PUBLIC policy has the ability to shape attitudes and thinking, and drive change in cultural, social, economic and political structures.

Good public policy can deliver countless tangible benefits to the community, and is undoubtedly an area in which a university, and especially a Catholic one, should be actively involved.

However involvement requires a proper understanding not only of the complex causative factors in issues affecting society, but also of where and how the common good and justice can be best promoted through practical and "doable" solutions.

With this in mind, Australian Catholic University (ACU) last year launched the Public Policy Institute (PPI).

Based in Canberra, the institute aims to critique, inform and influence public policy from within the Catholic intellectual tradition – drawing on the collective knowledge of the university and its research programs and projects, policy centres, and community engagement initiatives.

Since its inception, the PPI has attracted high-profile members from diverse backgrounds and disciplines.

Inaugural executive director Professor Scott Prasser has held senior policy and research positions in federal and state governments, and senior academic positions across universities in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Fr Frank Brennan is a Jesuit priest and law professor, widely known for his human rights work. Professor Brennan was awarded an Order of Australia for his services to indigenous Australians and in 2008 he was appointed by the Australian Government to chair the National Human Rights Consultation.

The Honorary Dr Gary Johns was appointed as Associate Professor in Public Policy, and was previously a minister in the Keating Government – as Special Minister of State, Assistant Minister for Industrial Relations, and Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer.

The most recent additions to the PPI are Adjunct Professor John Nethercote, Associate Member Dr Derek Drinkwater and visiting academic Greg Mahoney.

Since its launch these members of the PPI have begun to strongly push the agenda on public policy within Australia and internationally – in the priority areas of the health, education and social sectors, the dignity of human life and social inclusion.

Through regular columns, interviews and forums, they have led media debate on a huge range of issues, from the mentally ill and homelessness, to asylum seekers, the outing of Kevin Rudd and the Bushfires Royal Commission. One current research project on the PPI agenda, and a growing issue for Australia, is homelessness.

The Rudd Government promised to halve homelessness by 2020, and it will be interesting to see if there is success in this.

It is not for want of trying that this issue hasn't been resolved. In 1989 the Human Rights Commission produced a report Our Homeless Children, and subsequent reports included the 1993 Human Rights Commission's The Human Rights of People with Mental Illness and the 2008 National Youth Commission's Inquiry into Youth Homelessness. In the early cases the government responses were very generous.

And yet the present rate of homelessness is 53 per 10,000, the same as in 2001. About 16,000 Australians sleep rough on any one night, with an additional 105,000 at risk of becoming homeless every night.

Homelessness is dependent on two difficult-to-control precursors – the factors that cause homelessness, and policies designed to tackle the causes.

The factors are largely beyond our control – such as the housing market, employment market, mental illness, domestic violence, abuse of drugs and Indigenous issues.

However the policies are something we can, and should, be working on, especially in relation to housing, drugs, mental health,
domestic violence, indigenous and public support.

The PPI research will assess the cost effectiveness, probability of success and timeliness of known “remedies” such as social housing, rent assistance, outreach teams, child protection and so on.

It will also assess the cost effectiveness of newer remedies such as income management, “Foyer” institutions for youth and those with mental health problems.

The results should be a clear guide to the priorities for solving homelessness, and while the weight attached to this by the government remains to be seen, at the very least they will be well informed by research.

Professor Greg Craven is Vice-Chancellor of Australian Catholic University.

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