

# The Refuge Project: Taking cross-faculty collaboration beyond the ivory Tower

## 1. Summary of Impact

Cross-faculty collaboration and student projects that reach beyond academia are still very rare occurrences in universities. However, these initiatives can greatly benefit students and the community.

A team of dedicated scholars from the Faculty of Health and the School of Architecture came together to bridge this disconnect by enabling nursing and architecture students to collaborate on developing a women's refuge.

The project research indicates that students have developed a greater sense of empathy and widened their perspectives. It has also improved their practices and increased awareness of their role and responsibilities as future professionals.

## 2. The Problem

Although there is much evidence suggesting that interdisciplinary collaboration is beneficial for students, it is not common practice at universities. Faculties still operate in isolation and students learn to approach issues through a very specific, inflexible lens.

In addition, tertiary education remains a predominantly theoretical sphere, and work beyond academia still receives little support or incentive. Despite possessing human resources with a wealth of skills and experience, universities do not leverage this enough to drive social change.

Two key issues arise from this disconnect between university practices and real life issues.

Firstly, students enter the workforce with a very one-sided view of their role and responsibility. The lack of understanding and empathy that arises from this can negatively impact their workplace practices and result in ineffective use of resources.

Secondly, the important work and research that is done in tertiary institutions is rarely used to drive meaningful social change. The pressure on academics to adhere to program and funding scopes continues to result in lost opportunities to make a change in the community.

### **3. Beneficiaries**

The Refuge Project primarily provided healthcare, architecture and landscape architecture students at UTS with the opportunity to work on a real-life project across multiple faculties.

In addition to these immediate beneficiaries, the project has laid out a path for a wider university program that will include more students and more faculties.

The project has also been valuable for NGOs and refuge centres by providing research, ideas and support. As it expands, the project will assist vulnerable groups, in particular women who experienced homelessness and domestic abuse.

### **4. Approach to impact**

Links between different faculties are not always obvious in the academic context. However, according to Faculty of Health Lecturer Sue Dean, there are recognised benefits when teaching and learning initiatives transcend disciplinary boundaries. It was a shared interest in women's issues that brought her and Scholarly Teaching Fellow from the School of Architecture, Samantha Donnelly, together.

The Refuge Project is a joint initiative that provided the opportunity for nursing, architecture and landscape architecture students to collaborate on an authentic learning experience through the development of a women's refuge.

Both Dean and Donnelly have volunteered and worked with women's refuges which inspired them to involve their respective students. The two key goals of the project were to develop empathy among students and to actively contribute to local communities through academic partnership.

Academic staff from the schools of nursing and architecture designed and implemented subjects that ran separately but concurrently, allowing students to collaborate on the development of a women's refuge.

The nursing students involved all had a background of studying within a Feminist framework. Domestic violence is a key topic within the women's health subject, and students undertook a work-based placement in a women's refuge, which lasted eight weeks.

Simultaneously, the soon-to-be architects and landscape architects joined forces to research specific spatial designs for survivors of domestic violence.

The nursing students returned and provided the architecture and landscape students with insights into the health and social issues of women who have experienced domestic abuse and homelessness. By sharing their knowledge, experiences and ideas, the nursing students were able to convey the stories of people that reside within these four walls.

This was an important empathy building exercise for all students. Traditionally, health care students approach their discipline bio-medically, often neglecting the importance of being empathic with their patients. This has had an important bearing in workplaces today with many issues in patient communication and care.

Similarly, architecture students are hardly ever encouraged to consider the reality of the community they are designing for. As a result, designs do not always meet the true needs of the client. Getting more involved with the target community and gaining a real

sense of the lives within these buildings was a critical step in this project. Not only did this increase their empathy towards the women, but it helped them maximise their resources to create the best possible design based on the situation described.

In addition to exchanging stories, the entire team was invited to a site visit of a refuge in Hornsby, Northern Sydney. The Mayor of the Hornsby council, originally a board member of the refuge, hosted the entire student and academic team at a civic reception to support the project. At this event, workers from the refuge attended and held a presentation in which they spoke about the facilities, its shortcomings and what would be needed to improve it.

Subsequently, the architecture and landscape students produced a series of design proposals for a women's refuge that directly addressed the circumstances and needs outlined by the nursing students and the stakeholders in the Hornsby refuge.

A total of 49 students collaborated on this project, and it formed part of their assessment tasks within their respective courses. By doing so, their academic assessment directly addressed an urgent social need, and the academic staff successfully merged the two worlds.

## **5. What has changed as a result of this work?**

### **5.1. The Outcomes**

While the results of the projects have thus far been theoretical, Dean is in the process of extending this initial pilot program and secure more faculty support. She is hopeful that her team will be able to work closely with councils and NGOs to put the academic work and research into practice.

To measure the impact on the students, the academic staff have conducted pre- and post-project research with the students. The results are currently being evaluated, but they show strong indications of increased empathy levels among all participating students.

Moreover, student feedback shows they were surprised, amazed and excited when collaborating outside their faculty. They enjoyed gaining new perspectives and approaching issues from multiple angles.

Once the research has been evaluated and analysed, it will be published and used to secure more funding and faculty support to extend the program. According to Dean, working more closely with councils and stakeholders and implementing some of the students' work will be critical to help domestic violence survivors.

## **5.2. Impact**

Despite still being in its pilot stage, the Refuge Project has undoubtedly triggered a response which faculties and universities can no longer ignore. By demonstrating the benefits and success of cross-faculty collaboration on a small scale, the team may well be on the way to implementing interdisciplinary projects into academic assessment strategies.

According to Dean, this has also been a push towards closer partnerships between universities and NGOs. In a past research project, which received very little funding, she demonstrated the immense benefits of merging academic research with those organisations who can actually use it to drive change. Through her research the organisation was able to change its practices and systems, and, overall, improve the situation for the vulnerable community it was serving.

The Refuge Project, she argues, is academic work driven by social change, which is beneficial on multiple levels.

In addition, the associated research demonstrates that such work increases the students' sense of empathy. She hopes that through continued effort and collaboration, more students will develop a sense of empathy and widen their perspectives. She is certain that such experiences at university can improve workplace practices as professionals enter with an increased awareness of their roles and responsibilities.

She also hopes to have set an example on how universities can step out of academia and make their work meaningful to drive social justice in their community.

## 6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

### 6.1. Personal enabling factors

Having dedicated much of her professional life working with domestic violence survivors and women struggling with substance abuse, Dean has developed a strong sense of resilience. Combined with her determination towards social justice, she has been able to advance the project despite very limited support.

In addition, her wealth of experience in the field has seen her form many important partnerships. By working with NGOs and organisations that are at the forefront of driving social change, she has been able to share her resources and knowledge where it is most needed.

### 6.2. External enabling factors

The Refuge project received overwhelming support from Hornsby council and the refuge which students were invited to work on. The experience of working with real stakeholders was greatly beneficial for the students, and Dean has plans to continue this relationship for future projects.

The research associated with the project has been assisted through the UTS Social Impact Framework Commissioned Research Grants scheme.

## 7. Challenges

While the Refuge Project was undoubtedly beneficial for students, Dean and Donnelly encountered much opposition from their respective faculties when suggesting to incorporate it into their subjects. Despite this lack of interest, the pair did not get discouraged and resolved to launching the project without faculty support.

It was their combined determination and courage that enabled students to have this experience. According to Dean, the culture of working as isolated faculties and not

using research to drive real social change is preventing many academics from taking a similar stance.

She hopes that more scholars and faculties will recognise the benefits of collaborating with each other and with external institutions in the future. If there were more emphasis on achieving social impact, research could benefit the general population rather than merely circulating in the academic sphere.

It is also essential to acknowledge the personal challenge of dealing with women and children who experienced violence, homelessness and substance abuse. Dean stresses the importance of self-care and mindful meditation, which she also incorporates into her teaching.

## 8. References

<https://theconversation.com/are-our-busy-doctors-and-nurses-losing-empathy-for-patients-68228>