Clemente Australia
Institute for Advancing Community Engagement

Clemente Australia program is a transformative 21st century universities education program. This program, also known as Catalyst when offered by Mission Australia, 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 Mission Australia and the St Vincent de Paul Society. Today, these organisations collaborate closely to provide rigorous, university-approved courses in the humanities to genuinely disadvantaged people across Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney and Campbelltown.

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

Working Together
ACU National’s role is to provide academics who offer a positive experience of tertiary education, and to award the university’s Certificate of 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. This has encouraged government, community, university, and corporate groups to support and help extend this valuable program which is seen as a highly effective method of addressing poverty, inequity and the social injustices that are faced by disadvantaged people in Australian today.

Innovation in Community Engagement
The basic approach of Clemente Australia is radically different from the traditional outreach, deficit-based model, where experts provide services to disadvantaged people.

Clemente Australia uses a “strengths” based model. This model see students 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.

Major Outcomes
Since the Clemente Australia program began in Sydney in July 2003 more than 100 disadvantaged people have been involved as students. In the July 2007 semester, a total of 52 students have enroled in the Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney and Campbelltown sites. By July 2008 we expect this number to double.
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).

Clemente Australia is steadily growing and spreading across the nation, exciting interest among other tertiary institutions and organisations. The program is seen as a highly effective community engagement and corporate social responsibility program.

ACU National and the partner community organisations have developed and refined an inter-organisational collaboration that demonstrates a new way forward in engaging with communities experiencing significant disadvantage. This transformative engagement offers a model of collaborative and cross-sectoral practice that can be adapted by other organisations.

Collaborative research has been critical to the partnership since its beginning, and the participants have established a joint research agenda for further investigation, reporting, and publication of Clemente Australia program outcomes. This research is driving change to public policy and practice in the sector.

Offering hope of a better tomorrow for Clemente Australia students, ACU National and its partners work to achieve a more just and equitable society. This, in both the short and long term, effectively reduces the footprint on the nation’s social welfare, mental health and legal and justice systems by creating.

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 need something meaningful in my life because up until now it has been just busy surviving ... I feel encouraged to just have a go and by having a go all kinds of things are opening up. (Clemente Australia Student)

**Future**

Clemente Australia opened in Campbelltown, an area south of Sydney, in September 2007. New Clemente facilities are proposed for Melbourne, Ballarat and Western Sydney, with possible extensions to the Hunter Valley region.

Clemente Australia is a proven, transformative and sustainable program that engages and empowers people and communities in the hope of a better tomorrow.

The future for the program is outstanding with the potential to reach a broad range of disadvantaged people including refugees, indigenous people, and people in prison. By offering this innovative program to community groups that rarely have access to purposeful and meaningful tertiary education communities will re-engage socially and economically, as equals, creating a more just and equitable Australian society.

References


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