

*Australian Catholic University/Mission Australia*

*Clemente/Catalyst program*

*Zonta International  
Twin Towers Motel, Artarmon  
March 6, 2007*

*Advancing the Status of Women worldwide*

*“...a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and for the dignity of all human beings....”*

***Building capacity: new possibilities for the disadvantaged***

*The Australian community has a history of coming together to assist one another in times of need. It has often searched for innovative ways to share and combine resources in looking for answers to social issues. The Clemente/Catalyst program is one way in which community organisations, tertiary institutions, corporate and government have come together to re-engage people in learning. Since 2003, the Australian Catholic University with Mission Australia and St Vincent de Paul Society have worked collaboratively to provide community based academic programs in the Humanities for homeless and 'disadvantaged'. The program has provided a learning environment for people in community settings that are supportive of the students' learning and personal needs. Students have shown a commitment to their study and after graduating, admittedly in small numbers to date, have enrolled or re-enrolled at universities in Masters, Doctoral and undergraduate programs. The learning partners from corporate, community and government sectors who have supported the program find that they too have engaged with people who have taught them much about a part of the community they may never have experienced. Together we are building an inter-organisational and personal capacity that has opened up new possibilities for all. This discussion shares some of the learnings gained over the past four years and sets some future directions for the further development of the program.*

**Background**

It is a sociological fact that homelessness is an entrenched feature of Australian society that requires urgent attention. Homeless communities are among the most marginalised in the country and are in danger of becoming disengaged and alienated from mainstream society. To do so would slip them further into a culture of dependence, poverty and social exclusion. These factors contribute appreciably to individuals' poor health, mental health and the likelihood of premature death. In contrast, friendship, positive social relations, strong supportive networks, respect amongst people and mutual obligations improves an individual's health and well-being

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). 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” (Social Exclusion Unit, UK Office of Deputy Prime Minister).

### **Program**

In Australia, the Clemente/Catalyst program began in 2003. It is an innovative community based tertiary education model developed in collaboration between community agencies and ACU to bring about effective teaching and learning programs for disadvantaged people. Lecturers from both the Faculties of Education and Arts and Sciences have been involved in the program. All lecturing staff must have attained doctoral qualifications.

There is a focus on the Humanities in that these 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. To date, students have undertaken courses in Ethics, Contemporary Australian History, Australian Literature, Spirituality, Art Theory and History.

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

### **Students**

The students undertake four Academic Board approved units with the same content, readings and assessment tasks as mainstream students. Upon completion the students are awarded a Certificate in Liberal Arts which is a non-award accredited university qualification. The basic prerequisites for students 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

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. Peter has a long history of an undiagnosed mental disorder, drug use and prison and finds himself living in

temporary accommodation. Clara lost all of her family 20 years ago, was unable to speak for seven years and subsequently lost everything.

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.

### **Learning partners**

Business and community leaders/professionals involved with the program who express an appreciation for the program, gain personal satisfaction from their interaction with the students and who find they also learn much about themselves and others through their engagement in the program.

### **Community links**

Mission Australia, St Vincent de Paul, Sisters of Charity Foundation, Sydney City Council, Minter-Ellison and, now, Zonta have been linked to ACU through the Clemente/Catalyst program. International community links have been established with universities and programs in USA, Canada, Korea, Africa and Mexico.

The ongoing involvement of the program has seen Australian sites established or being considered in:

East Sydney - 2003,  
Surry Hills - 2005 [NSW];  
Brisbane - 2006;  
Canberra - 2007;  
Perth - 2008  
Melbourne – 2008;

### **National Recognition**

The program team has been recognized nationally with the awarding in 2005 of a Business and Higher Education Roundtable Honourable Mention and, in 2006, a Carrick award for Excellence and innovation in tertiary teaching and learning.

### **Reporting**

There is an ongoing research and reporting agenda that has evolved with all those involved in the program to share with others the learning that is occurring\*.

### **The Impact of Collaboration**

“The ACU staff both those involved in the direct delivery of the program and those involved in its planning and development, have become valued collaborators of the Mission Australia staff who work with the students on a daily basis to help them address the multiple challenges they face. Fundamental to that collaboration has been the shared philosophy of the inherent dignity and capacity of homeless people which has been evidenced in the respect and dignity with which the staff have engaged with students. Whilst preparing and delivering any university program is always time consuming, Mission Australia is certain that ACU staff have

invested significantly more time, thinking and effort in the delivery of Catalyst than is the norm. Their clear commitment to deliver the most appropriate program to their students has been clearly evident. The capacity of MAC to develop a spirit and thirst for learning within some of the homeless people it works with, has been fundamentally shaped by our partnership with ACU and our direct collaboration with staff.”

[Anne Hampshire-National Manager Research and Social Policy, Mission Australia]

### *New horizons for the students*

Through their engagement in the program the students experience an increased sense of confidence, personal efficacy, achievement and autonomy, and that they are better able to re-engage with community through the education process. The lecturers create an environment that “helped us feel safe” and encourage a sense of empowerment through learning. The students report on the value of the one to one sessions with the learning partners. Through the students’ learning the learning partners have noted changes in the students’ confidence, interpersonal relationships, self responsibility and the ability to see things from another person’s perspective. Case- workers, who have known the students in some cases for many years comment positively about the program’s effect. They document increased confidence and desire to share learning with others, the ability for some to express themselves more readily and with increased clarity.

There is evidence of positive changes in the students’ casual social interactions and changes in self-awareness of their impact on others. Data show that the opportunity to learn and interact with others assists in appreciably overcoming participants’ deep sense of isolation and homelessness. The program facilitates a sense of community engagement in multiple ways. This evidence indicates the relevance of the program, its impact upon the learning of those involved and begins to identify possible indicators to further inform and benefit the community in developing purposeful higher education learning programs for marginalised people.

### *Shaping the University*

#### *Teaching and learning*

- Staff growth through peer mentoring
- Cross Faculty teaching involvement
- Innovative teaching program that enhances community capacity
- Enhanced profile for the University through a community acknowledged relevant teaching program.

#### *Research*

- Links with Griffith University and a shared research agenda with the community agencies.
- Partnered research conference presentations: American Psychology Association, Homelessness Australia, Australian association of Research in Education, International Vocational Education

#### *Community Engagement*

- Enhanced community engagement by the University
- The development of inter-organisational capacity between the university and community based organisations
- Development of trust capital between the University and community agencies
- Memorandum of Understanding with St Vincent de Paul completed, in train with Mission Australia
- Significant marketing and media coverage in press, radio and television
- An effective sustained community-university partnership

- Links with Sydney corporate and business community
- An explicit example emphasizing the Mission of the University
- Mission Australia and St Vincent de Paul professional staff are involved with University programs [Community Outreach]
- Evidence of an engaged university within its stated values base and Mission

*Considering some Key Issues within the program*

- Collaboration
- Social interaction
- The rigour of learning
- Inter-organisational capacity
- Personal wellbeing
- Re-engaging
- Engaged citizens
- Individuals to a community of learners
- Isolation
- Mental Health
- Empowerment
- Future

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