By promoting its research results to influence policy, ACU National’s Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship aims to help improve the health and wellbeing of Australians, especially those who are disadvantaged.

Director Professor Ruth Webber leads a team of eight researchers who have received numerous research awards. With postgraduate qualifications in education, psychology and sociology, Professor Webber is a prolific author and a speaker in demand for occasions ranging from welfare and church bodies to internationally conferences.

“The whole direction and push of our research is in the Catholic tradition of engagement with social justice,” Professor Webber says.

In collaboration with a network of Catholic reciprocal partners who share common values and histories of serving others, the Flagship is focusing on a long-term national health strategy and on strengthening communities, supporting families and social inclusion.

“All of our projects are working to fulfill the Gospel imperatives, that we love one another, that we support each other. Together we’re much stronger than individually,” Professor Webber says.

Research into long-term health initiatives includes how aged care residents influence their care and quality of life, and the cognitive basis of emotional regulation in adults with schizophrenia. Other major health research is being done through the Intellectual Disability and Ageing project, seeking a suitable transition for the intellectually disabled into aged care.

“It is central to the Catholic mission to work with the most disadvantaged groups in society,” Professor Webber said. In this project, partners include the Gill Family Trust, which finances some of the Flagship’s work, government departments, such as the Department of Human Services, and Catholic Church groups such as the Jesuit Social Services and Centacare. “We involve all stakeholders, including the clients, the disadvantaged themselves and their families.”

The Flagship’s work in strengthening communities includes the Future Generation Network, which involves interdisciplinary research developing policies to overcome a concerning increase in youth problems in Australia.

A five-year study by Professor Webber, Dr Father Michael Mason CSSR and Dr Andrew Singleton of Monash University led to the well-received book The Spirit of Generation Y, which detailed how the spirituality of young people influenced their concern for others and an active interest in social justice.

More recently, in the research project Pilgrims’ Progress 2008, the trio surveyed 12,000 young people before going to World Youth Day (WYD) and interviewing 50 of them in depth. The team is now undertaking further interviews and another large-scale survey.

“What we hope to get out of it is why they went to WYD, what faith development they experienced and also the way an event like WYD influences their social concern with the wider world, participation and service,” the researchers said.

Students at WYD from the Brisbane Campus are pictured above.

A further project is planned which involves keeping long-term prisoners connected to their families. The working party includes representatives of community groups including Prison Fellowship, Jesuit Social Services, Department of Justice, Centacare, lawyers and academics from other universities.