Since ACU National’s first volume of acunique, A Mission Possible, featured Australia’s pioneering Clemente Australia program in East Sydney in 2005, a further four programs have begun in East Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane and Campbelltown, and at least six more are expected to begin around Australia in the next two years.
“It is a privilege to be able to work with our collaborators, learning partners and these students.”

‘True belief’, true questions, and a sense of achievement

The uniqueness and success of the programs, which have involved more than 100 people who are homeless, poor and disadvantaged, have attracted wide media interest.

The university-level courses, taught with the help of voluntary learning partners and collaborating institutions such as Mission Australia and the St Vincent de Paul Society, cover such topics as history and politics, Shakespeare, Australian Indigenous people past and present, the nature of drama, art and an introduction to ethics.

Students who successfully complete four of the course units may enrol in ACU National’s on-campus degree courses or choose to apply to other universities and tertiary education providers.

Student John van Gulik, who was featured on ABC TV’s 7.30 Report earlier this year, having graduated with his Certificate in Liberal Studies, is among some 14 Clemente students who have so far gone on to study at university. He has been studying arts at ACU National’s Strathfield Campus this year.

John described how he “wound up living in St Kilda at age 15 and started using heroin”. Until recently, he was “pretty much deeply entrenched in that lifestyle of addiction and crime” but Clemente Australia “transformed my life”.

Associate Professor Peter Howard modelled Clemente Australia, on the work of US author Earl Shorris, who wrote Riches for the Poor.

“As far as I’m concerned, John is the tangible reality of this particular course and there are so many others within the Australian society that are just waiting for that helping hand,” said Professor Howard, who is pleased to see the program move from strength to strength. “What has happened is that there is accepted ownership from everyone. This came about through taking a risk and having a vision.”

Around the table at The Nagle Centre in Campbelltown in Sydney's southwest, distinctions blur between the students, lecturer and learning partners as questions of ethics are discussed.

Do people cause themselves to fall into the poverty trap? If people took more care of themselves, would there be fewer health issues? Are Australia’s recent anti-terrorism laws necessary to maintain safety and security?

ACU National theology lecturer Mr Michael Foley is a former ABC production manager turned prison, hospital and school chaplain, and an academic since 2003.

Mr Foley brings his wealth of experience to his Clemente Australia ethics classes for people who are marginalised, but he freely admits it is the students who do much of the teaching.

“My teaching has been turned on its head,” Mr Foley said.

“What has thrilled me is the skills and experience these people have. To take part, they have to be able to read a newspaper, but these people have the skills and the language to write a newspaper, to write anything.

“It’s been an eye-opener for me. People who have fallen through the cracks were vulnerable when they were young and they are vulnerable now. Life circumstances have not allowed them to meet their potential when they were younger, and in many cases, domestic situations haunt them their whole lives.

“It is a privilege to be able to work with our collaborators, learning partners and these students, to be part of something so positive.”

The Nagle Centre is run by the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Presentation Sisters. Centre director Mr Peter Presdee said people with disadvantages often lacked belief in themselves.

“The idea of getting these people to believe that they are valuable enough to achieve something they have never dreamed of, to start that process, in an environment they know, is a tremendous bonus,” Mr Presdee said. “They are building community, seeing that together they can make a difference. This is a great opportunity for these people, and a great opportunity for us to be part of their journey. If we are true to what we believe in, we need to be able to meet people where they are, and walk with them.”

Student Steve Foster, 50, of Ambarvale, has suffered from drug abuse, said the course was opening his mind. “I knew what morals and principles were,” he said. “These things come to you naturally as a human, but I really hadn’t got into ethics.”

Student Jenny Sheppard, 52, who works at The Nagle Centre, said she was from “the school of hard knocks” and had always wanted to study at university level. “I am a single parent,” Jenny said. “I’ve raised three children on my own. My husband suicided. I felt this course would give me a chance to broaden my own knowledge and perhaps lead to other study. Michael has been fantastic presenting the course in an interesting way. I’ve met lots of other people. They’ve all got their own skills. Everyone is really friendly, regardless of the reasons we are here. I’ve enjoyed the discussion and interaction, and the support from the learning partners is great.”

Student Cheryl Woods, 41, of Ruse, juggles raising two children with part-time work, initially feared the course would be too hard, but is finding it “immensely enjoyable” as does student Cindy Lockhart, 36, from Campbelltown, pictured.

“Everyone has made it so interesting,” Cheryl said. “I love being in group discussions. I am hooked. The course isn’t easy, but they help you along.”