Beyond Disadvantage

**Clemente Australia**

Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE)

The Clemente Australia program is a transformative 21\textsuperscript{st} century university education program aims to break the cycle of poverty, inequity and social injustice for disadvantaged and marginalised people in Australia.

Clemente Australia is a highly innovative and effective venture in community engagement by the Australian Catholic University (ACU National) in association with a number of community agencies including Mission Australia\textsuperscript{1}, The Smith Family, St Vincent de Paul Society and Josephites-Lochinvar\textsuperscript{2}. Today, these organisations collaborate closely to provide rigorous, university-approved courses in the humanities to genuinely disadvantaged people across eight centres nationally.

Studying the humanities, through courses such as philosophy and ethics, engages and enables people to reflect on the world in which they live. By doing so, the student becomes less reactive to contexts and events and more likely to examine, question and contemplate. In doing so, learners engage in “activity with other people at every level” (Shorris, 2000) and become engaged ‘public’ citizens. (Howard and Butcher, 2007).

*This course (Clemente) gives you self esteem … I have learnt so much through the course. Not just about the subject matter but my own capabilities. … I feel encouraged to just have a go and by having a go all kinds of things are opening up.  (Clemente Australia Student)*

**Working Together**

ACU National’s role is to appoint academics who offer a positive experience of tertiary education, and to award the university’s Certificate in Liberal Studies to students who complete the required units of study. The community organisations provide well-resourced learning environments for the program as well as personal and material support for students. Corporate, professional, and community volunteers act as “learning partners” to students in planning, writing, research, and computer skills.

ACU National and its partner community organisations have worked together since 2003 to adapt Clemente Australia sensitively to Australian conditions. The program has been widely and positively reported in print and electronic media since 2004.

**Innovation in Community Engagement**

Clemente Australia uses a “strengths” based model. In this model students are addressed as having the strength and capability to shape their own goals, change their dispositions, and improve their life choices. Through greater social interaction and focused reflection they become agents in their own re-engagement with society.

Clemente Australia assists individuals and communities to undertake a role in relation to others in society that makes them feel valued, enhances their self worth and moves them from the fringes, to the centre of society as engaged, productive citizens.

\textsuperscript{1} Clemente Australia is referred to as Catalyst-Clemente when offered by Mission Australia.

\textsuperscript{2} For a list of Clemente Australia partners please refer to:

**Major Outcomes**

Clemente Australia students, as a direct result of the program, have become more independent, have improved long-term well-being, and are socially and economically engaged in Australian society (Yashin-Shaw, Howard and Butcher 2005).

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

To date more than 15 academics, 12 community partners, over 60 learning partners and more than 120 vulnerable people have been involved in Clemente Australia. There are already seventeen graduates of Clemente Australia with seven of these having continued further university study at undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral levels. In March 2009, over 100 students have enrolled across eight sites in Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney, Campbelltown, Newcastle, Ballarat, Melbourne and Perth. In 2009 there will be a cohort of 25 graduates from the program.

Collaborative research has been critical to the program since its beginning. The partners have established a joint research agenda for continuing investigation, reporting, and publication of Clemente Australia program outcomes. This research is influencing public policy and practice in the sector.

In October 2008, the Clemente Australia program received a prestigious Australian Research Council (ARC) grant for 2009-2011 to investigate the life journeys of the Catalyst-Clemente students across the two years of their study. This grant is a significant national acknowledgement of the value of the program to the Australian community.

In March 2009, the first Clemente Australia National Forum was being held. The first National Review of the program is currently underway with findings due in April 2009. The recommendations from both of these activities will help consolidate the program and inform future directions.

Through offering hope of a better tomorrow for Clemente Australia students, the outcomes that ACU National and its partners achieve reduce the footprint on the nation’s social welfare, mental health, legal and justice systems by creating a more just and equitable society.

**Future**

National universities and community agencies are committed to empowering Australians experiencing the effects of disadvantage, such as poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, inferior housing, homelessness, family breakdown, and social marginalisation. Jointly, they are providing a rigorous tertiary humanities learning that kindles their intellectual engagement, encourages personal reflection, and supports social integration and social competence.

Clemente Australia research has proven that the program has a positive and unique affect on a broad range of individuals and communities who are disadvantaged or marginalised. By offering this innovative program to community groups that rarely have access to purposeful and meaningful tertiary education such as refugees, those involved in the juvenile justice or prison systems and indigenous people to name a few, communities will be able to re-engage socially and economically, as equals, creating a more just and equitable Australian society.

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