Australian Catholic University (ACU National) is an extraordinary university. Our commitment to social justice and the common good, expressed in our Mission, clearly sets out for us why we exist and what we must achieve, through our courses, through our graduates, and through our diverse relationships with others.

ACU National is the only university in Australia that has such a social justice Mission and I am honoured to witness the many ways our staff, students, graduates and partners continue to interpret it, reflect upon it and be agents of change, locally, nationally and internationally.

It is particularly fitting that this, my final acunique, should focus on community engagement. In the past 10 years I have been honoured to witness in our University, with our partners, the power of our Mission and its growth, and of our increasing engagement with diverse communities.

In a changing world, our University continues to respond to diverse needs, for at the heart of our Mission is a recognition that our role is to hear people’s needs and to meet them, with all our professional skills, and with all our care.

I am delighted to provide this snapshot of achievements in community engagement such as the Clemente Australia program, changing lives as it grows from strength to strength, bringing tertiary education and multiple benefits to people who are homeless, poor and marginalised.

I am immensely proud, too, of our University’s capacity-building work in East Timor which is also showcased, along with glimpses of the activities of some of our award-winning and extraordinary students, staff, graduates, volunteers and partners, as they reflect on and respond to need, creating change for the better through genuine community engagement.

Our commitment to community engagement is supported by policies and structures which continue to evolve and strengthen, nourished by more than three decades of projects and activities at ACU National and our predecessor colleges. This rich history has created the model of partnership, mutuality and reciprocity which has paved the way for many of our other successful, sustainable engagement ventures, now spanning all faculties and all schools. It is so central and so dispersed now, we can call it our core business.

The importance we place on community engagement is reflected in the prominence it is given within the University. Professor John O’Gorman, as our Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality and Engagement), leads the initiative and is supported by the recently established Institute for Advancing Community Engagement.

So high is the priority we give community engagement that we have selected it as a theme to be audited during 2008 by the Federal Government’s Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

As my own decade at ACU National draws to a close, I am profoundly grateful to have witnessed the impact of our distinctive community engagement, through the activities of the staff, graduates and students who embody our Mission.

Their awareness, skills and willingness to become involved are amplified again and again through their strong and healthy relationships with communities and with our supporters and friends in the Church, in the professions, and in business, industry and government.

As I prepare to leave ACU National, may I put on record that I welcome signs in the wider world that the corporate sector is beginning to recognise the social and ultimate financial benefits that demonstrating genuine Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can bring. Indeed, business partnering with the Church, community organisations and universities is all about increasing efficiencies, about successfully targeting areas of highest need, and about measuring and maximising impacts of effective CSR activities.

Community engagement is a vital and valued agent of change. The challenge for the future will be for social responsibility and community engagement to flourish together at ACU National, for the common good.

Professor Peter W Sheehan AO
Vice-Chancellor