| CASE STUDY

RECONCILING INSTITUTIONALLY EMBEDDED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND AGILITY: AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY AND THE 'NEW NORMAL'

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY:
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Australian Catholic University, like all universities, was challenged to respond to COVID-19 with agility and flexibility. In this case study we argue that deep, established, and institutionally-embedded community engagement can provide a platform for agility during times of crisis.

ACU and community engagement

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a national institution with seven domestic campuses and a campus in Rome. Community engagement (CE) is central to the ACU mission-driven commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person, and the common good. We adhere to a definition of CE as collaboration between university and community to support the dignity and well-being of people in a manner that is sustainable, and builds capacity at an individual and/or organisational level. There is a particular focus on working with communities who have experienced disadvantage and marginalisation. Both student and staff CE is supported by ACU Engagement, a department focused on the facilitation, communication, and celebration of community engagement across all areas of the university.

At ACU, community engagement is embedded in the undergraduate curriculum with more than 20 dedicated discipline-specific CE-embedded units of study. These CE units are tied to our unique Core Curriculum which assists students to explore social justice issues through the lens of the principles of Catholic Social Thought. More than 3,500 ACU students complete compulsory community engagement placements each year. It is precisely because community engagement is so deeply embedded into our teaching and learning programs, that COVID-19 posed a particular challenge. How could we meet the needs of our students and our community when face-to-face contact is essentially off-limits? How could we reconcile such an elaborate institutional CE structure with agility in the face of a pandemic?

Pivoting placements

The first and most significant impact of COVID-19 on our engagement program was the shutdown of nearly all CE placements. COVID-19 is undoubtedly one of the greatest global disruptions of our times, but the impact has especially been hard on our community partners and those they work with. Many of these organisations faced the devastating situation of having to close their doors, knowing that this would have substantial effects on those already experiencing hardship. Out of 39 CE opportunities normally available to students in Semester 1, only 6 programs

remained open. 28 were suspended and 5 transitioned to online delivery of services.

ACU lecturers had to quickly adapt to the loss of these placements to ensure students were able to complete their courses. In order to recognise and capitalise on this unique teaching moment, it was important not to take the easy option of removing the requirement for engagement experiences. Instead, lecturers ensured that students were given meaningful opportunities to see how the impact of a global crisis was even harsher for our community partners, and to be inspired by their compassion and resilience.

Responding to disruption

ACU teaching staff responded by offering alternative tasks, modified placements (offered online), or deferred placement hours to a later semester. ACU's dedicated community engagement office assisted by developing alternative tasks that integrated ACU's five principles of community engagement (see image). Students could choose a community issue or organisation and review literature for effective ways of working with these communities. Although no match for a CE placement, these alternative tasks served as an important opportunity for students to reflect on the mission and principles of community engagement, while being sensitive to the strengths and challenges of communities we work with. Individual teaching programs were free to adapt these alternative tasks to meet the needs of accrediting bodies or the structure of their units of study, or develop their own from scratch.

According to student feedback, the alternative tasks still helped to increase students' understanding of community engagement. Nearly all (92 per cent) of the students who did not have an opportunity to complete a placement, and who responded to our survey in Semester 1 felt their alternative task led to at least a moderate increase in their understanding of community engagement. Sixty-five per cent rated this increase as 'a lot' or 'a great deal'. When asked how their alternative CE experience could have been enhanced, online (virtual) placements (35 per cent) and guest speakers from the community (32 per cent) were the most preferred options.

Another response to the loss of in-person CE placements was the creation (or shifting) of some placement opportunities online, where it was feasible to do so. A seemingly promising option on the surface, online CE opportunities proved difficult to find in the early stages of lockdown as the community sector grappled with transition to online delivery of services. There were some opportunities, however, that were able to rapidly manage the shift to virtual services, such as an ACU-run peer support program for international students, which developed a series of online social events. Similarly, our planned launch of peer-to-peer mentoring for autistic students was quickly transitioned to online mentoring. The preliminary feedback from mentees is that this support has been instrumental in adjusting to the unexpected changes to university study. This experience has prompted a new, though cautious, open-mindedness to meaningful online CE opportunities in the 'new normal' where a physical placement may not be available for all students.

Emerging challenges and opportunities

Other innovative responses have arisen from the challenges posed by COVID-19. Outside of the teaching and learning program, the university's mission-led commitment and focus on community engagement facilitated local responses to COVID-19 challenges across several of our campuses. It has been clear that many newly marginalised communities would emerge due to COVID-19. It was unforeseen how devastating the effects would be on one of our own communities – that of international students. This, therefore, has been a focus of recent CE efforts. In Ballarat, ACU partnered with Federation University to provide food and essential supplies for international students. Throughout June, this 'pantry' was serving approximately 60-80 a week and is set to continue indefinitely. In Melbourne, the reciprocal nature of our community engagement partnerships came to the fore when one of our partners reached out to offer support in our time of need. St Mary's House of Welcome has provided 500+ meal packs to our international students who are facing hardship due to the pandemic.

We also took the opportunity to increase staff awareness by profiling key partners through internal staff communications, highlighting their needs during COVID-19 and opportunities to work with them during and following the pandemic.

So what did we learn?

COVID-19 has caused a great disruption within our communities and also within the walls of ACU. Although the deeply

embedded nature of community engagement at ACU challenged our ability to be instantly responsive, it also created the foundation for agile responses once we had secured the progression of our students. Community engagement is an essential part of our teaching and learning program, which encouraged agility within our walls and with our partners. Having a centralised community engagement team to support staff and students in meeting this challenge also enhanced the university's response. As the dust started to settle, a centralised team meant we were also able to reach out to our partners and respond in creative ways that were not dependent upon the teaching and learning program. The fact that community engagement is embedded into all aspects of the university meant that we, to some degree, could reconcile core business and the agility to respond in a time of mass disruption.

ACU Community Engagement is about...

Developing understanding

ACU community engagement responds with empathy, aiming to understand the people we work with and interact in a considered, compassionate, and respectful manner.

Acting with humility

ACU community engagement acts with humility, looking 'outward' with equality to work collaboratively with community, not 'on' or 'for' community.

Building connections

ACU community engagement builds genuine connections with community through respectful and mutually beneficial partnerships.
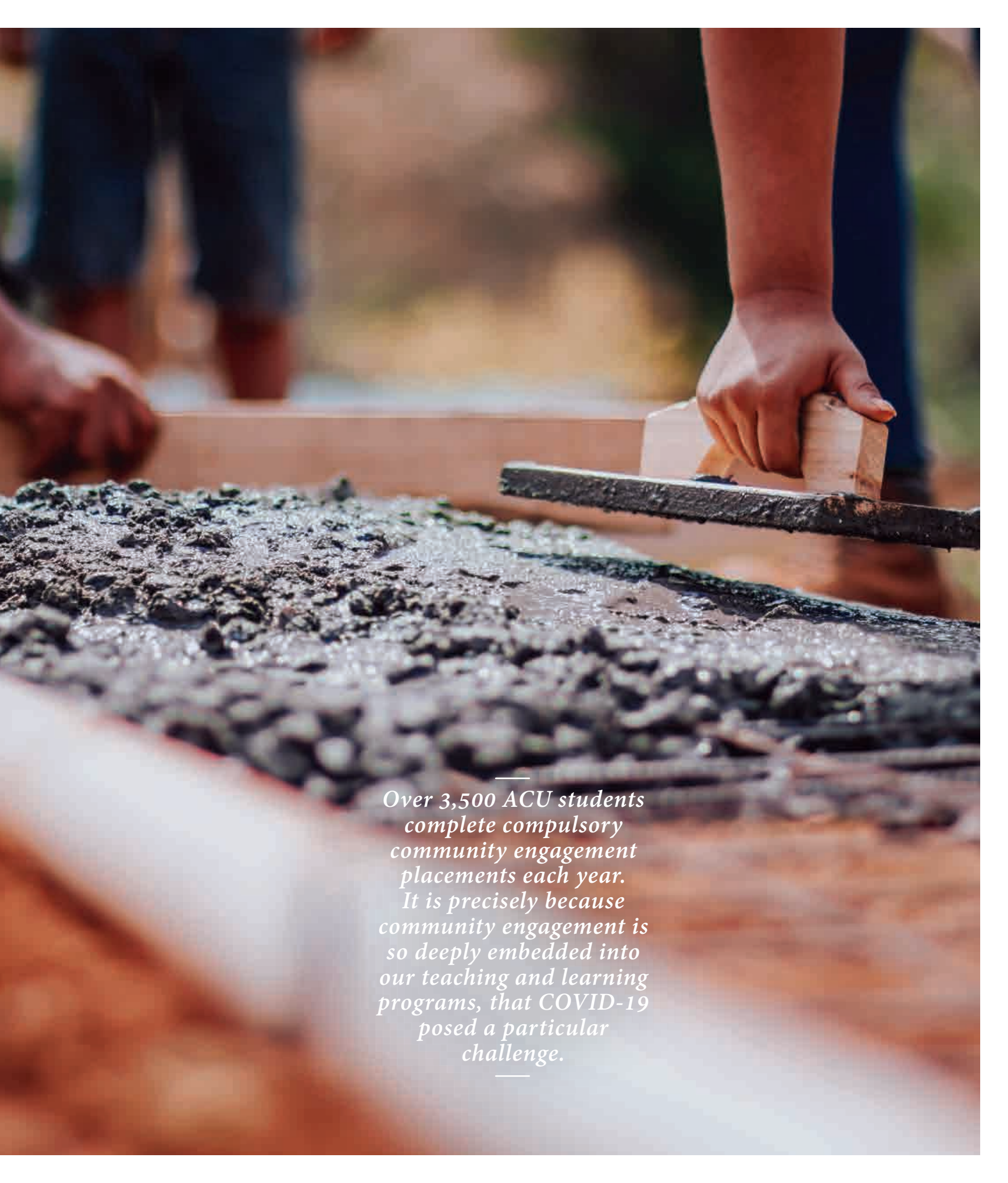
Affirming dignity

ACU community engagement recognises the fundamental rights and worth of all human beings and is committed to affirming the dignity of all people in a holistic manner.

Pursuing justice

ACU community engagement stands in solidarity with the most disadvantaged and marginalised, and works to realise a fair and just society for all.

ACU
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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