

**Practice Article:**

# The Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU): An institutional approach to community-led research



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**Abstract**

At a time when there is increasing expectation that universities produce outwardly impactful and engaged research, more attention has been given to the way universities work with community to actively embed community perspectives into their teaching, research, and outreach activities.

This paper offers the Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU) at Australian Catholic University (ACU) as one example of a university's institutional approach to furthering engaged and impactful community-led research. We discuss the institutional conditions that gave rise to the SESU at ACU. We then outline, using case studies of two completed projects, how the SESU has followed a community-led, reciprocal approach when undertaking research with community. We describe how, following in the tradition of established approaches to community-university research, SESU projects foreground the establishment of respectful, trusting relationships and reciprocal partnerships. This includes



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the sharing of expertise to produce outcomes and outputs that benefit communities directly and provide capacity building for community organisations and academic staff. We finish by sharing our learnings based on the challenges and opportunities that have arisen during the SESU's first three years. We propose that centralising trusting, reciprocal partnerships with community, embedding community-led research within an institution's academic culture, and facilitating opportunities to make research more accessible to community organisations, are essential ingredients for universities wishing to enact meaningful, mutually beneficial research with community.

### Key words

Community-led research, community-engaged research, Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU), co-design, mutually beneficial partnerships, social justice research.

### Introduction

At a time of transformational change for higher education in Australia, there is a need to revisit, reconceptualise, and reconfigure approaches to university research. This has been recognised through the federal government's recent review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001, which included

consideration of both Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and the Engagement and Impact (EI) schemes (Australian Government, 2023a). Although the outcomes for ERA and EI are yet to be fully realised, it remains clear that there exists a need for research to be increasingly outwardly impactful, connected to the public good, and conducted in ways that include community in the identification and exploration of solutions to societal challenges (Australian Government, 2023c). Such approaches have the potential to address the "wicked issues" (Firth, 2018, p. 35) that our nation is facing in the next 30 years, such as essential workforce shortages, the threat of climate change, ensuring economic stability in a period of rapidly advancing technological and social change, and addressing healthy aging in a period of increasing social isolation. Further still, the increasing enthusiasm for outwardly impactful and engaged research (as kick-started by the Turnbull government in 2015; Knott, 2015), speaks directly to the requirement of Australian universities to "demonstrate strong civic leadership, engagement with its local and regional communities, and a commitment to social responsibility" (Higher Education Threshold Standards, 2021, Criterion 13; Australian Government, 2021). Research, as with other university

activities such as teaching and outreach, should not be immune from such an important endeavour.

In 2023, at the time of writing this paper, the Australian government is developing an Australian Universities Accord that aims to reimagine universities for the next 30 years (Australian Government, 2023b). The Accord is asking big questions such as, "what actions and solutions are needed now, to address the major challenges underway in our society, economy, and environment?" and "what kind of higher education system does Australia need in two- and three-decades' time?" (O'Kane, 2023, p. 4). The Accord aims to better align universities with Australia's national needs through stronger future collaboration with community, industry, and government on solutions to problems of local and national concern. The Terms of Reference includes themes of governance, accountability, community, and delivering new knowledge, innovation, and capability (Australian Government, 2023b). The interim report highlights the need for government systems and support structures for high-impact research involving community, industry, and government at various levels (Australian Government, 2023c). Enhancing the mechanisms for sharing and translating research are also implicated and we argue that community-led approaches



support both sharing of research, and – through the co-creation of knowledge – limit the need for ‘translation’. These approaches to research can support the ambitions of the Accord, the civic implications of the Higher Education Standards Framework, and lead universities to better function as civic institutions that transform society (Harkavy, 2006; Shephard & Egan, 2018).

Furthering the argument that 2023 is a transformational time for Australian higher education, the Australian Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has received its first submissions for classification. The framework of the Carnegie Elective Classification has been adopted as the leading guideline in the United States for advancing the institutionalisation of community engagement in higher education (Engagement Australia, 2022b). It was first piloted in 2005 and has been refined over time in response to changes in the sector and new research (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2020). In addition to pursuing classification, universities receive feedback on how to further impactful engagement with community across their institutions and implement systems and practices to prioritise reciprocal and mutually beneficial community engagement across their teaching, research, and

outreach activities. The Carnegie Foundation defines community engagement as:

*The collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Engagement Australia, 2022a, p. 4).*

The definition further identifies that “the purpose of community engagement is the partnership (of knowledge and resources) between higher education institutions and the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity [... to] address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good” (Engagement Australia, 2022a, p. 4). The similarity between the ambitions of the Universities Accord and the standards of the Carnegie Foundation hardly needs to be spelled out. As such, a case study of a university’s institutional approach to furthering engaged and impactful community-led research is both timely and relevant. In the following section, we discuss the institutional conditions that gave rise to the Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU) at Australian Catholic University (ACU).

## Background: The formation of the SESU

ACU is the only public Catholic university in Australia, established in 1991 after the amalgamation of four Catholic teaching and nursing colleges. As a relatively young national university, ACU operates seven Australian campuses along the eastern seaboard at Brisbane in Queensland, Blacktown, North Sydney and Strathfield in New South Wales, Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory, and Melbourne and Ballarat in Victoria. ACU also has an international campus in Rome. As distinct from secular universities, its mission and values are informed by the principles of Catholic Social Thought (Byron, 1999; Carey, 2001) and champion the pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person and the common good. This prioritisation of the value of all persons and the public good have been an impetus for the SESU.

Over the past decade ACU’s research has been directed by the institution-wide “Research Intensification Strategy”. Importantly, it led to improved results in ERA assessments especially in chosen Fields of Research (FoR) and boosted the University’s research profile in several international world rankings. The strategy inspired the establishment of research institutes and centres, the

awarding of research workload with a view to producing publications in highly ranked journals (and other publication outlets) and targeted approaches to achieve success in research grant schemes. As a product, academics who could, or show potential to, achieve high quality publications and bring in research income received more generous research workload allocations. In many cases, the strategy supported research aligned with the ACU mission, including social justice research. However, there were increasingly limited opportunities for not-for-profit community organisations to partner with ACU on research in areas they identified as important and to produce practical outputs that would help advance their community-based work. It was difficult for academics to take on such work, as they were not guaranteed to receive appropriate workload allocations in return. Instead, there was a strong prioritisation of investigator-led research, with researchers focussing on contributions they could make to their own academic fields.

While the Research Intensification Strategy was highly successful for ACU (for example, ranking first or equal first in the latest ERA assessment in 10 FoRs, including psychology, nursing, public health and health services), there were also some unintended

consequences which gave rise to the SESU. As an institution founded in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, it was identified that alongside the Research Intensification Strategy, there needed to be a structured pathway to increase ACU's capacity for research connected with its mission and values that is reflective of community voice and has a strong civic purpose. The SESU was, therefore, designed to engage academics with community to: 1) activate the research and evaluation priorities of not-for-profit partner organisations; and 2) as a result, produce positive social, cultural and economic outcomes, especially for communities facing the most disadvantage. So, in late 2019, ACU welcomed the news from the Vice-Chancellor and President of the establishment of the SESU the following year to specifically call for research proposals from community organisations, with a promise of collaboratively designing and delivering the research together.

In the SESU's model of community-led research, the research process is driven by the priorities of the community partners collaborating with the SESU. ACU does not envisage specific research topics or outcomes for SESU projects, but invites the community organisations it works with to establish these. Flexner et al. (2021) ask the

following questions of researchers and universities to invite reflection on the value of community-led paradigms:

*What would the research environment be like if, rather than researchers coming up with ideas and then trying to work with communities to study them, the community was given the initiative to tell researchers what they want? What if the entire research process was then led from the community level, with the researcher placed in a position of facilitator, using their expertise not to direct but to serve community research interests? (para. 4)*

In Flexner et al.'s view, community-led approaches, while related to community-based research and participatory action research, move one step further, with the community being invited to lead and guide the research process. They acknowledge the intentionality of "the language of step-taking and movement" given the complexity of achieving community-led research in its truest form (para. 5). The SESU is ACU's attempt to move in this direction. It is tasked with activating projects proposed by community organisations through an annual expressions of interest (EOI) process. ACU academics are then invited to facilitate the research as it is envisaged by the community partner and to work





collaboratively with them to refine the research questions and methodology and to undertake the research.

As with participatory action research, community-based research, co-designed research, and asset-based community development, the SESU recognises the value of relationships between community and university that are mutually beneficial and enable sharing of expertise from the community to the university and from the university to the community throughout the research process. These approaches align with the SESU's core principles, including establishing respectful, trusting relationships and reciprocal partnerships, collaboration and sharing of knowledge and resources, and producing outcomes and outputs that benefit communities directly (Wallerstein, 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

Capacity-building for all parties is one way in which the SESU centres reciprocity in its research and scholarship. When community organisations are partnered with ACU staff, there is a strong focus on learning for all members of the research team, not just in the discovery of new knowledge through the research but also to grow the research capacities of community organisations and the capacity of academics to engage in

community-led research. The SESU also establishes mentorship opportunities for early career researchers from more experienced researchers as part of its focus on capacity-building.

Since launching in 2020, the SESU has activated 19 projects in partnership with a total of 21 organisations (17 non-profit Catholic and secular community organisations, three Catholic Church agencies and one government department). They are diverse in scope and impact for a range of communities facing disadvantage: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrants and refugees, people experiencing modern slavery, family violence, mental health challenges, homelessness, psychosocial disability and so on. 34 academics have been engaged from across the University's faculties and research institutes, forming in many cases interdisciplinary teams. In the past, academics were appointed to SESU projects by executive leaders in faculties and institutes based on their knowledge of staff with relevant expertise to the chosen projects. However, after receiving feedback from academic staff, the SESU pivoted to an annual open call for applications from academics to join the shortlisted projects after the community EOI period closes.

The SESU has been able to achieve a broad reach in a short period of time because there are significant institutional supports enabling the SESU to be ACU's centralised department for community-initiated research. A university-wide policy dedicated to the SESU establishes that the SESU's operating budget is to come from a levy on the University's faculties. The budget supports two continuing staff in core positions, a full-time manager and a part time administration and research officer, both of which are responsible for the operations of the SESU and the provision of project management and basic research support to projects. Importantly, the policy makes clear that this operating budget will also provide dedicated project funds to cover a significant portion of (and sometimes all) financial costs associated with the research activities. This includes funds for the buy-out of academic time to compensate the academic workload allocations ACU staff receive to support their SESU work. This enables ACU to provide the academics with relief from some of their other responsibilities, such as teaching, through the appointment of other staff to take on such work.

It is important to ACU that community voice inform all key decisions of the SESU, so an advisory group – comprising 50% community members

and 50% university members – was established in the policy. The community representatives in the Advisory Group have extensive experience in the community development sector. This ensures input from expert practitioners who understand the community and social services sector and are experienced in addressing various forms of disadvantage. There is one community member from each of the cities in which ACU has its largest campuses – Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The university members of the Advisory Group are drawn from three of the University's portfolios: 1) mission and identity, 2) research and enterprise, and 3) education. This structure supports the SESU to work across faculties and research institutes.

The Advisory Group is responsible for strategic decisions of the SESU, such as which organisations are successful in their EOIs and, therefore, which communities and projects the SESU commits funding to each year. The strategic direction of the Advisory Group has shaped the spirit of SESU partnerships. For example, the set of criteria they established to review community applications ensures the chosen projects,

**1. are aligned with the ACU mission to advance the dignity of the human person and the common good, and the University's ethos as a Catholic university,**

**2. have capacity for measurable impact, and**

**3. have potential to add value to the issue, organisation and/or sector.**

In practice, these criteria have led the SESU to invite EOIs from religious (Catholic and otherwise) and secular organisations which are:

**1. committed to improving outcomes for communities facing disadvantage or marginalisation, or**

**2. wishing to advance the Catholic tradition.**

The next section communicates two case studies of completed SESU projects to highlight how the SESU strives to be community-driven and reciprocal in its approach to research. Each case study presents different phases of the research lifecycle. The first case study focuses on the process of establishing a collaborative research partnership to enable university and community to design and deliver research together. The second case study demonstrates the community impact that can be achieved through a strong partnership, well beyond the

completion of the initial research study.

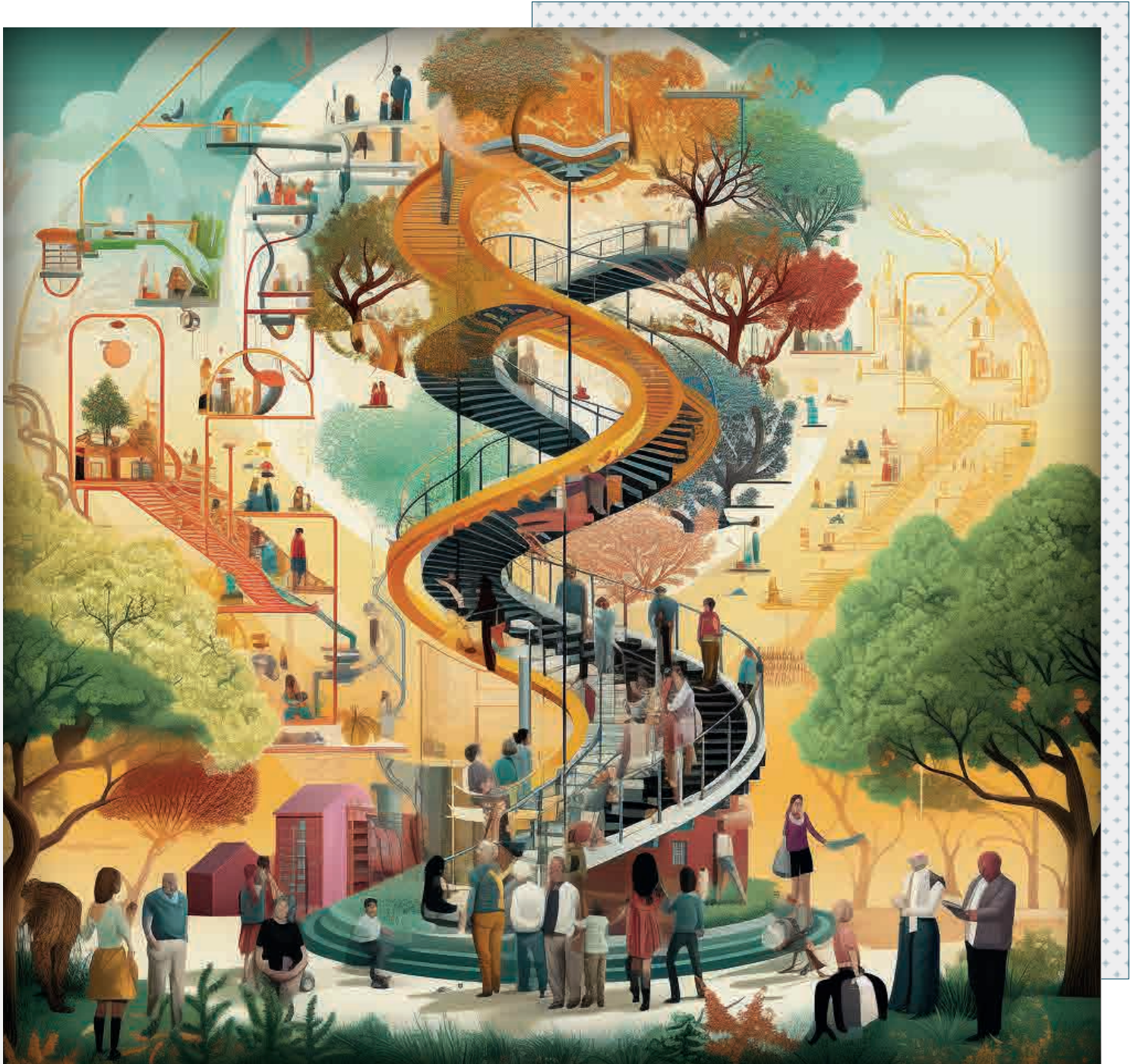
## **SESU partnerships, projects and community impacts: Case study 1 – An example of community-led, co-designed research**

### **i. Project overview: Investigating the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 in Victoria**

In 2020 the SESU partnered with Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV) and St Mary's House of Welcome (SMHOW) on research into the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria. It aimed to understand how the pandemic's economic and social impacts in Melbourne and regional Victoria affected the demand for social services and the capacity of social service providers to respond. It was hoped this would assist the SESU's partners (and organisations within their networks) in their strategic thinking, policies, and service provision years into the future. The research found that the government's rhetoric of economic recovery ignored falls in employment and labour force participation. Those who were most affected by the pandemic were people who had already been experiencing the most vulnerability pre-pandemic, including women, young workers,







temporary migrants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Barnes & Doidge, 2022).<sup>2</sup>

## ii. Establishing the partnership

The process of establishing this project was different to others in the same period. Initially, five community organisations were brought together into partnership with the SESU. This is because, as part of its call for EOIs, ACU had invited submissions for a large multi-partner project to better understand how COVID-19 would impact the community development sector following the uncertainty engendered by the pandemic in early 2020.<sup>3</sup> After applying separately to the SESU to join this project, the team focused project planning discussions from the outset on identifying the research interests of each organisation after they had been brought into partnership together.

After several meetings to discuss their ideas, it became clear that a scoping exercise would be beneficial to explore each organisations' core research ambitions. An ACU academic met with each organisation in scoping interviews to ask them separately about how their organisation had responded to the challenge of COVID-19, their objectives, and views on the project scope (for example, the geographical locations

and social issues that should be explored and the outputs that would be most meaningful at the conclusion of the research). Analysis of the interviews highlighted both shared and diverse themes and priorities. These were discussed in several meetings of the multiagency research team.

The scoping exercise and subsequent discussions revealed shared interests for two of the community partners, as distinct from the priorities of the remaining three partners. All agreed on the importance of being respectful of and responsive to each organisations' research intentions, and decided to split the project and the research team in two. While not the original intention, the split meant the community organisations would not be asked to commit their time to a project that only partially met their research aspirations to accommodate the core needs of the other agencies. After the split, one arm would be narrower in its focus – on the lived experiences of people on temporary visas, experiencing homelessness and/or financial precarity for the first time as a result of the pandemic and how the three community partner agencies responded to their emerging needs. The other arm would explore a wider lens – how COVID-19 would influence the demand for social services in Victoria. This wider-focused project with CSSV

and SMHOW is further described below to illustrate the project in action.

## iii. Co-designing and co-delivering the research

Once the project teams had been divided, the scoping exercise shaped discussions between CSSV, SMHOW and ACU to co-design the research. ACU also took a preliminary look at academic and grey literature to assist with the discussions and refine the research questions. A detailed project plan was then prepared and it documented the group's shared interest in a socio-economic analysis of the pandemic in Victoria by: documenting the existing unemployment and under-employment forecasts after the termination of the government's financial support scheme, JobKeeper; understanding the impact of excluding temporary visa holders from JobKeeper; estimating the potential impact of lower household income due to unemployment and under-employment; documenting trends in income, wealth and housing inequality during the pandemic; estimating changes to labour supply; and documenting the increased demand for social services (especially with respect to domestic violence and mental health) and the impact this had on program delivery for social and community service providers.





The process of delivering the research was also shared between the three organisations. ACU undertook the research by working closely with CSSV and SMHOW over many months to obtain and analyse relevant service data, review key economic data from public and private agencies and recruit and interview senior representatives at various social service organisations to capture their experiences of impacts to services due to COVID-19.

Given the SESU's partners did not have capacity to assist with writing up the research results, they contributed in other ways to the project outputs. For instance, an interim report was planned for release halfway through the project to summarise findings up to that point; and meetings were held both prior to and after the release of the interim report. These discussions were useful in capturing detailed feedback from CSSV and SMHOW, which led to improvements overall. What did they make of the themes that had emerged from the data? Did the interim report include the kinds of information that would help them to plan their future service delivery? Would the report be useful to other social service agencies in Victoria to inform both service delivery and advocacy to government based on the findings? CSSV and SMHOW, as well as organisations in their networks, were also able to

use the findings in their work until the final report was disseminated. A similar process was adopted for the final report, of working with CSSV and SMHOW to listen to and embed their feedback.

#### iv. Disseminating the findings

All organisations contributed to a public launch of the research at ACU ahead of the 2022 federal election, with invitations issued to various sectors: Victorian social services, university, government and industry. During the launch, there were powerful calls to advocate for change and lobby government to act on the basis of the true impact of the pandemic, especially for those experiencing marginalisation. The launch event reflected the collaborative research approach that had been adopted throughout the project, with each organisation working together to determine the best format for the event, confirm speakers, deliver presentations, and so on. This continued following the event where each organisation promoted the findings widely, including through sharing the report and meetings with politicians and the social services sector.

#### v. An example of community-led, co-designed community-university research

Which principles of community-engaged research were put into action and how did the partnership impact community and the social services sector? A respectful, trusting and reciprocal partnership was foundational to this research from the co-design to the implementation phase. It is well established that reciprocal and respectful partnerships are core to effective community-engaged research (McLean & Behringer, 2008; Furco, 2010; Southerland et al., 2013). The Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement encourages universities to prioritise reciprocity in partnerships:

*Reciprocal partnerships are characterised by collaborative community and higher education institutions' definitions of (1) problems, opportunities, and goals; (2) strategies and solutions; and (3) measures of success. In this way, community engagement requires recognition, respect, and value of the knowledge, perspectives, and resources of community partners (Engagement Australia, 2022a, p. 4).*

Adopting these principles enables the co-production of trans-disciplinary knowledge and societal transformation (Engagement Australia, 2022a).

In this project, ACU did not have

any specific intentions, except for the research to be meaningful to its community partners. Extensive time was spent listening to what the SESU's partners wanted for the research via a scoping exercise. The back-and-forth process undertaken to refine the project's scope, and the feedback on the interim and final reports helped to align the project's aims and methods wholly with community priorities throughout the project's lifecycle. CSSV and SMHOW's expertise identified the problems and solutions and contributed to relevant and timely research for the social services sector.

Building a mutually beneficial partnership nurtured the co-design process, and the pairing of CSSV and SMHOW enhanced the quality of the project. Although they had similar research interests regarding the impact of the pandemic, CSSV and SMHOW offered different perspectives during the project design stage and adopted varying responsibilities as the project unfolded. CSSV, as a peak body that represents 45 member agencies across the Victorian Catholic social services sector was pivotal in widening the lens of investigation. They ensured the project addressed a range of social problems and at-risk groups, which they saw as key for the research to have value across the social services

sector in Victoria. CSSV consulted widely within their membership base during the research design and as the project unfolded, including recruiting research participants from within their members and seeking valuable feedback on the interim report. CSSV also widely disseminated the findings to their members and beyond, especially through their established relationships with politicians. SMHOW, on the other hand, works directly at the 'coalface' in Melbourne's Fitzroy, providing a centre for people experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, psychosocial disability, social isolation, or a combination of these, to access fundamental supports. SMHOW brought the perspective of a small-scale social service provider working in one of the busiest parts of Melbourne during the pandemic. Their experiences were especially useful during project planning as they explained the emerging priorities they themselves and other social service providers had during an extremely difficult period. Thus, CSSV and SMHOW benefitted from their contribution to the project and from the research findings in mutual yet different ways, unique to their organisational remit and research needs.

After the project launch, CSSV and SMHOW reflected on the value of the

collaborative partnership. Mr Josh Lourensz, Executive Director, CSSV commented that for CSSV:

*This research process helped us build productive relationships between ourselves and our members and was a part of making Catholic social service agencies feel like there are shared projects and visions that we can meaningfully participate in together. The process of putting this report together has helped us think through what kind of work is meaningful in the future.<sup>4</sup>*

Ms Robina Bradley, CEO, SMHOW similarly explained that the project has "built pride, confidence in partnering and a sense of contribution during a very demanding period".

## **SESU partnerships, projects and community impacts: Case study 2 – Community-led research engendering positive community impact**

### **i. Project overview: Improving employability prospects for recently arrived migrants and refugees in western Sydney**

In 2021 the SESU partnered with SydWest Multicultural Services (SydWest) to evaluate their employability programs under their



Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) services for recently arrived migrants and refugees in Blacktown and Mount Druitt, NSW. As part of these programs, SydWest support newly arrived migrants and refugees in western Sydney to increase their employability skills, identify employment pathways and develop relationships with job providers. SydWest were interested in understanding how effective their programs were in preparing clients for meaningful employment journeys.

An evaluation framework was developed, informed by the National Settlement Outcomes Standards, to assess the impact of SydWest's programs and possible future actions regarding their program. ACU and SydWest worked closely throughout the research process. SydWest staff were particularly instrumental in developing the research design, recruiting participants – especially in making the study accessible to their clients – providing feedback on the draft report, and in actioning the research findings.

After collecting data from a wide-range of local stakeholders connected with the program (for example, SydWest clients, staff, and external training and employment providers), SydWest's employability programs and services were found to be highly effective across

all standards assessed and provided the majority of clients with a supportive, culturally sensitive, and empathic service. However, the program's local stakeholders recognised significant barriers faced by highly skilled and highly credentialled refugees in western Sydney in resuming their former careers. Despite the government-reported skill and labour shortage in Australia (Albanese & O'Connor, 2022), migrants and refugees bring a rich array of skills that are not being fully utilised.<sup>5</sup> There were systemic issues beyond SydWest's control that required targeted actions across many sectors.

#### ii. Activating a call to action in western Sydney

SydWest and ACU worked together to deliver a public launch of the research in November 2022 at ACU's Blacktown campus. Given the barriers faced by highly skilled and credentialled migrants and refugees, both organisations agreed that the launch should mobilise a multiagency response to this issue. The organisations planned and hosted an employability roundtable during the launch, where representatives from local industry, government, education, social services and employment agencies workshopped how employability prospects could be improved for this cohort in the Blacktown LGA and surrounding areas.

At the event, two SydWest clients shared their lived experience as refugees seeking to return to their previous careers in Australia – a powerful moment in the proceedings that brought the research to life. SydWest's CEO, ACU's Vice-Chancellor and the State MP for Blacktown spoke about the need for future action. ACU's lead researcher delivered a proposed model that emerged through the research – an interagency, cross-sector working group dedicated to refugee and asylum seeker employment challenges, which would meet regularly to workshop, develop and implement strategies in response to this challenge. The employability roundtable was focused on possible future actions the working group could take to address the barriers to meaningful employment. Attendees were then invited to express their interest in joining the working group.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, SydWest and ACU acted on the momentum engendered by the launch event and supported continued, meaningful engagement with the research. For example, SydWest joined forces with Workforce Australia, and together with ACU, hosted a second roundtable event in the weeks following to begin planning the establishment of the working group. Representatives from the Federal Department of Employment and Workplace



Relations, western Sydney-based community service organisations, local employers, and education and training organisations came together to brainstorm a set of key priority areas for the group.

### iii. Impacts of the research: Establishment of a cross-sector employment working group

The Sydney Greater West Migrant and Refugee Employment Working Group was established in February 2023 as a community-based approach to community development, arising out of this place-based, community-led research. At the first meeting, representatives from SydWest, Workforce Australia, ACU, state government and local social service, educational and registered training organisations attended. They agreed on key priorities, including to engage local business chambers and industry associations in the working group, especially in sectors where there are jobs shortages in Blacktown and surrounding areas. The group has been meeting regularly since. The group turned their attention to an accelerator employment event in western Sydney in October 2023. It was attended by 250 refugee and migrant job seekers who were able to apply for jobs on the spot, grow their networks with prospective employers and receive advice and

feedback. As the working group is still in its infancy, further outcomes will become clear into the future.

The research was primarily designed as a service evaluation, so we wish to briefly highlight how it was useful to SydWest for their employability programs and services. After the report launch, Mr Saurav Shrestha, Settlement Services Team Leader at SydWest, commented that undertaking this project with ACU added value to their working relationships and brought positive changes to their services for refugee clients. For example, within a month of the launch event, SydWest activated another research recommendation by establishing a new position in their organisational chart, Employment, Education and Training Specialist. This position will develop new partnerships and represent SydWest migrant and refugee clients more effectively in partnered employability programs.

As noted above, SESU projects are designed to be mutually beneficial for all parties, and completing this project was also valuable to the ACU academic who worked on the project, Dr Haydn Aarons. Dr Aarons commented afterwards that,

“I was able to use my research skills to assist with a real-life problem

which was immensely satisfying; the research will make a difference to the organisation we partnered with, and for the people who the partners work with.”

In these ways, the research was beneficial to SydWest and ACU, as well as to the local Blacktown community that they each serve.

### iv. Community-led research that benefits communities experiencing disadvantage

This partnership demonstrates the potential of community-led research to generate positive community impacts. The collaboratively designed and delivered research helped support a community organisation to improve employability outcomes for newly arrived refugees and migrants. Further, the research acted as the driver to mobilise key stakeholders in the western Sydney area to work together to find targeted solutions to an issue identified by the community.

This example highlights how community-led research is distinct, in philosophy and practice, from research consultancy. Unlike typical consultancy arrangements between university and community which usually cease once the deliverables – and the recommendations – have been ‘handed over’ to the organisation, it was important to both ACU and



SydWest that the research partnership continued after the conclusion of the study. There is value in co-creating a clear engagement plan as part of the research process, as was done in this project, and in a university choosing to walk with a community organisation to create broader impact in one area of social injustice.

## Discussion: Learnings from the SESU's first three years of operation

There are challenges that universities must address if seeking to undertake community-led research. It is not enough for a university to say that they want to do community-led research or that they value community; they must also re-configure some of their existing processes so that partnerships and projects bring value to community. Equally, there are opportunities that arise when universities engage in community-led research. This section presents some of the learnings – both challenges and opportunities – the SESU has encountered at ACU.

### i. Centralising the importance and value of partnerships, upon which all community-led research projects are built

In the last three years of working with a diverse range of partners, we have seen best results when there

is investment in the establishment of a partnership in the truest sense of the word. The building of a strong relationship between community and university must always come first; the success of a collaborative project flows from the fruits of such a sound relational foundation. In other words, the project 'gets done' *through* the partnership that is built, and the quality of the partnership can enhance outcomes and impacts. This approach involves a commitment to invest in building a positive and trusting relationship with community partners. This is not a new concept within community-engaged research; it has been acknowledged that "Developing a sustainable partnership requires time, resources, and a commitment to principles of reciprocity, co-learning, honoring contributions and diversity, transparency, honesty, and trust from the beginning of the partnership relationship" (Alexander et al., 2020, pp. 324-325). However, it should not be ignored if the temptation arises to rush this relationship-building process to get a project underway, or default to traditionally more hierarchical or unequal research partnerships favouring the university. In the modern 'corporate' university there is always a risk that relationship development can be diminished due to external pressures.

Approaching partnerships with an active appreciation of each party's knowledge and skills is key to developing a solid relationship and producing quality, usable research. As documented in the framework of the Carnegie Elective Classification and widely recognised in academic literature on approaches to co-created research, much is to be gained from universities entering with an attitude of respect for the contributions of the community members to the relationship, rather than with a notion of the university as 'the experts' (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2020; Wallerstein, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). Community-led research thrives only when university staff value the experience and expertise of their partners, both as the research is designed and implemented. Moving away from a traditional research paradigm that prioritises the production of academic knowledge, the SESU borrows from the traditions of community-based participatory research (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008), participatory action research (Troppe, 1994), community-led (Flexner et al., 2021) and assets-based work (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). This work assumes that "the involvement of community members [...] has the potential to improve the quality of produced knowledge" rather than dilute its academic rigour (Wright et al., 2020, p. 463).

Community members engaging with the university may come with varying levels of research experience and expertise; they may look to academic staff to help develop their ideas, but ultimately, projects work best and achieve the best results when community knowledge is listened to and actively embedded into the project. As Furco (2010) notes, one mark of the ‘engaged university’ is that “the values and norms that guide the work of partnership honour the expertise, experience and talents that each partner brings to the collaboration” (p. 387). This creates mutual understanding and respect across teams from different sectors and produces mutual benefits for community and university. On a related note, when designing research, there is also great value in ensuring that university staff listen fully to how the community staff understand the issue and wish for it to be addressed. As the first case study above highlighted, this helped the SESU to align projects’ aims and methods with community priorities so the outputs have greater utility for partner organisations.

Respectful listening is important when planning a project, but also throughout the life of the project, particularly during data collection and when the time comes to prepare and disseminate the project outputs. The staff at the community organisations the SESU has

worked with – managers, coordinators, and front-line workers – have the best knowledge of their service users’ needs, and the most optimal recruitment methods to ensure contact with them will be well-timed and respectful of their unique circumstances. They are also ready to share ideas about the kind of information to include in the project outputs to make the most impact, the most appropriate audiences for the findings, and the formats to best communicate those findings, whether a report, a brochure, a video, an infographic, or a combination of these.

While establishing a good relationship with community partners precedes and makes possible the research project, maintaining connections after the project has officially closed is also important to help determine whether and how the research is creating the change intended for the organisation, their staff and service users and, in some cases, the sector. SESU staff keep in contact with partners from previous projects to share further opportunities with them and hear about how the research has impacted their service, staff or service users. Where possible, SESU staff also support the organisations to implement the research in practice, as was demonstrated in the second case study.

## ii. Institutionalising community-engaged research within universities

In the SESU’s experience, to make the above-described investments in relationship-building up front, there needs to be institutional commitment to reciprocal, collaborative research. The SESU learnt quickly that it was not appropriate to expect academic staff to give their time to relationship-building and carefully understanding the research priorities of community partners without receiving a workload allocation for this phase. The SESU’s academic workload model has been adjusted since to enable two separate allocations to be given – one at the outset for building rapport and planning the project with partners, and a second larger allocation after the project has been designed for the delivery of the research. There is benefit in universities thinking through whether their current processes allow academic and professional staff adequate time to build a quality relationship with a community partner.

Indeed, the SESU’s experience regarding the need for universities to make practical commitments to community-engaged research is reflected in numerous existing tools. These tools support universities to adopt community-engaged approaches in all their activities. The





Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, as noted earlier, is one tool that universities can use to self-evaluate their own institutional journeys in community engagement. The classification process is designed to build on the work of scholars, such as Furco, who have encouraged university leaders to pay careful attention to how they can best enable service learning (an engaged approach to teaching) at their institutions. Furco's much-cited "Self-Assessment Rubric" and supporting tools (originally published in 1999 and revised numerous times) are designed for university leaders to assess their current institutional commitment to service learning and to develop an action plan for their institution's improvement. Though Furco's focus for the rubric is on service-learning rather than community-engaged research, the numerous dimensions that support institutionalisation within it hold true. Particularly relevant to the point above about the need for fair academic workloads, Furco (2002) notes that a university will have reached "Sustained Institutionalization" (the third stage of the journey towards institutionalisation) in the area of faculty support and involvement when faculty have substantially supported the infusion of service-learning into "faculty members' individual professional work" (p. 7).

Beyond service learning, Furco (2010) has also described the emergence of the "engaged campus" (as noted above) – the impetus for community engagement to be built into academic culture across the institution's teaching, research and service activities – rather than seeing it as supplementary to their core business.

### iii. Establishing project teams: 'Matchmaking' and education

Collaborative research with community requires an approach to research that not all academics will readily understand or adapt to – an important consideration for any university wishing to institutionalise some form of community-led research. The SESU is often leading a 'matchmaking' of sorts – bringing community partners and academics into a relationship. To arrive at the right 'fit' of academic staff to the community partner, care should be taken not just with regard to discipline knowledge and interest in the community-proposed research area, but also with cultural alignment to ensure a positive and rewarding experience for all.

A great number of the academics engaged by the SESU have actively embraced the community-led approach (and many also have prior experience with this kind of research). However,

on a small number of occasions, the SESU encountered academics who have struggled to transition from their previous understandings of what research should be and how it should be done. These understandings usually reflect the established research paradigm within universities where academics may partner with community, but identification of the research problem and solution may not be community-led or co-produced. There have been some academics that have attempted to steer the research in ways that are not reflective of the core interests of the community partner to address the academics' own areas of interest.

Mentorship and coaching can be a handy tool in these situations, however there might be instances where an academic will be unwilling (or unable) to depart from doing research in their preferred way as it best aligns with their own knowledge or interests. For the SESU, in some cases mentorship and coaching has been very fruitful and the community-university relationship thrived. In other cases, the SESU had to terminate the involvement of the academics at an early stage in the partnership and work to rebuild a positive relationship with the community organisation.

Universities have a responsibility to

enact greater change in academic culture and provide greater preparation, training, and mentorship in reciprocal research with community for academics at HDR, early career and higher levels if they wish to embed mutually beneficial research that is outwardly impactful for communities as a legitimate and valued model of university research.

#### iv. The role of universities to act as 'connectors' to research

The SESU uses several tools to promote the learnings from its research projects, such as events, circulating outputs, media promotion, its own bi-annual newsletter and its website. After sharing the research in these ways, SESU staff and academics have received requests from community partners to provide more information about (and sometimes, the full reports from) other SESU projects, especially where the research relates to an area of work in which they deliver services. There is appetite, at least among many of the SESU's partners, to know more about the research the SESU is producing in response to community priorities. Community stakeholders are calling on the SESU to do more to connect them with other community-facing research. Despite efforts of the government to improve accessibility to research, through the EI Assessment,

much research is still inaccessible to community partners – hidden behind paywalls of non-open access journals.

In response to the interest from community, the SESU is exploring ways to establish an alumni network to create formal and informal opportunities for sharing across projects, where community partners and academics can connect with other project teams. The network will be designed with community partners to understand their views and tailor it accordingly. An established network should lead to a broader reach for the research and, ideally, the potential for new research and other partnerships between likeminded community organisations.

It will not be new to readers to hear that universities have a responsibility to think creatively about how best to share their research with the wider community. We invite universities to take greater action to 1) understand the research priorities of the organisations they partner with; and 2) seek creative ways or strategies to facilitate greater research connections between likeminded agencies within their own networks.

## Conclusion

The SESU provides a contemporary example of a university adjusting institutional policy and structures to pave the way for community-engaged research that is community-led. By doing so, mutually beneficial outcomes and impacts for university and community partners have been achieved. Establishing the SESU has supported reciprocal research relationships that honour the knowledge, strengths, and assets of all partners involved, enriching the professional development of academics and community partners alike. At a time when the Universities Accord Panel envisages research that has wider impact through engaged approaches with community, industry, and government as 'partners' instead of 'end-users', this paper makes an important contribution to the literature. Reciprocal partnerships, as defined by the Carnegie Foundation, hold the key to augmenting best practice for universities and their partners. If the Universities Accord is to fully realise its ambitions for research that has wider impact, community-led research – as supported by government and university systems and incentive structures – should form a part of future initiatives.



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Community partners and ACU at launch of Scarring effects of the pandemic economy: COVID-19's ongoing impact on jobs, insecurity and social services in Victoria





Community partners and ACU at *Migrating from settlement to prosperity: An evaluation of SydWest's employability programs and services for recently arrived migrants and refugees in Blacktown and Mount Druitt, NSW*

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<sup>2</sup> The report, *Scarring effects of the pandemic economy: COVID-19’s ongoing impact on jobs, insecurity and social services in Victoria*, can be read online.

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the EOI process enabled organisations to put forward research proposals to address their other non-COVID-specific research priorities.

<sup>4</sup> Quotes from partners and academics who have worked with the SESU have been gratefully used in this paper with their permission.

<sup>5</sup> The report, *Migrating from settlement to prosperity: An evaluation of SydWest’s employability programs and services for recently arrived migrants and refugees in Blacktown and Mount Druitt, NSW*, can be read online.

<sup>6</sup> A news article about the report launch event, “ACU Report: Skilled Migrants Battle Job Lockout”, can be read online.