



# ACU's Community -Engaged Learning Approach – An Evolving Story



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At Australian Catholic University (ACU), a primary aim of 'community engagement' (CE) is to build capacity and affirm human dignity through sustainable and reciprocal collaborations with communities – particularly those experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation. It is a key means of advancing the university's mission to serve the common good

and enhance the dignity and wellbeing of people and communities.

Within the sphere of learning and teaching, community engagement is embedded in the undergraduate curriculum in around 20 discipline-based community engagement units of study ("CE Units"). CE units are tied to ACU's three-part Core Curriculum which prompts students to explore social justice issues through the lens of the Catholic Social Teachings or philosophy. Indeed, community engagement and the Core Curriculum are regarded as "distinctive elements of an ACU education" in the university's current strategic plan. Over 3,500 students complete CE experiences as

part of these units each year. Depending on the unit, the required hours for a CE placement range from 20-100 hours, amounting to ACU students spending more than 150,000 hours in and with community annually. A large portion of these community-engaged learning experiences are facilitated by carefully cultivated partnerships with community-based organisations. A centralised community engagement team based on each ACU campus is responsible for establishing and nurturing these relationships, with an aim for student opportunities that are sustainable, mutually beneficial, and responsive to the needs of the local community. Increasingly, School- and discipline-based teams are also forming partnerships with community to not only

provide more student opportunities, but also to create further points of interaction between the university and community, such as around co-designed research and curriculum.

Student and community partner feedback data has consistently shown the community engagement experience as being overwhelmingly positive and beneficial, especially around generating new insight into communities experiencing marginalisation or disadvantage. Additionally, students cite the effectiveness of the CE experience in developing critical transferable skills, such as cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and empathy—critical qualities in both an ever-changing employment landscape and in establishing a more just and compassionate society.

To further develop and deepen its community-engaged learning approach, ACU has looked to the Carnegie Elective Community Engagement Classification since 2019. As part of the original Australian pilot, ACU used the Carnegie Framework to conduct an intensive self-examination of the extent to which community engagement is embedded across its policies and practices. While the submission preparation process has verified many of ACU's steps to-date to establish widescale community-engaged learning, it has also highlighted key areas for further improvement.

Consequently, in teaching and learning, dedicated focus has turned to:

- » Developing **professional development opportunities** for academic and professional staff involved in community-engaged teaching and research, including informal and formal learning spaces and a mini-grant program for developing CE units.
- » Establishing a CE **Community of Practice** dedicated to linking engaged staff across Faculties and nourishing a budding **culture of community-engaged teaching**.
- » Reviewing and refining **institutional supports and levers** that underpin community-engaged learning, such as clearer promotional paths for engaged academic staff and commensurate workload allocation.
- » Creating **systematic methods of tracking the impact** of community-engaged learning from the perspective of multiple stakeholders.
- » Turning the focus to **quality in community-engaged learning** experiences, starting with an intensive review of CE in the curriculum and recommendations to establish minimum standards and consistency across CE units.

This attention to institutional drivers supporting engaged staff and curriculum; building staff capacity and connection; and capturing impact has ensured that community-engaged learning continues to be an evolving story at ACU and one that is more firmly grounded in dynamic, meaningful, and sustained university-community relationships.



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