept of project management as an enabling life skill in a cross-cultural context is worthy of further exploration and application in the field. In a broader context, this cursory exploration provides unquantified support for the notion that the sharing of basic project management “life” skills through capability-building educational initiatives such as the LIAP pilot, does have significant potential to realise social and economic benefits to the individual and to society. Further academic research and support from the project management profession is recommended.

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**Neil C. Robinson** is an experienced Business and Technology Project Manager, consultant and trainer with global experience delivering complex projects, transformation programmes, and business solutions in diverse geographic locations. His experience as a practitioner includes Senior Programme/Project Management, IT Services, and Operational roles in the private and public sectors. His domain experience includes IT Management and Project Delivery roles in the Aviation, Technology, Oil & Energy, Health, Government, Insurance, and Education sectors. His regional Project Management experience includes on-ground delivery in 20+ countries across the UK, Europe, the Middle East, Australasia, the Americas and Asia. Neil is PMP and PRINCE2 accredited and is currently undertaking research and academic studies in a Masters (Project Management) programme at Salford Business School. He has a special interest in social project management and initiated the “Life is a Project” concept in London, teaching project management life skills to ‘at-risk’ community groups. His further research interests include the roles of motivation and cultural intelligence in international project success.

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