



Mission Australia

# Enhancing participation: New possibilities for disadvantaged Australians

Snapshot  
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Macquarie Bank  
Foundation

We're going upwards, we've got a goal  
and learning is such a positive, it takes  
your focus off your own problems.

(*Catalyst-Clemente* student)

## Introduction

Australia is a country of increasing prosperity. It has enjoyed a significant period of economic growth and declining levels of unemployment. The average annual growth in Gross Domestic Product over the past decade was 3.5% (International Monetary Fund, 2006). A set of broader health and social indicators from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) relating to increased life expectancy and reduced disease burden also presents a very positive picture for many Australians (ABS, 2007).

There are, however, some Australians living on the margins of this prosperity. They include the close to 100,000 Australians who are homeless on any given night (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2003). There is a growing realisation that it does not have to be like this and that those who face disadvantage do not have destinies fixed in stone. New ways are being found to address changing needs.

This snapshot begins by discussing disadvantage in Australia. Its focus however, is on the *Catalyst-Clemente* program - a new way of working to increase the social and economic participation of disadvantaged Australians. The snapshot examines the background and philosophy of the program, its operation in Australia, program outcomes and future directions.

## Disadvantage in Australia

There is no agreed definition of disadvantage and/or poverty in Australia. In an affluent country such as Australia, it is common to consider disadvantage and/or poverty in *relative* rather than *absolute* terms (ABS, 2004; Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004). Relative disadvantage and/or poverty refer to individuals and/or families who have low incomes or few resources relative to others. It is also recognised that many aspects of disadvantage go hand-in-hand, for example, low income is associated with poor health and in turn inferior housing. There are significant numbers of Australians who face cumulative disadvantage (Vinson, 2007).

Across the globe there is increasing interest in a broader understanding of disadvantage and poverty through

concepts such as social exclusion and/or social inclusion. This recognises that a failure to share in the prosperity of the nation is not simply a question of a lack of material goods but may also include the capacity and ability to function both economically and socially in society.

*"Social exclusion happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill-health and family breakdown. When such problems combine they can create a vicious cycle"* (UK Social Exclusion Unit).

## The *Catalyst-Clemente* program

The potential of education, including higher education, to change lives and promote social inclusion, is well accepted (Warwick, 2001; Hammond, 2004). Yet such an education is often inaccessible to the very people who might benefit most. The *Catalyst-Clemente* program offers a model of how university education can become accessible to disadvantaged Australians. The *Catalyst-Clemente* program uses higher education in the humanities, delivered in a community setting, to engage with people who are disadvantaged. It involves a partnership between a university, community organisations and a range of external supporters.

The subjects taught are all fully accredited by the university and are in areas such as history, literature, ethics and art. The basic prerequisites for participants are:

- A desire to learn
- A willingness to commit to a 12 week program
- A literacy level that is sufficient to read a newspaper
- Some stability in their lives.

## The origins of the program

Earl Shorris, an American journalist and social commentator, began the *Clemente* program in New York in 1997. Its philosophy is that tertiary-level education in the humanities can assist socially disenfranchised/marginalised people out of cycles of poverty and homelessness. Humanities subjects are used to empower disadvantaged people to think about and reflect on the world in which they live. In turn, this intellectual engagement can promote a broader re-engagement with society, 'activity with other people at every level' (Shorris, 2000 p.127), and assist them to exit the cycle of poverty. *Clemente* is designed to build the capacity of participants to be more proactive: to examine, contemplate and question the world around

them. Students learn to view themselves in terms of their intellectual and personal capacities; to see themselves not as victims, but as agents.

*Clemente* is now being run in a range of cities across the world. The St. Vincent de Paul Society has been running the program for four years in Sydney. Mission Australia began the program in Sydney (calling it *Catalyst*) in 2005 and in Brisbane in 2006.

## *Catalyst-Clemente* in Australia

The Australian *Catalyst-Clemente* program builds on the work of Earl Shorris. Through a collaboration involving a range of organisations, *Catalyst-Clemente* provides an integrated student-centred program. Key contributors to the program include the lecturer, community agency support staff and learning partners. The learning partners are recruited from the community, mainly from the corporate sector. They meet with students one-on-one each week over the duration of the course, to provide support to the students' learning journey.

In the Australian context, each subject usually takes place over 12 weeks and involves a range of assessments. Students generally take one subject at a time. At present four subjects qualify participants to receive a non-Award Certificate of Liberal Arts from the Australian Catholic University. This Certificate can provide a pathway for entry into an Australian Catholic University undergraduate degree. It is envisaged that other universities will participate in the program in the future.

## Assessing the impact of *Catalyst-Clemente*

### Background

Research on the effects of the *Catalyst-Clemente* program is in its infancy globally (see for example, Groen and Hyland-Russell, 2006). In 2004, preliminary research was conducted into the impact of the program on re-engaging homeless people in inner city Sydney. Results of this pilot study were positive, noting increased student self esteem and autonomy (Yashin-Shaw, Howard and Butcher, 2005).

In the second half of 2006, Mission Australia, the St Vincent de Paul Society, and the Australian Catholic University (ACU National) carried out a second phase of research to inquire into the substantive and tangible benefits of the program.

Three *Catalyst-Clemente* courses were run simultaneously over this period, two in Sydney (Mission Australia Centre (MAC) and Vincentian Village) and one in Brisbane (Mission Australia Café One on Wickham (Café One)):

- An art history course was taught at MAC, including a visit to the NSW Art Gallery and a couple of walking tours of the city;
- A practical art course was taught at Café One, including an exhibition with other ACU National students, of the artwork created during the course; and
- A literature and drama course was taught at Vincentian Village, including students performing a play and attending the Bell Shakespeare Company's production of *The Tempest* at the Sydney Opera House with other ACU National students.

## About some of the students

Many of those attending the *Catalyst-Clemente* program have faced, and often continue to face, significant life challenges. These might include drug addiction, alcoholism, recent homelessness, anxiety disorder, child abuse, mental health issues, physical health issues, migration, insecure accommodation or perhaps a combination of these challenges. Ken\* was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 16 and suffered traumatic treatment for the illness. Denise and Antonia both have a history of alcoholism. Denise suffers from depression and Antonia psychological problems, which have seen her previously admitted to a psychiatric ward. Daniel had suffered problems related to child abuse and later drug abuse. His itinerant lifestyle travelling around Australia eventually culminated in homelessness and then prison. Kevin and Anne both have long term health problems – Kevin had been forced to give up work; Anne has to fit her life round her medical appointments. Peter has a long history of an undiagnosed mental disorder, drug use and prison and finds himself living in temporary accommodation. Clara has been dealing with major grief and loss issues for many years.

What is also common is that the students have begun a journey to a healthier, more stable and safer life. Many, if not most, will have had to overcome significant internal and external barriers getting to the program entry point. They may have long harboured dreams of future study but have never had the opportunity to progress them. Even when students have enrolled and come to the first class, often a daunting experience, continued participation can be precarious and fragile, changing from one week to the next. Some may find the demands of the course too much, particularly alongside other activities they might be undertaking such as treatment for drug and alcohol misuse. Others may find internal barriers, such as negative self perceptions about their ability, extremely high. The courage involved in beginning a *Catalyst-Clemente* course is clear, especially when many may have been repeatedly labelled 'failures' or 'losers', over an extended period.

Research was undertaken at all sites, at three stages during this period, to explore the outcomes of the program. The research involved the four participant groups: students, learning partners, lecturers and agency staff. Where possible the same questions about hopes, experiences and outcomes were asked of each of the groups. The methodology included a mix of surveys, focus groups and interviews. While rich data was collected from all participant groups, it is the voices of the students which are used below to identify the key outcomes of the program.

## Outcomes for students

A total of 17 out of 30 students completed the subjects run across the three sites in the second half of 2006 – an extraordinary achievement given the backgrounds of many of the participants (see text box page 2). This required all students to demonstrate and further develop their writing, organisational and communication skills as part of the ongoing subject assessment process.

The outcomes of the program whether it be through a course focusing on practical art, art history or literature and drama, however, are clear beyond the stark numbers of student completions. They can be categorised into a number of core themes which emerged from the students' comments at the three sites: self, social interaction, relationships with others, learning, community participation and the future.

### Self

Students made a range of comments on the impact of *Catalyst-Clemente* on their sense of wellbeing. This included issues such as self esteem, confidence, and personal development, all of which are important factors in enhancing economic and social participation:

*...This course gives you self-esteem...I have learnt so much through the course. Not just about the subject matter but my own capabilities.*

*...I need something meaningful in my life because up until now it has been just busy surviving...but now I am able to start this... I feel encouraged to just have a go and I have found by having a go, that it is from having awareness, all kinds of thing are opening up.*

*...Events took away my confidence and self-esteem...the course helped me get back on track...*

### Social interaction

Social isolation is a key feature of the lives of many disadvantaged Australians and can have a negative effect on health and wellbeing. The desire for increased social participation was clearly articulated by many students at the beginning of the program and found clear expression as it progressed:

*It is a great joy being here with my peers, ...you find yourself talking not just about art, you are talking about life, which is what it is all about anyway. It is expanding and it is good fun.*

*I've enjoyed the social side of it. I've enjoyed meeting new people, loved going to The Opera House and seeing Shakespeare and all of that.*

### Relationships with others

The research showed an important and unexpected thread, with the program outcomes going beyond simply enhancing students' social interaction to include changes in their relationships with others, including family and friends:

*...People see that I have a brain because I have done a university unit. I am back in society.*

*It is important because everyone always asks you first thing what you do...now we're doing something.*

*It might be too soon to say but I think it has enhanced my self-esteem. I think my teenage son is proud of me.*

### Learning

Many disadvantaged Australians have poor or interrupted educational experiences. The students saw the process of learning and the content of the subjects as very important, as was the opportunity to learn from other students:

*This whole experience of education is really alien...I never went to school. I've had an interest in the content of what we've been studying but I haven't had the discipline to actually sit down and read and write an assignment...So it's been challenging and rewarding and I've received quite good marks...It comes as a bit of a shock to me...It's been really good for my confidence that I'm at this university level. I would never have guessed that.*

*...The subject plays a part... It has given me a basis to start working from.*

*...I'm learning a lot, some things go over my head but I'm able to go back home and go over things...and by the time the next class comes around I've got some sort of understanding of it.*

*...I'm aware of the people that I'm with, how much more they've done and that is interesting, so you are picking up ideas.*

### Community participation

As with education, many disadvantaged Australians do not participate in community arts and cultural activities. Students commented on the value of such participation:

*Just the experience of going to the theatre, never done that before, and that was an eye-opener, something that I didn't really think I was going to enjoy, and I ended up enjoying it...I thought it was gonna be one of those nights where it was just gonna drag on...but I wasn't tired...I really enjoyed it.*

...He (the lecturer) makes us more aware of what is going on around us, and the environment as far as art is concerned and architecture and sculpture...(we've) more awareness...

## The future

For Australians who have experienced long-term disadvantage it is sometimes very difficult to see that a different future, for either themselves or their families, is possible. During the course of the *Catalyst-Clemente* program, the students spoke increasingly about the future:

*It is helping (me) for the present, for now, to think a bit more positively about the future and taking those steps into the future. It is currently a key part of my positive steps in my life...*

*With everything we've learnt it's opening up completely new experiences to me on such another level and understanding, about the world and art and literature.*

*We'd like to think that quite possibly through learning we can make a difference for our children and our future.*

*I feel prepared for uni or further education.*

*I am thinking about my future, and thinking perhaps I can direct it.*

The comments above highlight that *Catalyst-Clemente* is having significant outcomes with disadvantaged Australians, particularly in relation to their sense of self and their abilities, their relationships with others and their perceptions of the future. Suddenly, a lot more is possible. Some of these possibilities are quite tangible; for example, one student organised work experience at an art gallery, another applied to the National Art School, a third was preparing for the next *Catalyst* subject, a fourth was considering the best pathway to become a teacher or counsellor and a fifth was enrolling for a university degree. It is important to note in this context, that five students who have participated in the program since it began in Australia, have already completed four *Catalyst-Clemente* subjects and six have enrolled in an on-site university course.

The findings demonstrate that profound change has occurred for students who have experienced significant and often long-term levels of disadvantage. Participating in the *Catalyst-Clemente* program at the right time in a person's life can effect real transitions and increase social and economic participation. It is able to provide ballast for people in the midst of their challenging lives. *(The course) has given me the opportunity while going through ...treatment to keep myself focused on doing something that is outside and above what could quite possibly lead me back into things I shouldn't be doing (Catalyst-Clemente student).*

## Outcomes for other participant groups

The research also showed there were significant outcomes for other participant groups. Through their participation, learning partners developed a greater understanding, particularly about the hidden skills and complex lives of people who are disadvantaged:

*Sara is very smart and knows a lot about the subject matter.*

*You may be the only person in their life who is providing encouragement and a 100% on their side, cheering for their success without seeking anything in return.*

There can also be important and sometimes unanticipated effects on the lives of learning partners themselves:

*I gain more intrinsic reward from an hour a week working with people than 40 hours a week sitting in an office in front of a laptop with little people interaction. I want to do more of this long term somehow.*

The course lecturers identified strong outcomes relating to personal satisfaction and personal development in a way that perhaps had not been expected, for instance in the way it helped to hone their teaching skills:

*I'm certainly getting an extension way beyond the teaching that I've been doing for thirty years at ACU where we've got a fairly privileged group of students who have often got a lot of parental support, and here I'm working with students who have none of the supports, and they're in difficult circumstances. And yet there is an intensity of life experience and insight and human warmth that's expanding my whole range...*

There was significant support from the Mission Australia and the St Vincent de Paul Society staff involved in the program, especially given its power to effect change for students in particular:

*Some are now applying to mainstream tertiary institutions. Also, for some, I believe there is a greater hope for a more optimistic future in which their dreams can be realised.*

## Insights – The power of the *Catalyst-Clemente* program

From the research undertaken to date it is becoming clear that the key attributes which contribute to the success of the *Catalyst-Clemente* program are:

- Delivery in an environment with which students are familiar and where they feel comfortable
- Small classes (generally 8-15)
- Humanities education (acting as a challenge to students to reflect on society)
- Rigorous university level education
- A lecturer with a flexible and engaging method of teaching and communicating
- Learning partners who are part of the learning journey

- The ongoing availability of a ‘welfare worker’ who supports students’ non-educational needs and to whom learning partners and the lecturer can turn for support
- Administration and IT support, including access to computers and other necessary resources.

Underwriting all of the above is a genuine cross-sectoral collaboration, which would not be possible without the shared commitment, expertise and resources of non-government organisations, university and corporates (such as Minter Ellison Lawyers, who provided the learning partners for this semester in Brisbane). While this collaboration requires significant energy, it also means that the program utilises largely existing resources but in a new way. The dollar cost for each unit is minimal, with the major cost being the ‘in kind’ contribution of various staff involved in the program. The rigour of the program is ensured by it being formally approved by the University. All lecturers receive appropriate payment to reflect the standards that are expected. Other costs include texts, food and transport. At this embryonic stage the *Catalyst-Clemente* program has largely drawn on existing resources.

## Future directions for the *Catalyst-Clemente* program

The *Catalyst-Clemente* program operates at a number of levels, especially in working with students to find new possibilities in their lives, and providing a bridge to greater social and potentially economic participation. There are also significant outcomes for the university, community agencies and learning partners. The program works as a genuine inter-agency collaboration and highlights that innovative responses to major social issues often require new ways of working across sectors. It is not a magic pill but the evidence suggests that it can have a profound impact in supporting transitions and ultimately new possibilities for disadvantaged Australians. Further research to investigate the longer term impact of the program is required, including in different contexts around the world.

In the first semester of 2007 *Catalyst-Clemente* is being run in Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra, with Perth and potentially Melbourne to follow later in the year. There is significant potential to expand the program both geographically and to different population groups. This expansion reflects the increasing recognition that the program is receiving. Nationally, it has been recognised for excellence in university teaching through academic peer review, resulting in a Carrick Award citation in 2006. In 2005, the collaboration between the university and community agencies received an Honourable Mention at the Business and Higher Education Roundtable awards (B-HERT).

The *Catalyst-Clemente* program is still new in Australia and as such there are a range of challenges. These exist at a variety of levels, including the actual delivery of the program at sites, ensuring that the extraordinary changes achieved by individuals are sustained after the completion of the course, garnering adequate financial and ‘in kind’ support to consolidate and expand the program, and developing processes to support the program in a sustainable way.

## Maggie and Dave: Two *Catalyst-Clemente* students

Maggie lives in church-owned accommodation. She is not currently working but would like to, and still feels that she has a contribution to make. Maggie participated in the Brisbane *Catalyst-Clemente* subject which focused on practical art. Her experience of the program was ‘marvellous’, recognising that the pension she is currently on would not have allowed such an opportunity.

An outcome has been a paid commission for Maggie to do three paintings. She has also found one week’s work experience at a local art gallery where she will learn about accounts, bookings and how to hang paintings. Maggie said that *Catalyst-Clemente* gave her the confidence to ask for the work experience. She feels she has a bit of a future, a goal and a purpose in life. ‘I’m not unemployable’.

Dave lives in transitional accommodation and is hoping to secure public housing. His life over the last twenty years has been characterised by mental illness, drug abuse, homelessness and prison. Dave participated in the Sydney program which focused on the history of art. He has had a lifelong interest in art, and is hoping that through *Catalyst-Clemente* program he might be able to break the cycle of the past twenty years, using art as a basis for his life. The program has made him more confident of what he can do in an academic sense of completing assessment tasks and writing papers, as well as in terms of his self confidence and ability to be part of a group.

As a result of the program Dave feels prepared for National Art School. With the support of the *Catalyst-Clemente* lecturer he submitted his application and has been accepted.

Maggie and David provide examples of people who completed a subject. Some students who commenced the program decided not to continue; others chose various pathways for future learning. Sadly, but perhaps not unexpectedly given the fragility of the group, one student died.

However, even if students did not complete the program significant positive change may have occurred. The following is from a learning partner commenting on the student he was working with: *“I have worked with the same person through two programs, in the first he achieved a distinction, and in this one he left the program to move and make some changes in his life – if you looked at completion alone, you would not see the total picture. An extremely positive outcome... (he) reconnected with his family, established a relationship and conversation turned from talking about his past into one which was future oriented.”* (*Catalyst-Clemente* learning partner)

## New possibilities for people who are disadvantaged

As this publication shows, research is emerging that programs such as *Catalyst-Clemente* can contribute to disadvantaged Australians increasing their social and economic participation. A range of groups and organisations (for example, the Council of Australian Governments 2006; Productivity Commission 2007; Business Council of Australia, 2007) have recently raised issues relating to the skills shortage in Australia and the improvements required for labour force productivity and participation. If Australia is to make inroads in addressing these challenges, ways will need to be found to encourage the participation of those currently outside the workforce. Equally, there are significant groups within the community who are not making the contribution that they might wish to and who feel their potential is being squandered. Innovative cross-sectorial initiatives, such as *Catalyst-Clemente* can support the realisation of this potential.

## Conclusion

Nations across the world are searching for new models to promote social inclusion and participation. The *Catalyst-Clemente* program provides an example of how people who face challenging lives can envisage new possibilities for themselves. It offers a model through which new understandings can be reached, stereotypes broken down and significant outcomes achieved. Australia's best future will rest on its ability to develop the capacities of all its people and to increase the social and economic participation of all Australians. The *Catalyst-Clemente* program shows how this might be done with people who may have quite possibly been out of the workforce and mainstream society for a considerable period of time. Importantly, it does so by utilising existing resources in a new way.

*"It is about realising I am not the big loser that I tell myself I am, that I can contribute, that I have something worthwhile to bring to the class and society."*  
(*Catalyst-Clemente* student)

\* All the names used in this document are not the real names of participants.

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*Inspired by Jesus Christ, Mission Australia exists to meet human need and to spread the knowledge of the love of God.  
Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life.*

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