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# YEARNING FOR LEARNING: ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED THROUGH SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



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## Abstract

Social injustices are often experienced by marginalised groups in Australia today. There are limited opportunities for these people to participate in learning experiences within a supportive environment. The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of one strong university-community partnership initiative called the Clemente Canberra program that works with community agencies to promote the value of learning throughout life. The paper covers organisational procedures related to the program components, selection processes, teaching and learning strategies, role of learning partners and the management of challenging behaviours and risk. The findings confirm the effectiveness of the program in building new knowledge and skills and increasing the participants' level of achievement, confidence and sense of self-efficacy.

*Keywords:* University-community partnerships, life-long learning, social inclusion

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## **1. Introduction**

Social injustices continue to be experienced by marginalised groups in Australia today and many Australians still face ongoing adversity or multiple forms of disadvantage in their lives, including mental health and physical problems, homelessness, interrupted schooling and joblessness (Snapshot, 2011). Dr Robert Fitzgerald, a Commissioner with the Australian Government Productivity Commission, argues that the concept of wellbeing should be broad and embrace the notions of ‘economic and social participation, social cohesion, and personal autonomy’ (Fitzgerald, 2008). Yet many people in Australia, and elsewhere, still remain socially excluded for numerous reasons, including low income, crime, unemployment, disability, and family disintegration. When experienced in combination, ‘these problems can result in cycles of poverty, spanning generations and geographical regions’ (Gillard & Wong, 2007).

Compounding these problems is the lack of opportunities available to people within these groups to participate in education programs that are both socially inclusive and responsive to individual needs. This is particularly so for those currently under-represented and less- advantaged by their circumstances, including members of the Indigenous community, people with low socio-economic status and those from regional, rural and remote areas in Australia. The level of participation by these groups has been static or falling over the last decade signalling a clear message that this imbalance needs to be redressed. Education is known to be a key social determinant of health and wellbeing and this makes it all the more important that opportunities to participate in education are made available to ensure all citizens share in the benefits of a developing society (Wertheimer, 1997; Scull & Cuthill, 2010). Benson et al. (2007) suggest that access to university education for people who might otherwise be socially excluded can provide opportunities for them ‘to gain confidence and capability to take control and re-engage purposefully in a changing society’ (Benson et al., 2007).

Building an internationally competitive higher education system in Australia is regarded as a key determinant in its economic and social progress and in ensuring it maintains ‘a high standard of living, underpinned by a robust democracy and a civil and just society’ (Bradley, 2008). Traditionally, the two major foci in higher education have been teaching and research, while more recent developments have included a third element, or ‘third stream activities’ (Bradley Review of Higher Education, 2008). Although there is some difficulty in providing a clear definition for the diverse range of activities included in this element, there is general acceptance that these activities relate to university ‘relationships with and contributions to other sectors of society’ (Webber, 2008). In a globalised world where social

problems are affecting an increasing number of people, the need for purposeful engagement by universities in the broader society and with their local communities remains a priority and has provided the impetus for the development of new partnerships and initiatives that are mutually reciprocal and effectively blur the boundaries between formal educational institutions, such as universities and schools, businesses and the wider community.

### *1.1. Working in partnership*

Strong community-based initiatives that bring together an array of institutions for collaboration and partnership provide one approach towards addressing the need for increased participation in educational opportunities and have the potential to ‘build a culture where learning is valued and promoted throughout life’ (Kearns, 2005, p. 48). Yet partnerships are not always easy to establish; if they are to be successful, there is a clear need for clarification of expectations (Social Inclusion Board, 2008, p. 4) and an alignment of values to ensure there is a common understanding of the aims, culture and practices expected (Beck, 2006). Partnerships will differ in their nature and purpose and this will affect the way in which they are experienced. For engagement to occur, partnerships need to be ‘developed, negotiated, sustained and supported’ (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011, p. 16) As Seddon and Ferguson (2009, p. 97) highlight, partnerships develop ‘in situations that cannot be addressed ... by one partner working alone’ and ‘exist only when partners recognise their interdependence’. It is only through the development of a sense of trust and reciprocity that the participants will feel their contributions are valued (Chapman et al., 2006; Schuetze, 2008).

A clearer understanding is needed for the way in which community institutions, networks, norms and values can enable people to ‘capture the benefits of development and build their capacity to help themselves’ (World Bank, 2000). It is also essential to establish dynamic communities that support learning and provide a sense of social connectedness between the participants and others. As the South Australian Social Inclusion Board report (2008) states:

‘...when communities share the responsibility for responding together to the identified needs of individuals, those individuals are also connected with their communities. By working together in joined-up ways through partnerships, we will collectively reap the benefits, as responses are more targeted, efforts more coordinated, outcomes more effective, and satisfaction greatly increased’. (p. 11)

## *1.2. Engaging in learning*

It is commonly considered that engagement in learning throughout life can impact on the health and resilience of individuals by promoting attitudes, practices, and life experiences that are conducive to positive health outcomes, including ‘improved well-being, increased efficacy, protection and recovery from mental health difficulties, and more effective coping’ (Hammond, 2004, p. 553). Participation in learning experiences that not only promote cognitive development, but also emotional, creative, and spiritual aspects of development, create new avenues for expression and play an important role in reinvigorating interest in learning (Chapman et al., 2006; Longworth, 2003). Miller and Saxton (2011, p. 11) highlight the value of the arts in these processes, stating that ‘the Arts provide opportunities to reflect, discover and uncover the issues and challenges of being human through our engagement with forms that involve us physically, mentally, and emotionally’. They also have the potential to provide ‘the means for disadvantaged, disengaged and disenfranchised school students and adults to find a way back to learning and to a meaningful place in society’ (Bryce et al., 2004).

Schuller et al. (2004) argue that learning should be thought of as a process where individuals build up assets in the form of human, social, or identity capital. These investments should then bring benefits in terms of improved health, stronger social networks and enhanced family life. Although the three forms of capital have been recognised for some time, the need for practices that lead to sustainable outcomes has increased their importance. Factors associated with identity definition, such as increasing confidence and self-esteem, are clear indicators of our effectiveness to sustain individuals, particularly those who might otherwise be less advantaged; for example, members of the Indigenous community, youth, those living in poverty and people with disabilities.

While there have been significant improvements and reforms over the years, the strategies employed to address social exclusion have had limited success. In general, interventions for the most excluded in the community tend to be ‘too late, poorly evidenced, weakly coordinated, and not tailored to the needs of the individual or family’ (Social Exclusion Task Force report, 2006). This UK report succinctly sets out useful principles, applicable in Australia, for the provision of opportunities for participation in learning environments that are congruent with individual needs and interests, and that allow the expression of personal values, which are essential to personal growth and change. Participation should also enable individuals to become actively involved in the process of knowledge construction and extension of personal meaning. The opportunity to share and interact with others from different backgrounds and experiences encourages critical examination, promotes reflective practices and challenges established beliefs, thereby assisting in breaking the continuity of experiences

and socialisation processes that have occurred over many years. As confidence builds, individuals become more self-directed in their approach to learning and are more likely to take a proactive stance towards the development of their own learning journeys, thereby increasing their level of self-esteem, empowerment, optimism and hope (Seligman, 1992). In doing so, learning becomes transformative, as well as accumulative, so providing the motivation for individuals to seek answers to the questions they construct themselves.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of one initiative that links a multi-campus Australian university with community agencies and members of the wider community to provide a cohesive set of educational programs to those who have experienced less advantage in their lives. This evaluative study aims to demonstrate that strong university-community partnerships have the potential to build effective socially inclusive communities that promote the value of learning throughout life. The paper also outlines the benefits of the program in enhancing the participants' sense of personal identity, self efficacy and wellbeing. The study adopts a predominantly qualitative approach that utilises some quantitative strategies for the collection of data for analysis and discussion.

## **3. Context**

The Clemente Course was developed in the USA as a free tertiary-level humanities education program for people living in poverty (Shorris, 2000a). It was first offered in 1997 at a community centre in New York City and since that time has formed the basis of similar educational programs in the USA and other countries, including Australia. In 2003, the Australian Catholic University (ACU), in collaboration with the St Vincent de Paul Society and assisted by funding from the Sisters of Charity and Sydney City Council, introduced the first Australian Clemente program at the community centre of Vincentian Village in East Sydney. In 2005, the ACU and Mission Australia established the 'Catalyst' program in East Sydney and in 2006 the program was extended to Brisbane. The program was offered at other sites in Australia, including Ballarat and Melbourne, Victoria, and was generally referred to as the Clemente-Catalyst program. Growing interest in the program resulted in a collaborative partnership between the ACU in Canberra and the St Vincent de Paul Society. In 2007, the Clemente Canberra (CC) program commenced.

While there is consensus that education has the potential to promote social inclusion and bring about change in people's lives (Hammond, 2004; Bothrell & Goodwin, 2011), it is often those people who might benefit most from education who find themselves unable to gain

access (Mission Australia, 2007). The Clemente Canberra (CC) program provides a model to redress this problem and to facilitate increased participation in higher education for those who might otherwise be less advantaged, including those living in poverty. The program's success is dependent on the development of effective and mutually reciprocal partnerships between the University, community organisations and support networks within the wider community.

### *3.1. Course development*

The core Clemente Canberra program comprises a four unit Certificate of Liberal Studies course offered across the academic year. Academic unit offerings are selected from those available through the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and focus specifically on the humanities and include philosophy, ethics, arts and history. This is a departure from the usual practice of providing vocationally-oriented programs for the poor and marginalised. Shorris (2000b) argues it is the humanities that provide the most practical education. As he explains:

*'If one has been 'trained' in the ways of poverty, left no opportunity to do other than react to his or her environment, what is needed is a beginning, not repetition. The humanities teach us to think reflectively, to begin to deal with the new as it occurs to us, to dare. If the multi- generational poor are to make the leap out of poverty, it will require a new kind of thinking – reflection. And that is a beginning'.*

After considerable consultation between representatives of the St Vincent de Paul Society, the ACU, and members of the wider community regarding the procedures and processes involved in the implementation of the program in Canberra, the first academic unit, titled Australia to 1890, was offered in February 2007. In the following semesters, a further three units were offered, titled Australian Indigenous Peoples-Past and Present, Introduction to Communication, and Arts and Culture. To maximise opportunities for learning and support, the number of participants enrolled in the units were kept low.

Academic units are designed to increase knowledge and skills, and to enhance achievement levels. The selection of specific units involves ongoing consultation, expressions of interest, observation of the participants' level of motivation and specific learning styles, lecturer availability, and evaluation of the participants' progress to date. Formative and summative evaluation, and ongoing support, is considered especially important to ensure the participants, once enrolled in the program, have every opportunity to achieve success. This is in keeping with a strengths-based approach that is characteristic of all Clemente programs. After completion of the course, the participants are awarded a Certificate of Liberal Studies at

the University graduation ceremony alongside other students who have completed their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. This reflects the esteem in which the program is held and acknowledges the significant achievement of the participants who have demonstrated commitment and perseverance to complete the academic program.

### *3.2. Entering the program*

Initially, a brochure advertising the program is distributed throughout the community through the St Vincent de Paul Society. After expressions of interest are received, informal interviews are conducted by agency staff to ascertain the level of interest and potential for study and participation in the program. This process is important in establishing a learning environment that promotes growth and achievement and avoids the deleterious effects that failure might have on those who have already experienced various forms of economic, personal or social disadvantage. With the development of the program, a number of flexible entrance arrangements have been made available to allow the participants to either formally enrol in the program through University procedures, or to attend and observe classes to determine the suitability of the program before final commitment. On occasion, some potential enrollees have been guided to another adult educational program that relates more to their specific learning needs.

### *3.3. Learning spaces*

In the first instance, the Clemente Canberra program was offered at a community centre for homeless men. The Centre was relatively close to the University campus and accessible by public transport. A transport service was offered to participants who had limited means of transport and some distance to travel. The decision to offer the first academic unit off-campus was in keeping with the accepted practice of locating the program in the community rather than in a formal learning space, such as a university. This was also regarded as appropriate for those participants who might require access to services more readily available at community centres. The Clemente Canberra program was later moved from the community centre to the University campus after an evaluation of the program raised concerns regarding: the suitability of the setting for women; the lack of sufficient technological support and equipment to assure quality teaching and learning; and, the limited access to resources such as those available through the University library. While teaching the program on-campus deviated from accepted practice on other campuses, the decision has been vindicated and supported by the participants and other stakeholders. The change has not been without its challenges and necessitated the formation of a campus management group to facilitate effective communication across the

various functional units at the campus. A brief University orientation program has been implemented to provide information to the participants about University regulations and procedures, ICT, library resources, and expectations for use of facilities.

### *3.4. Learning partners*

Learning Partners are an essential element in the Clemente Canberra program and are drawn from the wider community, including the corporate world. They volunteer their service to provide support to the participants during their study, including the clarification, preparation and development of tasks associated with assessment. For the Clemente Canberra program, St Vincent de Paul has assumed responsibility for the recruitment, induction and pairing of Learning Partners with the course participants.

### *3.5. Teaching and learning*

The teaching and learning approach is structured to facilitate a sense of comfort and active engagement in learning. Staff selected to teach the academic units bring to the program their own forms of expertise, pedagogical preferences and teaching styles. When appropriate, local off-campus sites are used to provide rich and authentic learning tasks that include visits to art galleries, museums and the theatre.

The design and completion of assessment tasks has provided some challenges for staff and the participants, and the supportive role of the Learning Partners has been crucial in this regard. There remains an ongoing tension between the maintenance of academic rigor and timely completion of assessment tasks and the need to be responsive to the participants' individual learning styles to ensure the achievement of specified learning outcomes. On entry to the program, a number of the participants have expressed anxiety when faced with the task of completing the required assessment tasks yet participate well in discussions and other workshop tasks and have aptly demonstrated their ability to engage conceptually with the unit content. This has necessitated the introduction of a number of strategies aimed to build confidence and increase the participants' sense of self-efficacy. These include:

- a range of assessment tasks that progress in terms of level of difficulty throughout the semester; for example, three minor tasks in the form of short reflection papers, and one substantial task, such as an essay, due for completion towards the end of the semester;



- assessment tasks that are partially or fully completed in class; for example, the development of an e-portfolio or art portfolio;
- introduction of a separate workshop or tutorial offering tuition in areas such as essay structure, report writing, and referencing; and
- flexibility in regard to the time allowed for the completion of assessment tasks.

While the attendance rate and participation levels have always been acceptable, there has been some fluctuation across units. Overall, however, there has been a steady increase in the level of engagement and commitment to study as the program has unfolded.

### *3.6. Building Community*

Since the commencement of the program, it has become increasingly clear that the establishment of a strong sense of community is essential to the success of the program, in maintaining contact, supporting learning, and enhancing the level of social connectedness between all participants. In response to this, a number of strategies have been implemented including:

- The provision for staff and the participants to share lunch together before the commencement of the academic program.
- Development of links between other Adult and Community Education (ACE) programs and the Clemente Canberra course to build knowledge and skills relevant to both programs; for example: the ACE Program Creative Transformations: Your Snapshots our History, which aimed to develop the participants' abilities in communication both as a foundation for formal study and for effective transition to the workplace. The content of the program emphasised the importance of effective communication, report writing, formal presentation styles and the presentation of ideas supported by appropriate software, visuals, and web-sourced information. The ACE course was offered in the Summer study period and created an ideal bridge to learning in the Clemente Canberra unit Introduction to Communication offered in the first semester of the academic year.
- Summer and Winter Community recreational short courses in areas such as: Music Making, Choral singing, Visual Arts, Introduction to Italian, and use of technology.

### *3.7. Pathways Programs*

In Semester 1, 2012 a new structured Clemente Canberra Pathways Program: Learning for Today and Tomorrow – Part 1 was developed to provide support for new participants seeking to enter the program yet not academically or personally confident for formal university study. The program is designed to increase the participants' knowledge and skills in preparation for more formal study, including the development of power-point presentations, report writing, communication skills and more. An evaluation of the program has shown it to be highly successful and a Pathways Program - Part 2 will be offered in Semester 2, 2012.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

Ongoing evaluation of the various Clemente Canberra programs is regarded as essential. Informal discussions with the participants and staff have been fruitful and guided the development of the teaching and learning approach used during the lectures, tutorials and workshops. The Clemente Canberra committee and ACU Campus management group continue to provide input and guidance regarding procedures, new directions and initiatives. A discussion of the evaluations from the 2012 Semester 1 Clemente Canberra Pathways Program – Part 1 and the Clemente Canberra Certificate course follows.

### *4.1. 2012 Clemente Canberra Pathways Program – Part 1*

The Pathways Program aims to provide the participants with new knowledge, skills and learning strategies that will assist them in their preparation for more formal study in the Certificate course.

Results from the student evaluations enrolled in the Clemente Canberra Pathways Program – Part 1 were encouraging with 98% of students (n=22) stating they were either Very Happy or Happy with all aspects of the program (77% Very Happy; 21% Happy). Only 2% stated they were not happy in some way; in both (n=2) these instances the concern expressed was related to the level of personal difficulty in the learning process; e.g. expressed embarrassment at not reading or writing very well or not being able to keep up in the lesson. All other comments were supportive. Students appreciated the time and thoughtful preparation that had gone into the program, the variety of content and the way in which the material was presented. Notes were clear and concise and handouts provided a useful reference for the future. Qualities admired in the lecturer were warmth, caring, professional, patience, encouraging and enthusiasm. In terms of age related appropriateness, one student over 50 years regarded the content as relevant and useful. Another felt the program had progressed their

decision making regarding future study, while another commented that their confidence had grown as the program progressed.

When asked to comment on possible improvements to the program, some indicated that they would keep the program the same and that there was the right level of pressure in regards their learning. Others saw value in the small group exercises while another preferred more time for note taking. Due to policy constraints, the Pathways Program students do not have library borrowing rights and some commented that being allowed to borrow from the library would be an improvement.

Clearly the Pathways Program fulfilled a need and overall students felt comfortable in the learning environment provided. Students came from a wide range of backgrounds with little scholastic involvement. They were nonetheless able to cope with the subject matter, as presented. The challenge will be to maintain this level of expectation and achievement in future years to enable progression to the formal Clemente Certificate program.

**Table 1.** Student evaluations of Clemente Canberra Pathways Program (n=22)

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Very Happy</i>		<i>Happy</i>		<i>Unhappy</i>		<i>Very Unhappy</i>	
Content acceptable	14	64%	8	36%	0	nil	0	nil
Subject delivery	19	86%	3	14%	0	nil	0	nil
Level of support from the lecturer	14	64%	6	27%	2	9%	0	nil
Level of support from community agency	21	95%	1	5%	0	nil	0	nil
<b>Overall</b>		<b>77%</b>		<b>21%</b>		<b>2%</b>		<b>nil</b>

#### 4.2. 2012 Clemente Canberra Certificate Course

The evaluation of the formal Clemente Canberra Certificate course included four student evaluation questions relating to: Content of Course; Teaching Style; Level of Support from Lecturer; and Level of Support from the community agency Coordinator. Students (n=12) rated their experiences according to whether they were Very Happy, Happy, Unhappy and Very Unhappy. Results were favourable across all questions. Overall, 98% of students were either Very Happy or Happy in regards Questions 1-4. Two open-ended questions sought information about the areas of the Certificate course that the students found most enjoyable and what the students thought could be done to improve the Certificate course for the next semester. Only one student (2%) expressed an Unhappy comment and this related to perceived level of support.

Reflecting on their learning, students commented that they found the course stimulating, educational, challenging, enjoyable and interesting even though, for some, they had little knowledge of the subject before commencing study in the unit. To one student, the unit had ‘opened a new world’. To others, the program had provided a sense of purpose and an opportunity to exercise their intellect. Others referred positively to the lecturer’s approach, competency and effective teaching style highlighting the value of multi-modal approaches such as visual, aural and tactile teaching techniques, quality feedback and assistance when required, and clarity in regards student responsibilities and expectations.

The students’ comments regarding their involvement in learning within a University setting highlighted the depth of impact; for example, that the experience had provided an ‘adrenalin rush’; it was enjoyable to be at university; there was enthusiasm for classes; and, the course had exceeded expectations. For one student, there was a clear sense of accomplishment after experiencing many setbacks in life.

In such a course, it is difficult to ensure all participants are progressing satisfactorily given the variations in their background experiences. Ongoing care will be needed to ensure future academic units cater for individual differences and provide ongoing support to those who might otherwise find learning difficult. The findings tabulated relate to the overall effectiveness of the course from the students’ perspective. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and demonstrate the effectiveness of the Clemente Canberra course in building a vibrant learning environment and sense of connectedness between the participants, the University, staff from St Vincent de Paul, and members of the wider community. The participants believed the course was effective in supporting their development of new knowledge and skills that increased their levels of achievement, confidence and sense of self-efficacy. The high value placed by the participants on the opportunity to engage in purposeful learning within a socially inclusive program was also noted in their comments.

**Table 2.** Student evaluations of Clemente Canberra Certificate Course (n=12)

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Very Happy</i>		<i>Happy</i>		<i>Unhappy</i>		<i>Very Unhappy</i>	
Content acceptable	10	83%	2	17%	0	nil	0	nil
Subject delivery	8	67%	4	33%	0	nil	0	nil
Level of support from the lecturer	9	75%	2	17%	1	nil	0	nil
Level of support from community agency	10	83%	2	5%	0	nil	0	nil
		77%		21%		2%		nil

## 5. Conclusions

A recent inter-university paper focused on issues of homelessness and highlighted the value of the national Clemente Australia program in supporting adults experiencing multiple disadvantage ‘by bringing those who are on the margins back into the mainstream’ (Snapshot, 2011). Over time, the national program has gained in strength to now become ‘an example of community embedded socially supported university education’ (Howard, Butcher, & Egan, 2010). Through the adoption of a life-based and strengths-based learning approach, the Clemente Canberra program, including both the Pathways Program and Clemente Certificate course, reflects the findings of the national study. As evidenced in the findings of the evaluation, the program has demonstrated its effectiveness in creating a framework for purposeful engagement in learning that is both motivating and transformative. Establishing a strong sense of community that is challenging yet supportive has been important in helping to sustain the participants throughout their involvement in the program. By providing a sense of connectedness between the participants and others it is envisaged the Clemente Canberra program will continue to impact positively on the participants’ ongoing health and well-being.

As the Clemente Canberra program continues to grow, it is imperative that the process involves the collection of research-based evidence to characterise the key elements of the program’s success while capturing the participants’ life experiences and motivations to pursue new learning opportunities. The following reflection provided by a graduating student highlights the value of the program and provides a powerful motivator for all involved.

*‘The main benefits from the course are wide and varied: It provides structure to my life; you meet interesting people; it increases your self-esteem; the actual things we learn are great; it increases your chance of employment; and, it’s also more than an educational qualification, it also speaks to my stability, my determination and my commitment. But for me the most important thing proved to be the contacts that I’ve made. Through doing the course you start to meet people. You meet lecturers, learning partners, administrators, other students. And you start to build up a network of people who know your abilities. And that’s important!  
...And it’s through the network of people I’ve met at Clemente that things have started to really turn around for me’.*

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