

The UTS Social Impact Grants: Research & Practice in Junction with Communities

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Introduction

The University of Technology Sydney's (UTS) vision for 2027 is to be a leading public university of technology known for its global impact. Recognising its role as a public purpose institution, social justice and a commitment to delivering public good is embedded in, and fundamental to the University's purpose, driving its research and teaching. Its social impact is defined by its outward-looking approach and dedication to channeling the University's considerable resources into the wider community. Realising this vision, the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion supports social impact

projects through a dedicated grant scheme, the UTS Social Impact Grants (SIG).

The UTS Social Impact Grants is a small grants program supporting UTS researchers, students and practitioners to maximise their contribution to positive social change by funding projects that align with the university's Social Impact Framework. The grants have two key purposes – to be a small-scale funding option supporting a range of diverse social change projects and to support community and UTS partnerships through funding projects that are partnered and co-led with community organisations and groups.

The UTS Social Impact Grants program began in 2017, under a model of engaged scholarship,

where successful applicants work in reciprocal partnership with community to design, implement, and deliver on their chosen initiatives. This is a key assessment criterion, with projects required to demonstrate significant engagement with their community partner in the ideation of the project and implementation plan within their applications.

Open to all disciplines, the projects supported by the UTS Social Impact Grants comprise many different fields of interest and deliver initiatives addressing a wide variety of important social issues. Past projects have included anti-slavery initiatives, projects championing First Nations rights, development of climate change communication resources, and 3D-printing of prosthetics.

Supporting both research and practice, the grants have been critical to initiating projects that otherwise might have difficulty finding appropriate funding schemes and have provided space for project teams to engage strategically in contributing to social impact. Projects awarded funding have near-universally had genuine, impactful outcomes and have led to further awareness, discussions, and ongoing community relationships. Grant outputs include policy and industry reports; media publications and broadcasting; public seminars, demonstrations, exhibits and events; public awareness campaigns; and public policy action.

Impact of the program

In 2023, a survey was sent to 43 recipients of the Social Impact Grants from 2017 – 2021, asking awardees to reflect on the impact of the grants program and their projects. We received nine responses, varying from people who were part of the inaugural grant year up to its most recent year. Although this was a low response rate, responses received were in-depth and extensive, allowing for insightful reflection on the value and impact of the program.

Recipients of the program spoke about how the grants funded projects that may not have otherwise been funded,

increasing their confidence in their work and feeling that the university recognises their work and values. Many also talked about the impact on beneficiaries of the projects, and the connections with communities to ensure targeted research and real outcomes.

Five years on, several long-term outcomes arose from the projects. These include new higher education courses being developed, long-term capacity building in communities, greater awareness of social justice issues and continued use of materials developed.

One project which was focused on increasing employment skills for people seeking asylum in Australia said their work continued to have tangible impacts beyond the project;

"[it has built] their financial security and survival in a country that does not give them any social security benefits and contributed to their sense of belonging to Australia through having purpose and building networks at work" (UTS SIG recipient)

Another project, focused on research around the mental health of LGBTQ+ young people during COVID-19 said their publications from the project had "seen attention from international scholars" working in the same area, and

that a future comparative study was being discussed.

Others also named the dissemination of their work through papers, conferences and tools, and ongoing engagement with community as ways their project had evolved. A project that delivered improv theatre to refugees in Indonesia spoke about the way their relationship continued after the project had ended;

"The improv team have returned to the community twice more and have offered online yoga and other activities during the pandemic. Several sponsorships to Canada have happened out of this program. The community would love the team to return" (UTS SIG recipient)

Recipients were asked to reflect on the most significant impact the program had on them. A few said it had helped 'shaped their thinking' and that they 'learnt a lot' while others named the benefits of community partnership as a key learning. Two projects that worked with refugees in Australia and Indonesia reflected on this impact;

"Team members were deeply moved personally and formed long-lasting relationships with members of the refugee community. I have been working with the community for many years now, the impact on me was watching the community learn and grow through play and laughter" (UTS SIG recipient)





Participants of the UTS-Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre Improv Theatre for Wellbeing in refugee transit.

In addition, respondents were asked if their connections and partnerships had continued in the years since the project. A majority said they were still in touch with their community partners or organisations, with only two respondents noted they did not have any ongoing connections.

Benefits of the program (for recipients)

For grant recipients, the program provided both professional and personal

benefits. One major benefit was the financial backing that enabled recipients to acquire resources to embark on their projects. This included hiring staff, travel costs, equipment and consumables. It is clear the monetary backing provided the 'push and incentive' to many recipients to either kickstart or prioritise their projects alongside other work;

"[The grant provided] crucial resources for hiring a team and undertaking primary research in the field. Also, much-needed moral support from the university for (at times) difficult and thankless work that we have been striving towards for the last 5 years!"
(UTS SIG recipient)

Feeling that the university recognised and valued their work was a key benefit

for recipients. Receiving the grant served as an endorsement of staff's social justice work, which created a sense of pride and confidence within recipients. Many recipients reported a sense that receiving the grant was the university's way of showing a commitment to positive change in the community and feeling happy to work for such an organisation;

"Receiving this grant made me believe even more in the work I was doing, I felt supported by the university and motivated to do better" (UTS SIG recipient)

Recipients also reported the grant provided a chance to build their skills and capabilities, which was particularly noted by early career researchers. For some recipients, this was realised through junior staff gaining skills and experience by working directly with beneficiaries, while for others the experience of the grant program itself proved helpful.

"This grant amount was also especially meaningful to me as a PhD student to learn to budget and manage a grant, produce deliverables and a report, and manage a relationship with a funder early in my career" (UTS SIG recipient)

Other benefits of the grant for recipients included connection with 'like-minded academics' and contribution to the

academic discourse in their discipline areas. Being able to publish their research was key to enabling outcomes and provided further opportunities to advocate for change and attract further interest. Respondents noted that the grants, importantly, enabled 'academic dialogue' about important topic areas, bridging gaps between research and community.

Further benefits of the program (for UTS)

The Social Impact Grants program offers a range of benefits to UTS as an institution. In the university's Social Impact Framework, UTS has identified students gaining a sense of social responsibility as a key priority. Through the grants program, students working on projects receive exposure to real-life projects and direct access to communities and beneficiaries themselves. This builds their awareness of social issues, increases their capability to work in the sector, and embeds a sense of social consciousness in students.

"A number of students reached out and asked whether there were any volunteer or work opportunities available in this space. One of these participants demonstrated a strong interest in modern slavery and a desire to continue

to assist with the development of the toolkit" (UTS SIG recipient)

One student involved in a Social Impact Grant observed that the learning activity, *"humanises [family violence] and brings it back home that this is real and a problem in Australia"*.

The Social Impact Grants enable UTS to fulfil its commitment to social impact, and encourages and enables strong community-university partnerships. Following UTS's participation in the Australian pilot of the elective Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, the Carnegie definition of community engagement was formally accepted by the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion and was ratified through the Vice Chancellor's Social Justice and Inclusion Committee. Practically, the definition underpins the community engagement activities run by the Centre. The Social Impact Grants are just one example of this in action. The use of the definition in the Grant's criteria has improved the quality of applications being received and the impact of grant projects. In requiring projects to be co-designed, implemented and delivered in partnership with community organisations, the program educates, encourages, and supports the reciprocal, transformational, and impactful partnerships that Carnegie defines and encourages. For UTS,



this provides further opportunities for collaboration and research and ensures that the institutional footprint is positive.

Benefits for local community

As a community engaged and partnered scheme, the grants deliver important benefits for community partners. The scheme enables UTS researchers and students to act as a resource for the social outcomes the community is trying to achieve but may not have the funding or resources to get there. By partnering with UTS, community can access expertise and resources that can bolster the social change these communities are already working towards.

"[The grant] helped us to continue with an ongoing impact with community. Engagement with community and their willingness to listen and talk with us, and not dismiss us as researchers with different goals to them" (UTS SIG recipient)

"The UTS Social Impact Grant has afforded the team some time to work with a community organisation that is currently unable to pay for our services" (UTS SIG recipient)

The collaborations between the community and UTS are not just limited

to the project's lifetime. One of the key benefits of the scheme is the ongoing and expanding collaborations that are built. The scheme builds trust that the university can serve as a resource and pillar of support for organisations in their ongoing work.

"UTS and [organisation] are now real partners. [...] What a team we have become. We now freely chat and text and collaborate even on legal matters and questions that arise" (UTS SIG recipient)

"[The community partner said the game is exactly what they have been looking for. This may bring an opportunity for establishing collaboration and performing a clinical trial]" (UTS SIG recipient)

Another important benefit to the community is the empowerment and ownership of projects that is enabled through the design of the Social Impact Grants. Through centering community voices in project ideation and implementation the Social Impact Grants work to rebalance the historic power dynamics between universities and communities, ultimately ensuring that the university understands the community's needs and how to be a resource to assist in improving outcomes.

Case studies

UTS-Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre Improv theatre for wellbeing in refugee transit

The Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre is the first refugee-led school in Indonesia and was designed, by the community, to meet the needs of refugees living in Indonesia in a state of limbo – with no right to work or undertake formal study, and no financial assistance or access to healthcare.

The project, awarded a Social Impact Grant in 2018, saw UTS collaborate with the Centre's volunteer teachers to design and deliver improv theatre workshops run at the Centre, culminating in a public performance for the refugee community. The project is part of wider work raising awareness around refugee mental health led by Dr Lucy Fiske (UTS). The workshops were designed to enhance factors that make up psychological resilience (such as trust, social capital, creativity, communication, and problem-solving) and through developing these have a positive effect on the mental health of the community.

At the end of the project, there was a community performance by the students and staff which was attended by approximately 250 – 300



Participants of the UTS-Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre Improv Theatre for Wellbeing in refugee transit.

community members. The performance allowed students and staff to share and celebrate their learning and feel a sense of pride and achievement. For the broader community, it was an opportunity to share in the project and through shared laughter build community capital and resilience.

After the project's success, a second program of activities was undertaken later the same year, with further events occurring through subsequent funding. The Social Impact Grant resulted in the establishment of a new program focusing on relationship skills, with 73

intended beneficiaries reporting and/or showing positive benefits.

Positive migration: Enhancing immigration advice and support for people living with HIV

Supported by a 2021 Social Impact Grant, a project team led by Dr David Carter and Dr Anthea Vogl (UTS Law), and Rhys Evans from the HIV/AIDS Legal Centre (HALC), produced a review and update of the 2012 ground-breaking guide for people living with HIV to better understand the Australian migration process and increase their chances of a successful visa application.

Called the Positive Migration Guide, the document is accompanied by a series of fact sheets translated into 12 languages and provides direct referral pathways through which applicants can seek specialist legal advice. It's important work: due to the strict health criteria of Australian visas, people living with HIV face limited options when seeking to migrate and work in Australia on a temporary or permanent basis. The complexity of migration law for people living with HIV means that applicants need to start preparing for the process sometimes years in advance. Ongoing changes to Australia's migration laws had left the original guide significantly out of date; the challenge for the project team was to update the document with contemporary legal information while also future-proofing it against the changing nature of the law.

The Positive Migration Guide is the latest in a series of collaborations between UTS Law and HALC; previously, they have partnered on a range of law reform strategies and submissions for HIV-related legal matters.

"The Social Impact Grant provided real, material support that enabled us to work together and grow our partnership," Dr Carter said.

"Without it, we couldn't have done this work"

Setting the agenda: how girls, women and gender diverse people are shaping autism research in Australia

This project, awarded a 2022 Social Impact Grant, is the first-ever autism research agenda to be developed based solely on the voices of autistic girls, women and gender-diverse people. It places a list of clear, actionable autism research priorities into the hands of academic, clinical and community researchers across Australia, opening the door to a new generation of research that reflects the lived experiences, needs and aspirations of the autistic community.

Dr Rachel Grove (UTS) has established an autistic research team to lead a two-year project to create an autistic-led research agenda for autistic women, girls and gender-diverse people in Australia.

The project puts autistic lived experience front and centre of the research experience, with a working group of autistic researchers and community partners established to guide the project. Autistic members of the research team included autistic parents, disability advocates, a psychologist and gender-based violence advocates and included both autistic women and non-binary people.

The team interviewed 47 autistic girls, women and gender-diverse people aged seven and above and developed two sets of research priorities – one for adults and one for young people – in response to their stories and experiences.

A Social Impact Grant enabled the next stage of the work: Dr Grove and her collaborators circulated the draft agenda among the autistic community, receiving feedback from 330 adults and 81 young people that they then incorporated into the final version. The grant was also used to develop a video, a one-page infographic report and a website to help promote and disseminate the findings among the autistic and research communities.

Dr Grove hopes that the wider research community will embrace it as an example of lived-experience-led research that amplifies autistic voices as key to future initiatives designed with them in mind;

“The idea is to put it out there and say, ‘This is what the community is saying they need, and this is what your research should be focusing on’. It’s really designed for everyone to use”

Conclusion

The UTS Social Impact Grants program is a key driver in UTS fulfilling its social justice goals and is a model to be

recognised and considered for future funding opportunities.

The grants program has enabled UTS to grow richer and more authentic in stated social justice goals and has given the university an example of how to embed university-community relationships which can lead to higher levels of community ownership of research and outcomes.

While small in scale, the program has achieved numerous positive social changes in communities, while also building confidence and capacity within UTS’s staff and students. It has enabled the linking and strengthening of the relationship between the community and the university, while also demonstrating the benefit of such partnerships to across UTS as an institution itself.