



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Melbourne
Social Equity
Institute

Community Fellows Program: supercharging community sector capacity





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Partnering for public good

Australia's not-for-profit sector attracts employees who are passionate about positive social change. Over time, these practitioners develop intensive working knowledge and highly sophisticated skills, yet are also likely to burn out due to the strain of working in time-poor and resource-constrained organisations.

The 2021 research report *Vital support: building resilient charities to support Australia's wellbeing* found that four out of five community charities struggle to meet increasing demands, while economic and health trends are affecting their financial capacity and access to volunteers.

Ongoing direct financial support of such services is critical in the short term. Addressing systemic issues that hamper program delivery, however, requires greater investment in the sector's innovation capacity.

The Melbourne Social Equity Institute's Community Fellows Program is a unique way of deploying the University of Melbourne's research expertise and infrastructure at the grass roots level. The Community Fellows Program validates and champions practitioners' capacity to innovate, evaluate and expand their offerings, ensuring that capability grows and stays within the community.



We're investing in the experts who make social change happen

The Melbourne Social Equity Institute's Community Fellows Program offers a respectful, supportive and focused space for practitioners to step outside the daily demands of their work. Mentored by experienced academics in related fields, participants are invited to devise projects that inform, document, evaluate, share and scale their work. It also affords a unique opportunity to network with other practitioners working in parallel fields.

I'm so excited and relieved to have the time and support to explore a problem that has always been present in my work. It's fantastic that I can do this, and have access to a world-class research community.

It also makes me feel less like I am stuck in a 'David and Goliath' situation. It's such a powerful thing, to be able to leverage the University of Melbourne's reputation as a respected research institution. It really validates the problem I am investigating and will help ensure that it gets in front of the people who can make significant change and ensure that they take it seriously.

RACHNA,
2023 COMMUNITY FELLOW

The Community Fellows Program is a potent way to distribute the University's resources and expertise among practitioner experts who are best placed to use them with immediate and lasting positive effect, for people who need it most.

The Program is transformative for both Fellows and mentors, connecting academic staff to experts at the coalface of social change and incubating a number of new research partnerships or, as one participant described it: collaborative advocacy.

Participants attest that not-for-profit organisations are fatigued by well-meaning institutions 'parachuting in' experts to conduct research, then departing with their findings, leaving very few tangible benefits for the community. The Community Fellows Program, by contrast, focuses on lived practitioner expertise to build self-sustaining research practices that can be scaled within and across the participating organisation and community for maximum positive impact. Many Fellows go on to become leaders in their fields, sharing and implementing research that impacts the community sector more broadly.

We need to expand our reach

Established in 2016, the Community Fellows Program is unique in Australia. It is reaching a tipping point. Due to its novel offering and success, community demand for the program significantly exceeds Melbourne Social Equity Institute's current capacity. For example, in 2023, the Program received interest from 54 people eager to support their communities through new leadership and innovation, however there were only 12 Fellowships available.

At present, the Program only has resources to run every two years, yet we know there is the wider community interest for it to run annually. It can also only focus on metropolitan Melbourne, when the need in regional Victoria – indeed, throughout Australia – is just as vital.

Additionally, a critical mass of Fellows alumni is growing: a resource that could also be harnessed for greater knowledge sharing, support and advocacy across the sector.

We believe that the Community Fellows Program is poised to make a sustained difference to communities in need across Australia. We will need to scale up our offerings to enable this. In the short-to-medium term, this would entail:

- running the Program on an annual basis
- continuing to evaluate and improve the program on the basis of participant feedback
- developing online learning tools to enhance and broaden the Fellowship experience
- establishing a Fellows alumni network to ensure ongoing support
- running a culturally-appropriate version of the Program for Indigenous organisations through the University of Melbourne Shepparton campus
- encouraging other research-led universities to take up the Community Fellows Program

How can you help

Supporting the Community Fellows Program represents a unique opportunity for you to support a cause you care about, and see not only tangible outcomes within a short term timeframe, but also sustainable improvement practices embedded and shared for long term and widespread change.

Examples of how you can support the Community Fellows Program include:

- 1** Annual funding to support a cohort of 12 Community Fellows each year: \$200,000 each year for 5 years (\$1M total)
- 2** Funding to support a minimum of 3 Community Fellows per cohort: \$17,300 x 3 Fellows = \$52,500
- 3** Funding to pilot and evaluate a culturally-appropriate version of the model for Indigenous practitioners in Shepparton: initial funding of \$150,000 to establish feasibility and acceptability.

The impact of investing in our Fellows

The University of Melbourne Social Equity Institute is passionate about using knowledge and research for the benefit of society, particularly the community's most vulnerable. Alumni of the Community Fellows program have used project findings to develop, for example: a toolkit for schools in trauma-informed education; self-assessment tools for people with intellectual disabilities; and, a peacebuilding report to unravel ethnic tensions within diaspora communities.

One alum authored a breakthrough report that enabled Fair Work Act reforms.

All current and past projects can be viewed at <https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/community-fellows-program>

Here are three examples of current projects and how they will address a gap in service provision to a community in need.



Meet Manu from THREE for All Foundation (Towards Human Rights for Everybody Everywhere)

Manu, a highly respected community leader and public speaker, leverages both their professional expertise and lived experience to foster resilience within the LGBTQI+ and refugee and asylum seeker communities worldwide.

One of Manu's roles is leading the *Queer Refugee and Asylum Seeker Peers Program*, comprising 293 refugees and asylum seekers, five of whom are in detention. Of these participants, 90 per cent are on Temporary or Temporary Protection Visas, barring them from public, emergency and supported housing. Most will wait for many years before their visa will be processed.

From lived experience, Manu can attest to the perils of this situation. Denied working rights, unable to find safe and secure housing (a basic human rights under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights), and locked out of Medicare, refugees and asylum seekers will often end up sleeping rough and some may turn to sex work to earn enough to buy food and meet other basic needs.

These conditions place the LGBTQI+ subset of the refugee and asylum seeker community in greater danger than most. When they are eventually housed, they will invariably be placed with members of their own ethnic community, some of whom perpetuate social, cultural and political norms (such as homophobia) from their home country. In addition, transgender and non-binary people are usually misgendered and subsequently placed in inappropriate housing.

Manu's research under the auspices of the Community Fellows Program is redefining the concept of 'home' and 'safe space' led by LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees.

Manu is co-supervised by Dr Nicholas Hill and Professor Karen Farquharson. Dr Hill is a sociologist in the School of Social and Political Sciences. His research focuses on LGBTQIQA+ experiences of mental health, specialising in community engaged research. Professor Farquharson is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Anti-Racism Hallmark Research Initiative. Her most recent work examines how organisations manage diversity including organisational opportunities for, and barriers to, increasing diversity.

Professor Farquharson says: ***"I'm delighted to be working with Manu and Nicholas on this important project. The queer refugees and asylum seekers that Manu is working with are hard to reach and in real need of help. The project will develop Manu's research skills, which will support their advocacy work for this very vulnerable group. It will also improve Nicholas' and my knowledge of the issues they face."***



'We're all about developing capacity,' says Manu. 'Capacity for community-led research, governance and leadership in independent Queer-led organisations. It's absolutely critical that representation is led by people who have lived experience of the issues they're advocating to change.'





Meet **Bosede** from the Yoruba Heritage and Cultural Association of Victoria

Bosede is a Yoruba community leader, language teacher and nurse, who currently works in aged care in Victoria's La Trobe Valley. Every day, she sees the impact of social isolation on her clients' mental health, communication skills and physical confidence. While the epidemic of loneliness is not unique to Australia, Bosede cannot help comparing the life she sees around her to her own upbringing in West Africa.

'I am one of ten children,' she says, 'And our family was well-knitted together. Even if we didn't always live in close proximity.'

Bosede recalls how the grandparent figures in her life always found a way to tell stories, especially after evening meals. Each story had a moral, which helped ingrain the story's embedded instruction for living a good life and the consequences of poor choices. 'Fables, proverbs, metaphors,' Bosede reflects, 'This was how we were guided through life.'

Through her work as an office bearer in the Yoruba Heritage and Cultural Association of Victoria, Bosede noticed the widening gap between young people and elders in her own culture. She tracked the diminishing sense of village life, including loss of language and cultural understanding, particularly for the next generation.

Bosede's project with the Community Fellows Program centres around workshops to bring together elders and young people within Victoria's Yoruba community. The workshops will incorporate storytelling by elders in Yoruba (with English translations provided by a narrator), followed by younger participants performing dramatisations of what they have learnt.

Bosede is establishing and evaluating the workshops under the guidance of anthropologist Professor Adrian Hearn, Professor in Latin American studies, who has extensive experience working in Yoruba culture in West Africa, Cuba and Brazil. Professor Hearn points out: 'Through its workshops and recordings, the project aligns with emerging Victorian Government strategies to support ethnic diversity, such as networking and contributing to social capital, fostering relationships through collaboration, and helping communities to be law abiding.'

Bosede's research findings will provide a valuable framework for community groups across all cultures -- particularly those based on oral traditions -- seeking to mitigate social isolation of elders and loss of language, culture and moral direction in young adults.



Our kids do not think like Africans,' she observes, 'And I think this is because our elders are no longer telling them stories. How else would they know who they are, where they have come from and how to behave?'





Meet Rachna from South East Community Links

Rachna is a financial counsellor based in Melbourne's South Eastern suburbs, providing free, impartial information to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (among others) about their rights and responsibilities. As the years have gone on, Rachna has become increasingly frustrated by the limitations of official materials and resources currently available to enable recently arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to make sound financial decisions.

Rachna's greatest concern is that most interactions with newly arrived individuals and communities do not inform them adequately about how Australian financial systems work and their consumer rights. As a result, many find Australian financial systems complex and confusing. This puts them in danger of signing contracts with little understanding of what these agreements mean and what the consequences are. 'Currently, the onus is on the client to find a relative or friend to help them navigate the system. This removes their agency and also leaves them open to exploitation or abuse, particularly in the case of women and the elderly.'

'If you are a bank employee and you are sitting with a client who doesn't speak English, how do you know that the person translating is conveying what you are saying accurately and appropriately? How do you know that the client isn't basing their decision on information that hasn't been tainted by vested interest? How do you know that the person translating isn't saying **Sign this or I'll kill you?**'

Rachna's project under the auspices of the Community Fellows Program is to interrogate the **Easy English Guides** which are the main mechanism through which banks and financial institutions inform clients who need additional assistance. These guides were originally developed to support clients with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, and are widely used with people who have low English literacy.

Rachna is looking forward to testing her hypothesis that communities are best placed to lead their own information delivery, supported by independent impartial experts.

Rachna's academic mentor is Jeannie Paterson, Professor of Law and expert in consumer protection and consumer credit law, data privacy, and the regulation of emerging technologies. 'Information about financial rights and the workings of the credit and banking systems in Australia is crucial for new arrivals,' affirms Professor Paterson. 'Information works best when tailored to the needs and circumstances of the recipient. Rachna's experience and passion place her in the ideal position to interrogate how migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who come from a non English-speaking background use the Easy English Guides and other supposedly accessible information. This is a significant project with considerable social impact made possible only through the MSEI Community Fellows Program.'



'The Easy English Guides certainly have their place but how do we know whether or not they are effective? Coming from a non English-speaking background is not a disability.'



Let's continue this conversation

We look forward to continuing the conversation with you about how your investment can make a vital difference to building greater innovation and leadership capabilities into communities facing truly complex problems and entrenched disadvantage.

For further information, please contact:

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