



Practice article

Community-University Partnerships in an Era of University Crisis and Contraction: Reflections from an Organisational Partner

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Abstract

Engagement Australia and the Australian Universities Accord emphasise the importance of community-university partnerships for the future of research in Australia.

For organisations, certain assumptions about academic employment necessarily underpin community-university partnerships. As the university sector contracts, Anglicare Southern Queensland observes that community-university partnerships are increasingly at risk due to casualisation, fixed-term contracts, and waves of redundancies. Sitting at the coalface, we sound the alarm about the implications this has not only for higher

education but from the perspective of partner organisations. In this practice article, we firstly affirm the value of social sciences and the humanities for the social research that so often underpins community-university partnerships. We secondly assert the importance of stable employment for university-based academic and professional staff to sustain the wider imperatives of university engagement.



Engagement Australia and the Australian Universities Accord emphasise the importance of community-university partnerships for the future of research in Australia (Pink et al., 2023; O’Kane, 2024). In the twenty-first century, scholars are increasingly mindful of the imperative to transcend the extractive research practices of the past (e.g., Bunting et al., 2023). A plethora of methodological and practice-based research emphasises the importance of co-design (e.g., Blomkamp, 2018; Meyer et al., 2022; Nichols et al., 2024) and, more recently, community-led research (Rawlings et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2023), a model in which researchers are led by the interests and desires of communities rather than vice versa.

As a recent edition of *Transform: The Journal of Engaged Scholarship* exhorts, “Engagement Australia champions the importance of reciprocal partnerships in civic engagement” (Pink et al., 2023, p. 20). This practice article reflects on key community-university partnerships that Anglicare Southern Queensland has developed with university-based academics and to support student learning. We recognise the human, social, and cultural dimensions of the complex problems in our world that we need research to address today (Turner, 2025). Our community-university partnerships demonstrate the importance of pure research in social sciences and the humanities

for Anglicare Southern Queensland’s applied research, evaluation, and advocacy.

In an era where the value of social sciences and the humanities is constantly questioned (Turner & Brass, 2014; O’Mahoney et al., 2019), with particularly deleterious consequences in regional communities (Croft & Bradshaw, 2025; Kerruish & Hughes, 2025; Kuttainen, 2025), we assert the importance of these modes of knowledge production for the human services. Sitting at the coalface, we sound the alarm about the implications that casualisation, fixed-term contracts, and waves of redundancies have not only for those employed in the university sector but also from the perspective of communities and partner organisations.

Anglicare Southern Queensland

Anglicare Southern Queensland is a not-for-profit organisation in the human services sector. Our research fosters community-university partnerships in applied research specifically relating to our service delivery in aged care, foster and kinship care, counselling, family support, housing and homelessness, mission and community outreach, retirement villages, and youth support. Our advocacy uses evidence-based insights from our research to influence policy and work towards social justice. Historically, the remit

of our research has and continues to encompass applied allied health, health, and social research in the areas of our service delivery. Anglicare Southern Queensland’s new *Research, Evaluation & Advocacy Roadmap, 2025-2027* prioritises issues relating (but not limited) to young people; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; older people; and the human services workforce.

As sociologist Raewyn Connell observes, much of today’s “neo-conservatism has little use for the humanities and social sciences” (Connell, 2020, p. 749). In consequence of the breadth of Anglicare Southern Queensland’s research and advocacy, however, we continually engage with academics and students whose research is grounded in these very disciplines. Recent policy reforms such as the Morrison government’s 2020 Job-ready Graduate Package sought to attenuate the academic disciplines not currently in favour and “re-shape universities as job-training centres” (Connell, 2020, p. 749). While the desirability of the employment agenda was the Job-ready Graduate Package’s unchallenged rationale (Patfield et al., 2025; Jayasuriya, 2020; Moore, 2020), the remit of our research and advocacy demonstrates the importance of these disciplines for knowledge production in the human services.

At Anglicare Southern Queensland, we have a history of establishing

community-university partnerships with Australian universities in Queensland and beyond. One of our most enduring partnerships is with The University of Queensland Life Course Centre. A recent project, *Hanging by a Thread: Our Search for Home*, was a photovoice project in which young people from Anglicare Southern Queensland's youth homelessness and youth justice services used photography to explore their personal perceptions of "home" and "homelessness" (Anglicare Southern Queensland, 2023; Stambe et al., 2024). The research team included academics in the social sciences, including the disciplines of ethnography, social work, and sociology. This project featured a photography exhibition showcasing the young people's photographs that toured Southern Queensland including five large office towers in the Meanjin Brisbane CBD, conferences, fundraising events, and St John's Cathedral.

Anglicare Southern Queensland also supports our organisation's practitioners to lead and engage with research with the support of academic partners. Our Seed Grants Program links Anglicare Southern Queensland staff with university-based academics to bring the original research ideas of our staff to life (Anglicare Southern Queensland, 2025b). The program

aims to nurture collaborative applied research projects that Anglicare Southern Queensland can implement or pilot so as to benefit our clients, our staff, and our future service delivery. Successful projects may be scaled up, be internally transferable, or benefit the human services sector more broadly (Anglicare Southern Queensland, 2025b). A structural feature of the Seed Grants Program is that Anglicare Southern Queensland requires the principal university-based academic

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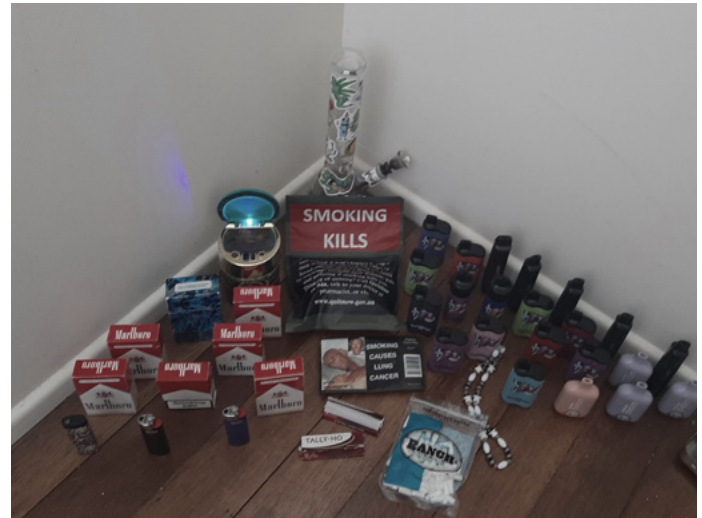
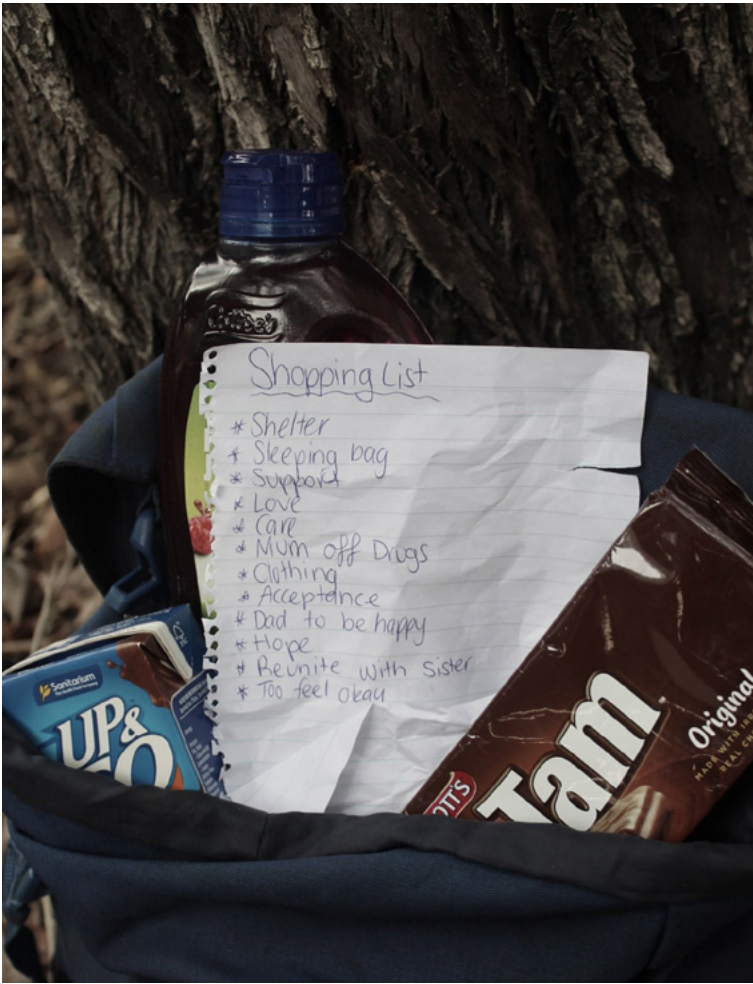
research partner to hold an ongoing contract. For the simple reason that we need consistency in our partners and access to a Human Research Ethics Committee to facilitate the research, this unfortunately excludes academics who hold honorary roles or are employed on casual, sessional, or fixed-term contracts of one year or less (Anglicare Southern Queensland, 2025b). We are also extremely reluctant to further perpetuate worker exploitation in the university sector.

Through a Seed Grant with the University of the Sunshine Coast, Anglicare Southern Queensland established the Anglicare Homeshare project (Anglicare Southern Queensland, 2025a). Bringing academics in the disciplines of counselling, social sciences, and urban planning together with practitioners in community services, this project seeks to respond to the current housing crisis by exploring the possibility of connecting older people who have

space to share in their houses with younger people who are in need of housing. An initial student-led scoping study undertook focus groups with homeowners and young people, identifying a number of friction points that may prevent both groups from engaging in home co-sharing (Davenport et al., 2024). The next phase of the project

sought further data collection through a survey that delved more deeply into homeowners' attitudes (McKinlay et al., 2025). The ultimate aim of the Anglicare Homeshare project is to better understand the challenges and opportunities of "home sharing" or "co-housing" in order to develop a pilot model in Southern Queensland.

Our research at Anglicare Southern Queensland is the foundation for our advocacy. One particular focus for our evidence-based advocacy includes concerns about housing and



Hanging by a Thread: Our Search for Home, Anglicare Southern Queensland

Top left: Grocery shopping

Top right: Unhealthy addiction

Bottom left: Home

Bottom right: Left to wander

homelessness in Queensland. The Rental Affordability Snapshot that we publish annually in collaboration with Anglicare Australia has provoked troubling insights about housing affordability in Queensland over time (e.g., Stevenson & Wood, 2025). “What is distinctive ... is the sheer consistency of the results, right across the country,” we observed in an article about the 2017 Rental Affordability Snapshot; “year after year, the private rental market has been shown to be out of reach of the vast majority of people in receipt of benefits or on minimum wage” (Wood, 2017, p. 61). Through the Youth Homelessness Project, Anglicare Southern Queensland continues to work towards raising \$14 million to build a youth homelessness service in Logan, Queensland, with the aim to address the escalating housing crisis (Anglicare Southern Queensland, 2025c).

At Anglicare Southern Queensland, we also have a history of supporting university students at Queensland universities. Over the past five years, we have hosted undergraduates from The University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology who have completed research projects within degrees relating to the social sciences, criminology, education, law and justice, and media studies. These students have contributed to research and knowledge translation for Anglicare Southern Queensland in projects as diverse as complex

rental tenancies (Shabrokh et al., 2019), housing co-sharing for care leavers (Davenport et al., 2024), media representations of youth crime (Gu et al., 2024), young people's digital engagement (Woodhart et al., 2024), and women's transition from prison into the community. Anglicare Southern Queensland also supports student placements in allied health degrees, including social work, a practice-based degree with a strong commitment to human rights and social justice. Currently, we are newly embarking on Higher Degree by Research internships with the University of the Sunshine Coast through the federal government's Research Training Program Industry Internships scheme, with a particular interest in candidates undertaking a Master of Research or Doctor of Philosophy in the humanities and social sciences.

While pure and applied research in allied health and health remains extremely important to Anglicare Southern Queensland, the significance of multidisciplinary social research for our research, evaluation, and advocacy cannot be understated. In contrast to the employment agenda of the Job-ready Graduate Package (Patfield et al., 2025; Connell, 2020; Jayasuriya, 2020; Moore, 2020), knowledge from these disciplines informs our applied research in ways that feed back into professional practice. Our experience at Anglicare Southern Queensland suggests that students, graduates, and

academics in social sciences and the humanities bring immense value to organisations and community partners in the human services.

The Australian University Sector

At Anglicare Southern Queensland, our model for how we engage in community-university partnerships is necessarily based on the existing academic workload models of universities. With the ongoing workforce downsizing of the Australian university sector (Owens et al., 2022), university employment models that are predicated on casualisation, fixed-term contracts, and redundancies have direct implications for our organisation. These models are antithetical to the development and sustenance of community-university partnerships.

As cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner stresses in a new appraisal of the Australian university sector, an academic's life should no longer be imagined as one of “privileged and leisured reflection” (Turner, 2025, p. 15), as many are experiencing “enormous challenges and [a] lack of hope” (Ibid., inside cover). Alongside the transformation from an academic-led model of governance to neoliberalism, managerialism, and corporatisation (Smyth, 2017; Watts, 2017; Kezar et al., 2019; Turner, 2025), a shift has occurred wherein universities are increasingly conceptualised as moving from “a ‘public’ to ‘private’ good



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(Wood, 2017, p.61)



– from civic education to a utilitarian emphasis on equipping students with the skills and flexibility needed by ever-changing labour markets” (Doidge & Doyle, 2022, p. 669). The shrinking of federal government investment has resulted in ever-increasing staff-student ratios; in the process, “[a]cademic staff have endured ballooning enrolments, unmanageable workloads and precarious patterns of employment” (Turner, 2025, p. 13). These shifts have broader implications for the conditions that are necessary to create the reciprocity that underpins community-university partnerships.

From the very first edition of *Transform*, Engagement Australia has acknowledged the detrimental impact of casualisation and fixed-term contracts on university engagement (Bell, 2017). As feminist anthropologist and senior university leader Sharon Bell has argued, “We should be concerned about casualisation of our sector and the fact that the shock of the new is that Australian universities have now become serious players in the ‘gig’ economy” (2018, p. 21).¹ The Carnegie Foundation Elective Classifications also animates the work of Engagement Australia. Its Community Engagement classification advocates for “the partnership (of knowledge and resources) between higher education institutions and the public and private sectors” in order to promote:

“collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (American Council on Education, 2025; Engagement Australia, 2025).

Since the early 2020s, several of the Australian universities that have elected to engage with the Carnegie Classification process have simultaneously undertaken large-scale voluntary and forced redundancies of academic and professional staff, with more projected into 2026.

In Australia, a key feature of reflection upon and the evaluation of community-university partnerships is the time and trust that is needed to establish meaningful relationships across the research team. As a recent reflection on the partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group and researchers at the University of New South Wales acknowledges, “this involves changing the way in which they work to allow time for

trust to develop with community collaborators, a process that often takes longer than university staff are used to” (Mccausland et al., 2024, p. 24). Engagement Australia further acknowledges that community engagement practice in the Australian university sector has long faced unique challenges, including “distance, competitive advantage, staff workload and the perception of leadership’s willingness to share institutional information” (Pink et al., 2023, p. 22). This precarity extends to the professional staff who facilitate community-university partnerships from within universities (Peacock & Campbell, 2023). More recent research empirically verifies just how extreme workloads have become, with mental health consequences for many academics (Zentveld et al., 2025).

Staff workload within universities has particular salience for community-university partnerships, as this determines whether these partnerships can even be established in the first place. Writing on the history of industriousness in twentieth-century Australia, historians of higher education and retail, Hannah Forsyth and Matthew Bailey, observe:

Work discipline was not only internalised[; ...] it was also externally imposed by managerial

¹ In the United States, scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the “Gig Academy” has become the dominant organisational model for higher education (Kezar et al., 2019).



process ... as any scholar operating under neoliberal academic workload models knows. The work intensification that academics know ... is part of the proletarianisation of white-collar professions in the decades following their massive growth, which was not-coincidentally fuelled largely by tertiary-educated women (Forsyth & Bailey, 2025, p. 203; Forsyth, 2023).

Forsyth famously took a voluntary redundancy when her former institution

underwent a major restructure that reversed a recent international academic recruitment agenda in the humanities (Forsyth, 2023; Forsyth, 2024).

At Anglicare Southern Queensland, we are witnessing the ramifications of these paradoxes, even as our Seed Grant Program offers the foundations for community-university partnerships. We have been struck in recent years by a growing phenomenon of possible university-based academic partners

either being casual staff who are employed on sessional and fixed-term contracts or who are affiliated with a university only in an adjunct capacity.² While some adjuncts are retired, others remain affiliated simply to retain a university email address and access to library resources (i.e., scholarly databases), alongside the professional networks that come with these connections. This affiliation does not ensure any remuneration for an academic to invest their time and expertise in our

² In Australia, being an adjunct specifically means an academic has an unremunerated honorary affiliation with a university, whereas in the United States this refers to an academic who is employed and remunerated on a fixed-term contractual basis, usually for teaching and learning.

projects; neither does it necessarily ensure access to a Human Research Ethics Committee. We also observe that university research offices do not always consider the funding our Seed Grant Program provides to be adequate. As academics are forced to apply for ever-larger grants, regardless of the likelihood of success (Turner, 2025), many research offices demand a greater injection of funds. In the process, the possibility of community-university partnerships focused on social research are directly undermined.

Better recognition therefore needs to be accorded to how community-university partnerships are fostered, who is doing the work, and under what conditions. “So much of the engagement activity at Australian universities goes unseen and unrecognised by the wider university,” Engagement Australia rightly asserts:

Relationships are often managed at an individual level and as a result, are fragile and at risk if a staff member leaves. A focus on reciprocity, encourages the conversation about mutual benefit and intentional design with community, with clear outcomes in mind. While many partnerships span multiple years and emerge significantly over time, a commitment to reciprocity ensures that the partnership, outcomes, initiatives, and approaches evolve with the partnership (Pink et al., 2023, p. 20).

A staff member leaving will, of course, always have implications for communities’ and organisations’ ability to foster partnerships. As the university sector is projected to contract, community-university partnerships are not only at risk of staff simply leaving but additionally at risk of university-based academic or professional staff being made redundant by voluntary or forcible means.

Understanding the impact of these employment trends upon both the academics themselves and the community-university partnerships they facilitate is challenging. There is already a large literature about casualisation and fixed-term contracts in the Australian university sector (Woelert et al., 2025; Rothengatter & Hil, 2013; Kimber, 2003), including growing recognition of the ethical dilemmas underpinning precarious employment (Harris et al., 2025). While empirical research about redundancy is emerging (Glendon, 2024; Owens et al., 2022), autoethnographic and reflective approaches are far more common (Simpson, 2022; Andrew, 2020; Joseph, 2015). Using autoethnography to criticise university management practices nevertheless holds inherent risks and possible legal ramifications (Merga, 2025). Many of the Australian academics whose research this practice article cites are insecurely employed, or work at (or are affiliated with) universities that have recently undertaken or announced major

redundancies across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

Stable employment for university-based academic and professional staff is critical for Anglicare Southern Queensland’s ability to engage in community-university partnerships. Our experience nevertheless demonstrates the value that long-term collaborations with academics bring to applied research in the human services. Casualisation, fixed-term contracts, and waves of redundancies therefore pose a direct risk to Anglicare Southern Queensland’s applied research and evidence-based advocacy.

Where to from here?

At Anglicare Southern Queensland, we are doing our part to support the university sector and the education and training of the next generation. Our staff are supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students in industry internships and placements; and multiple organisational portfolios are funding community-university partnerships. Yet the Australian university sector is not holding up its end of the bargain. Many academics, especially those employed on a casual basis, are simply not in a position to contemplate engaging with us in community-university partnerships. Even for those who can, academic workloads and the prospect of redundancy mean that what is required to build meaningful relationships can all too easily be ruptured.

As Connell and Turner so painstakingly illustrate, alternative models of what constitutes “the university” in the twenty-first century are not only possible – they are necessary (Connell, 2019; Turner, 2025). We advocate for university-based academics who are experiencing employment insecurity because the stability of researchers in the university sector is in the best interests of Anglicare Southern Queensland and other community organisations. Without serious government funding and intervention, the hoped-for community-university partnerships intended to sustain the Australian Universities Accord’s vision for the future of research in Australia are inherently at risk. New models of community-university partnerships will be required to create different futures for research and advocacy, both within universities and the sectors in which we, as organisations and community partners, are based.

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