

# Chapter 1: Teaching Homelessness

## Academic-Industry Collaboration to Advance Social Work Homelessness Education

Juliet Watson, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

In 2017, as a way of addressing the lack of homelessness-specific preparation for social work graduates, RMIT University and Unison Housing, one of Victoria's largest social housing providers, launched an education and research partnership — The Unison Housing Research Lab. A key purpose of the Lab was to address the shortage of homelessness-specific tertiary education. This involved two initiatives to create and develop educational opportunities: an undergraduate course and doctoral scholarships.

### Homelessness Course

The Lab employed a social work academic to design and coordinate the course — Homelessness: Contemporary Themes, Policy and Practice — which involved consultation with the RMIT Social Work Department, Unison, homelessness research academics and advocates. This stakeholder participation ensured that both sector and academic requirements were embedded in the syllabus. This elective course is aligned with the RMIT Social Work and Human Services Cluster. As such, a critical social perspective that involves analyses of power and intersectional discrimination, and that positions social workers as change agents working to dismantle structures of oppression, is fundamental to the course.

Run as an intensive course for undergraduate students during the summer semester break, it is designed to expose students to a range of perspectives from researchers, service providers, consumers, and advocates. The course is structured according to assessment and tasks that meet set learning outcomes.

Successful completion of the course means that students are able to:

1. define and articulate the concept of homelessness and how it is affected by policy, practice and research
2. critically analyse, synthesise and reflect on how factors such as housing market conditions, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and place contribute to homelessness
3. identify and appraise policy and practice contexts affecting the delivery of homelessness services
4. critically analyse and apply theoretical frameworks that inform homelessness research, policy and practice.

The teaching program consists of workshops that cover topics such as definitions of homelessness, the dynamics of homelessness, lived experiences, the homelessness and housing sector, Indigenous homelessness, gender and homelessness, and institutional responses.

An integral component of the course is the opportunity for students to visit housing and homelessness agencies where they conduct interviews with key workers as part of their assessment. This activity, highly regarded by the students, allows them to observe the environment in which service providers operate and to hear from those with frontline experience in the field. A range of organisations have been involved in both the agency visits and the class presentations including Unison, Salvation Army, Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation, Council to

Homeless Persons (including the Peer Education Support Program) and Launch Housing. This support for the course from industry is invaluable in exposing students to working conditions as well as offering insights into immediate and emerging sector concerns.

### Scholarships

The RMIT-Unison partnership has also invested in educational pathways for future homelessness researchers through the provision of three doctoral scholarships. These students are co-supervised by the Lab's social work academic, highlighting the value placed on social work theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Following open competition, two scholarships were awarded to social work graduates. That these scholarships were highly competitive indicates the interest in homelessness research careers, particularly by social work graduates, and also speaks to the need for social work education programs to prepare students for specialisation in homelessness research as well as practice.

The appointment of the social work doctoral students has resulted in the Lab making adjustments to incorporate and enhance social work education. This has been a reflexive and reciprocal process in which the students are active members of the Lab, sharing their evolving knowledge with colleagues. The doctoral students' prior education has primed them to bring critical social work perspectives to their projects. Importantly, the students are expected to contribute to the homelessness research space through empirical studies and by progressing critically-informed theoretical frameworks. They are shaping the research produced by the Lab and contributing to



a legacy of homelessness and housing research from a social work perspective. The doctoral students further participate in the translation of research into education through teaching into the university's social work program.

The participation of social work doctoral students in the Lab

has created additional research opportunities. These were not initially incorporated into the education aims of the Lab, but instead have evolved organically through the collaborative relationships involved in the partnership. For example, the Lab's research program is responsive to the ongoing and emerging areas of inquiry for Unison, with a suite

of projects being undertaken at different times. Social work graduates, including the Lab's doctoral students, are desirable candidates for employment as research assistants on these projects, which have in turn fostered opportunities for them to further develop their research skills and to consolidate their relationships with the industry partner.