In the sensitive field of child protection, collaborative partnerships are improving outcomes. Together, policy makers, social workers, academics and clients are involved in research, evaluation and professional development.

ACU National’s Institute of Child Protection Studies was established at the Canberra Campus in 2005 as a partnership between the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services and the University.

The Institute aims to achieve beneficial social change, translating rigorous research into improvements in policy and practice through partnerships with government, non-government and community organisations.

Institute director Associate Professor Morag McArthur said the Institute takes the view that the best outcomes are achieved by keeping children and young people “at the forefront of our concerns”. Children and young people are understood in the contexts of family, community and society, but also as individuals whose strengths, resources and possibilities must be recognised.

Associate Professor McArthur laments what she describes as “a yawning gulf between those who think and those who do”. “Collaboration in research is an effective means of bridging the gap between researchers, policy makers and practitioners,” she said. “We have developed a number of different models where partnerships are developed between us and funding organisations.”

She gave acuniche the following examples of research partnerships in which results can be translated directly into policy or service provision to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.

“In the Young people at Quamby Youth Detention Centre project, we are working closely with policy makers, practitioners and the young people themselves to understand the ways in which young people are supported before, during and after their incarceration at Quamby Youth Detention Centre, and ways in which they may be better supported,” Associate Professor McArthur said.

The model for collaboration is a Research Reference Group of broader interests and an internal steering committee made up of members of Quamby, the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support and ACU National’s Institute of Child Protection Studies.

“This is a sensitive area of work, and it is only possible due to an accumulation of trust and credibility that has built up between the partners over 10 years.”
“In the Children in families affected by alcohol or other drug use project, we are researching the specific needs of children who have a parent with an alcohol or other drug issue and how these are similar or different to other children with care responsibilities.”

The project, developed as a partnership between the Institute of Child Protection Studies and CYCLOPS ACT, a division of Anglicare Canberra-Goulburn, is expected to fill a major gap in understanding how existing programs might be modified to meet such needs.

CYCLOPS ACT has assisted in the recruitment, interviewing and support of children, young people and families, and will provide ongoing assistance to participants after the completion of the project.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people’s experience of out-of-home care project, funded by the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, aimed to expand and improve service delivery responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who were in the out-of-home care system.

Using various strategies, including hip hop, art and discussion groups, and a participative model which included an Indigenous Project Officer and Indigenous peer leaders who received training and remuneration, the project involved multiple cycles of planning, observation, action and critical reflection.

Research fellow Tim Moore said the project helped bring to light the complex social situations that young people from Indigenous backgrounds experience.

Each of the three projects used different strategies, but all have helped strengthen partnerships between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and, most importantly, the young people and families involved, with the overall aim of improving policy and the delivery of services.

“Collaboration in research is an effective means of bridging the gap between researchers, policy makers and practitioners.”