

Innovative Models for University–Community Partnerships

Fostering Productive Partnerships Between the University and Community–Based Organisations Serving Low–Income Populations

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1. What is the Community Fellows Program?

This report discusses the findings of an evaluation of the Community Fellow Program (CFP), an innovative initiative established by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute in 2016. The project builds mutually productive partnerships between academics and community-based organisations servicing disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

The CFP is part of a growing international trend to make higher education institutions more responsive to local communities. Its purpose is to create knowledge that is useful for addressing social inequalities. Many different models have emerged under various names, including university/community partnerships, community-engaged research, co-produced knowledge, and public scholarship.

The CFP was designed to open pathways into the University for community service organisations that had an identified research need but lacked capacity to address it. Six projects involving community-based organisations were conducted in 2016. The projects were of a scale that could be completed in 13-26 days, notionally at one day a week. The program supported the organisations by appointing one of their staff as an honorary Community Fellow at the University and pairing him or her with an academic mentor, all of whom were volunteers. Thus, the organisations were given direct access to University resources and expertise, including library access, a workstation and a University email address. The honorary appointments demonstrated the University's respect for the expertise of community members.

The program included brokerage funding (up to \$5,200) in the event that organisations would be prevented from taking part due to being unable to afford to release a staff member.

An evaluation of the trial was established to explore processes and the outcomes that were generated. Data for the evaluation were collected from a range of sources, including a focus group discussion (involving CFs, academic mentors and managers in participating organisations), individual interviews, notes from meetings, emails and journals. The collection and use of this material was approved by the relevant research ethics committee at the University.

2. Why is it important?

The University of Melbourne is committed to tackling 'grand challenges' – complex and multidimensional social problems that span global, national and local processes. These grand challenges have significant local effects but as higher education institutions have become larger, more complex and driven by reductionist demands for measurable impacts, they have found it increasingly difficult to respond to the complex needs of local communities, particularly poor communities. Further, there are risks that relationships between universities and communities are 'extractive'. This happens when communities are seen as sources of data and research subjects, and as venues for student placements to meet the interests of universities. University- community collaborations will be sustainable and productive when there are mutual benefits.

Building research partnerships with local communities and finding common ground where local communities can meet with academics on an equal footing strengthens the capacity of universities to generate 'useable' knowledge that blends practical, on-the-ground insights with theoretical and conceptual knowledge generated by academics. This blended knowledge is critical for addressing complex grand challenges and strengthens the status of universities as a public good. It gives practical expression to ideals of democracy and justice, expanding civil society in ways that are often unforeseen.

3. What happened?

The program was overseen by the executive officer of the MSEI and an academic co-ordinator. Applicants were asked to submit a brief expression of interest, and if successful, develop a similarly brief project plan. These were finalised through discussions between community fellows, academic mentors (who provided content area expertise) and the academic co-ordinator of the program, whose role was to provide support to CFs in carrying out academic tasks. A relatively simple collaboration agreement was developed by Legal Services in the University and used as the basis of the honorary appointments.

Following low-key advertising that created surprisingly wide interest, six proposals were selected to support. Three of these grew out of pre-existing relationships between the organisations and Melbourne University academics. Projects were located in Faculties across the University. See Section 4 for summaries of these projects.

Of these six, four completed their projects by the end of the trial, one devised a longer-term strategy as the complexity of their original intention became clear, and the sixth - the last to commence – is expected to be completed in early 2017.

4. Summary of projects and outcomes in 2016 trial

Project	A trauma informed approach to education		
Organisation	Carlton Primary School		
Community Fellow:	Bec Harris	Academic Mentor:	Greg Donoghue (MGSE)
Project purpose:	To produce a collection of resource material relevant to trauma informed education in Australia, and an explanation of how this is enacted at Carlton Primary School. This is intended for school staff, families, and for other schools.		
Project outcome:	The draft materials were produced. Bec and Greg made a presentation on trauma-informed education at an MGSE lunchtime seminar. They have submitted an abstract for a paper to the Australia and New Zealand Refugee Trauma Recovery in Resettlement Conference.		

Project	Final project report on research into issues of migrant employment.		
Organisation	Western Community Legal Centre		
Community Fellow:	Catherine Hemingway	Academic mentor:	Joo-Cheong Tham (Law)
Project purpose:	<p>To produce a comprehensive report that documents the working experiences of newly arrived and refugee communities in the West, analyse data from WCLC’s pilot programs and make recommendations for policy and legal reform. Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To complete a review of literature regarding migrant worker experiences and best-practice policy/legal responses. • To analyse stories and other data collected throughout the pilot programs; and • To produce recommendations for reform within an advocacy strategy. 		
Project outcome:	<p>A substantial report and recommendations have been completed and published, as well as a summary document for general distribution.</p> <p>The report was launched with the support of the Fair Work Ombudsman and the Fair Work Commission and received significant media coverage.</p> <p>The report has been, and will continue to be, used for advocacy for legislative and regulatory reform with federal MPs in Canberra.</p> <p>The recommendations include the need for further research.</p>		

Project	Skills For Life Community Program review		
Organisation	Carlton Football Community Fund		
Community Fellow:	Shawn Wilkey	Academic Mentor:	Karen Block (MSPGH)
Project purpose:	To review the design of the Skills for Life Program in order to understand if there is a sound methodology in place that aligns program content with the intended impact. Anecdotal evidence from participants indicated that the program has enormous benefits for young people, but a rigorous evaluation of the program design with recommendations as to how best achieve the desired impact is needed.		
Project outcome:	An evaluation framework and recommendations for improvement has been produced and is being implemented by the CFCF.		

Project	Performing Arts Programs in Juvenile Justice in Victoria 2005- 2015: Mapping Policy, Research and Programs		
Organisation	ILBIJERRI Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Company		
Community Fellow:	Kamarra Bell-Wykes	Academic Mentor:	Sophie Rudolph (MGSE)
Project purpose:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To investigate the types of arts programs, research and policies that have been developed in relation to arts programs in Victorian prisons over the past decade, with a focus on juvenile justice and the performing arts. • To establish of a toolbox of arts evaluation techniques for effectively evaluating developmental arts programs. • To develop the skills of Ilbijerri to undertake program evaluation, and to understand the values and limitations of research . 		
Project outcome:	The intended outcomes presented a greater challenge than anticipated, as it became evident that there were limited evaluative models of similar programs, and the complexity of assessing the individual and social outcomes of developmental arts programs in these settings. This understanding developed has given rise to a plan to convene a forum early in 2017 with other companies undertaking related work, as well as with academics, to develop and evaluation framework that all can use.		

Project	Identifying Employment Barriers for Tertiary-educated Muslim Australian Women		
Organisation	Women's Health West		
Community Fellow:	Susan Timmins	Academic Mentor:	Richard Williams (MSPGH)
Project purpose:	To investigate the barriers to employment for tertiary-educated Muslim Australian women in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne. The findings will inform the development and provision of services by Women's Health West, and enable them to best meet the particular needs of this group.		
Project outcome:	By the end of 2016 the research project had been completed and the research report was being prepared.		

Project	Evaluation framework for Space2b, a design-based social enterprise for unemployed women who are refugees or asylum-seekers.		
Organisation	Space2b – an arts and design based social enterprise		
Community Fellows:	Aila Joodi and Ondine Spitzer	Academic Mentors:	Ben Neville (FBE) and Richard Williams (MSPGH)
Project purpose:	To develop an evaluation framework for Ready to Fly, a mentoring program for refugees and people seeking asylum. It required identifying relevant documentation processes and impact measures to promote the validity of the evaluation, and to ensure that a range of perspectives and experiences among refugee and asylum seeker participants, mentors and program facilitators are captured. Two CFs with different roles in the program were involved in the project.		
Project outcome:	The project was not completed in 2016, and is expected to continue in 2017. This was the last of the projects to commence.		

5. What did we find?

The summaries refer to a range of outputs that were generated, including project reports, professional newsletter articles, a departmental seminar presentation, the development of evaluation frameworks and plans for a proposed forum to be held in 2017. These outputs reflect varying levels of understanding and different experiences of research among organisations involved in the CFP trial. It is notable that five the projects were completed and largely achieved their stated aims.¹ The evaluation data offered further insights into the experiences of the CFs, academic mentors and community organisations involved. Our discussion of these data is organised under two broad sets of issues: insights from the six projects on how the CFP served to bridge different cultures of knowledge, and whether the program structure met the needs of Fellows and participating organisations. These issues are discussed below and presented as far as

¹ At its commencement the program planned to support five projects. A sixth was added later in the year.

possible through the words of the participants. When presenting quotes, CF refers to 'Community Fellow', AM refers to 'Academic Mentor' and COR to 'Community Organisation Representative'.

5.1 Creating blended knowledge

The key aim of the CF initiative was to generate blended knowledge that combines practical on-the-ground with academic knowledge. A first step is to bridge the divide between knowledge fields that can be difficult to bring together because one is generally analytical, rules based and methodical, and the other being embedded and relational. This is reproduced in the cultural differences between the University and community organisations, and magnified by the huge differences in scale and status. There are other asymmetries in that academic knowledge mostly enjoys a higher status and authority than practice knowledge. There was evidence that the CFP managed to bridge this divide in different ways, including by according value to community expertise:

The program recognises some of the expertise that sits in the sector, as well as [in] the frontline [staff] working with the community. (CF)

There is academia and it's very intimidating and oppressive, so coming in, you're not sure what you're bringing to the table. [The academic mentor] made it clear to me [...] that the expertise that we have from the work we did with community women and the broader background we had of their lives and relationships, and the credibility we have with those women was also fundamental to the success of the project (...) it's a nice experience to see that you have that expertise and see how valuable it is. (CF)

I love working in partnership with community organisations because you learn so much as an academic; here's all that practice-based knowledge that actually makes the work you do more real. (AM)

I think there's an academic snobbery and, on the other side, a community sector inferiority complex (...) One of the great things about this project is it's bringing the two together. (COR)

This 'inferiority complex' means that while community organisations are likely to understand the value of their work, they may not fully recognise the value of their practical knowledge. Gaining academic respect for community knowledge contributes to lifting the status of what one participant described as 'embedded knowledge':

[The CFP] actually takes the embedded knowledge that we have and puts it out there. One of the reasons we haven't done as well as we should is that embedded knowledge doesn't find its way out enough. (COR)

'Embedded' knowledge referred to proximal and context dependent understanding of issues affecting communities. Participants described how this embedded and academic knowledge and expertise were blended in the projects. For example, one of the Community Fellows described how this happened through interactions with her mentor who gently pushed her to conceptualise the significance of everyday practices:

I liked being able to tell our story [of the community organisation's work] and investigate further what it is exactly (...) [the academic mentor] would say, 'Okay, break it down. What would you say your process is there?'. 'Process? We just do it!' 'No, what's the process?' That's a different way of thinking about [things] and I think, when you work in organisations, (...) it's a real luxury. (CF)

An academic mentor explained how this blended knowledge was an explicit aim for the project:

While one of our aims was for (the CF) to develop some research skills we also had to keep remembering that it was also about this project being very focused and useful in practice and it wasn't about becoming an academic. It was about developing some understanding of the problem within an academic environment that (offered) resources and support, but that was very much about helping to understand and develop some approaches to practice.

A community organisation representative reflected on this potential of academic perspectives:

All the evidence is that what we do does work in a different way, but why it works is something we're not at all clear about and would like to be clearer about.

The effectiveness of the work was significantly improved by having both the time and the access to rigour.

One CF was converting this blended knowledge into a publication for a professional newsletter:

I contacted Teacher Magazine, produced by the Australian Council of Profession Research, and asked if I could write an article for them about trauma-informed practice, and they said, 'Absolutely!' So, it's just given me a bit more confidence. (CF)

In one project, a key aim was to promote the value of research within an organisation that 'really had no real concept of research or what research is'. The CF was involved in running community-based activities and keen to demonstrate how research can be used to appraise meaningful outcomes and impacts.

The projects also presented opportunities for CFs to blend their own academic skills into their community work:

It was a great opportunity (...) for people in the [community] sector who have an academic background but haven't been able to utilise it. (CF)

The opportunity for Community Fellows, and by extension their organisations, to access University resources was critical in bridging the knowledge fields. CFs gained deeper understanding of university contexts for research and critical access to resources. These included a desk at the University, the opportunity to attend seminars and university events, and access to library and email facilities:

It meant she was really close to both the library and Melbourne Law School, which meant that she had significantly greater access to the labour law unit down there. So, I think it quite

significantly added to her access and gave her a chance to get away from the other case-worker services. [...] I wouldn't underestimate that as a significant benefit. (COR)

I've never gone through an ethics approval process like this before (...) just seeing the way people go about it. (CF)

What I benefitted from the most was the access to resources that I wouldn't normally have in terms of the university resources, and the log-on to all of those journals was fantastic. I also haven't worked in group research. There was myself, [the academic mentor] and another academic working with us as well, and in a team. I'd done my own Master's thesis and stuff by myself, but I've never worked in a team and had to be part of that collaborative drawing out of themes and working out things. That was very interesting. So many perspectives. I've found that kind of work to be quite isolating, but this wasn't. It was very collaborative (CF).

(It) was useful (...) to see how complicated that [research] field is and that, often, one thing leads to the next and to work out how to stop somewhere or put a limit on some aspect of it. (AM)

A CF also noted the importance of having time out from the everyday demands of their workplaces:

We're in the business of dealing with things every minute of every day and you never know what's going to happen (...) [through the project I was] given a bit of space and permission to step back and look at this big picture about what it is that we do that's different and what value it adds, and now thinking about how we measure it.

Participants noted mutual benefits for organisations and the University. For example, one CF gained better sense of how to navigate the University and this produced an arrangement for Master's students to gain real world experience while providing for unmet needs at a school in a deprived neighbourhood:

We've got 27 speech pathology Master's students who are going to come do something with us next year. That was me contacting speech pathology because there's so much need. (CF)

There were also plans for this CF to be involved in preparing a new funding proposal. A community organisation representative also expressed interest in exploring new opportunities for academics to be involved in funding proposals, although he was aware of the risks associated with the low academic value that is accorded to community reports despite their value informing community-based work. He was keen to explore new models for community/academic collaborations that generated mutual benefits:

My feeling is that what needs to be explored a bit more is a range of ways in which we can have academics support the community sector work (...) my feeling is that in the right context, it would certainly be worthwhile.

Participants' experiences suggested the potential of the CFP to generate a range of positive outcomes for communities, organisations, fellows, the academics involved and the university. This potential involved bridging academic and community environments to facilitate exchange of

knowledge and expertise.

An Academic Mentor noted the importance of the CFP in providing an opportunity to consolidate community connections in ways that can have positive outcomes for ongoing research partnerships:

(They) could then lead on to better research partnerships (... if) they are strengthened in those early stages, then they could grow into better research.

There was strong agreement among academic mentors, community fellows and organisational representatives, and through our own observations, that the projects had generated a range of significant outcomes and was building respectful partnerships that could potentially generate ongoing outcomes. In evaluating the CFP, we were also interested in participants' perspectives on the program structure and whether there was potential to improve this to better meet the needs of Fellows and participating academics and we turn to these now.

5.2 Program structure and organisation

Trials are by nature experimental and exploratory. The CFP was designed to be sufficiently structured to ensure that projects were completed, while being flexible enough to enable adaptation and the incorporation of emergent learning. Administrative burdens were kept to a minimum. This was achieved by a loose structure underpinned by clear principles and purpose.

The openness of the design was experienced differently across the program. The Community Fellows and organisations clearly enjoyed the flexibility and responsiveness, because it accommodated the fluctuating demands of organisations and operational contingencies:

[The academic co-ordinator] was very flexible with this due to the situation at my work where I had to change roles for a period of time (...) that has been great in terms of the practicality of fitting things in while you're also working (CF)

The novelty of the program, and the exploratory nature of the trial meant that CFs, academic mentors and program coordinators all needed to negotiate unfamiliar roles and relationships. At times, this meant there was some uncertainty around role expectations:

I'd say from my perspective it was a little bit vague at the start what the expectation was (...) I think it all worked out in the end, but it wouldn't have hurt to have maybe just some more guidelines about what you're supposed to be doing. (AM)

I had anxieties myself about how do I best support (the CF) in this space and how I need to make sure that I give (them) what (they) needed, and sometimes I was unsure about what that was. I don't know, I think it's sometimes, it's a matter of every context in its own right. It's hard to know what to do in terms of a blanket rule. I think it's a lot about the relationships and negotiating that relationship along the way. (AM)

Another participant acknowledged these uncertainties but was not concerned about them,

suggesting that a lack of clear expectations meant that the program could respond quickly and effectively to individual needs without being overly procedural:

It didn't really bother me that the parameters weren't very clear because I didn't really exactly know what I wanted to do until I started doing it, but I think [the academic mentor] said the same thing (...): 'Am I doing it right?' A lot of communication was essential, I think, to say what I need, don't need or if I needed him to come to me and look around and give me information (CF).

The unfamiliarity of the CF-academic mentor relationship was somewhat disconcerting for one participant, however, they noted that it is likely important to minimise demands on academics' time, particularly because these kinds of contributions are not valued highly in performance review processes:

I mean, the one thing that I suppose surprised me was it was quite light touch. I think we only met with them three times, and the first time was an introductory one. This is over six months or so. I'm used to six months where a student on his master's thesis where it might be every two to three weeks, and where you're reading stuff before each meeting. This was very light touch in comparison. I suppose that's part of the decision making that needs to be made in terms of balance. The more intensive it is, the more demanding and therefore, the less likely you're going to get people putting their hands up (AM).

It was noted that opportunities for academic mentors to get together would have been helpful in fleshing out expectations of the role:

I was wondering whether it could have been possible for the mentors to come together and meet together as a group, maybe a couple of times throughout the process and just be able to share some of what they were doing and how they were working with their fellow and what they were finding was useful. (AM).

It is evident that projects growing out of previously established relationships were more successful in generating notable outcomes, such as reports, articles and other products. This is because collaborators have usually had opportunities to identify relevant and feasible projects and established ways of working together. This was noted by one of the Academic Mentors:

I think that it really helped that I already had a relationship with (the CF). That meant that we didn't have to start from scratch. We already knew each other and were able to build on that and this was a really good opportunity for building those relationships and developing some of the ideas that she had been talking about for quite a long time with me (...) she needed the time and the resources to be able to do the work.

Nonetheless, the CFP also offers a good opportunity to build new collaborations even if outcomes are not as developed.

Some CFs also mentioned that they would have like more opportunities for collegial encounters with other fellows. Although an afternoon tea was organised to give an opportunity for CFs and academic mentors to meet, and learn about other projects, it proved difficult for many participants

to find the time to attend. For subsequent CF cohorts, it may be worthwhile to offer a series of professional development opportunities that fellows are expected to attend (and mentors invited to attend for part thereof) which would offer similar opportunities for collegial interaction.

These comments and suggestions from participants are being incorporated into the program for the 2017 cohort.

6. Did the CFP achieve its aims?

Under the broad aim set out in Section 1 were four subsidiary aims. Drawing on our experience and the data we gathered during the year, we respond to each of these in turn:

6.1 To promote opportunities for the University and community organisations to bring together their different knowledge, skills and experiences on an equal footing.

The fellows brought practice knowledge from their workplaces to the projects. This was mostly highly contextualised, having been developed in the operating environment of their organisation. The academic mentors brought different perspectives, providing theoretical frameworks and linking the local knowledge to wider contexts. Both parties benefited. Academics were able to see the application of research knowledge and concepts, and Fellows saw their knowledge validated and valued in new ways.

The program structure gave the participants a high degree of agency, which enabled them to shape their projects according to their needs. It is clear that neither the fellows nor the mentors saw themselves as subordinate to the other, but worked together with the co-ordinator to solve problems as they arose.

Bringing different knowledge types and perspectives together in this way led to the production of blended knowledge.

6.2 To give community-based organisations opportunities to experience and contribute to the University's intellectual and institutional environment.

This aim was not achieved to the extent that was hoped for, due mostly to the workplace demands on Fellows being higher than anticipated. While opportunities existed, Fellows were unable to take advantage of them. The primary task of the program was to ensure the satisfactory completion of each of the projects. Nevertheless, Fellows contributed to consultations, a presentation was made in a school seminar series, and a Fellow and her mentor submitted an abstract to a 2017 international conference.

As well, the MSEI developed process knowledge and artifacts (such as a simple collaboration agreement) for working in partnership with small community organisations, which are currently being used to expand the program across the University.

6.3 To give academic staff opportunities to engage with 'real world' settings, to develop or extend partnerships with community-based organisations, and to better understand the context in which their research may be used.

All the academic staff had some experience of working with communities, so were accustomed to non-university settings. However, the program fostered more equal partnerships than the traditional relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Three of the six projects built on pre-existing relationships and the academic staff already had good understanding of the real world settings of the projects. In these cases the program recognised and extended these informal arrangements, legitimising them within the framework of the University's engagement strategy.

6.4 To encourage research that is responsive to emerging social and practice issues.

The key selection criterion with regard to this was that each of the projects had to be based on a need that the organisation had already identified, but was unable to address without assistance. Each of these organisations was engaged in direct service delivery to poor or vulnerable communities. Thus each of the projects responded directly to emerging social and practice issues. Participants developed a deeper understanding of the quality and dimensions of responsive research.

7. Conclusion

The high level of interest that the program generated after very modest advertising indicates there is a strong need for partnership initiatives such as this. They provide opportunities for both fellows and mentors to conduct research, reflect on their practice, engage with academic literature, and develop analytical and interpretative skills.

The trial revealed two key features of the program that contributed to its success. The first was its flexibility. Working with small community agencies (some very small) and with only one Fellow from each magnified the impact of cyclical demands and of the sudden or unexpected events that all organisations face. Large organisations have the resources to smooth over these in ways that small organisations cannot. The program was able to adapt to medical problems, staff turnover, temporary reassignment and even the demands of the football season to see five of the six projects successfully completed during the trial period.

The second was the access to resources. This included a space for the fellows to work away from their normal workplace, access to library services, and a university email address. Less obvious resources were the practices, skills, understanding and cultural behaviours that surround the production of academic research. The program provided Fellows with insight into these aspects of the work of a university that are usually opaque to outsiders. The formal quality control provided by research ethics committees and the less structured controls of peer review and challenge broadened the understanding of the Fellows and their organisations about academic knowledge as a process and an artefact. Thus they are better equipped to assess the benefits and limitations of research, to work with researchers, and to know what other assistance universities can provide.

The collaborative partnership model on which the program was based reaches beyond the common practice of universities generating research and disseminating it to those who are likely to use it. The knowledge generated by universities has for a long time enjoyed a higher status and greater credibility than local and practitioner knowledge gained through experience. Although this is changing with the rise of citizen science and researchers are becoming more interested in local, contextual knowledge, there is still a substantial divide. This is particularly so for research intended to address poverty.

In recognition of this, is not uncommon for researchers, particularly when working with vulnerable communities, to attempt to redress the imbalance by downplaying or hiding their expertise in deference to local knowledge. While this can be an appropriate introductory technique, it is not helpful to maintain it in the long run as it places an important resource out of reach and ultimately reproduces the above imbalance. The Community Fellow Program steers a middle path, respecting the expertise and knowledge of both parties. Not only is this a powerful combination; it is also the basis of the generation of new knowledge and extends the role of the university as a public good.