APPROACHES TO WICKED PROBLEMS

UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC UNIT

Making a real impact in communities through learning and collaboration
ABOUT THE UNIT: SVLG2008

Approaches to Wicked Problems is an intensive service learning unit that offers enquiry-based learning, leadership training and develops valuable skills transferable to later studies and employment. It is delivered by the McCusker Centre for Citizenship at UWA in partnership with community organisations and networks. The first unit took place in January-February 2020 in collaboration with the WA Alliance to End Homelessness.

This experiential unit is grounded in project-based learning where students work in small groups on a real-world problem or need with and for community partners and the people they serve. Students participate in activities and learning focused on:

- The nature of wicked problems
- Problem solving using a design thinking approach
- How to do collaboration well
- The nature and scope of the relevant community topic

A lead community partner for each unit works closely with the teaching staff to provide advice and guidance on the relevant community or problem, scope projects, facilitate guest speakers and site tours, and work with students to ensure project outcomes have a positive and lasting impact.
The first unit, in partnership with the WA Alliance to End Homelessness, resulted in five projects that have already had an impact on communities, including a school lesson guide aimed at developing empathy and understanding of homelessness amongst school students and a series of case studies on local governments collaborating to address homelessness.

Community partners have found the experience beneficial - not just due to the significant work done on projects - but also in having university students take on problems with a fresh approach. Students experienced academic and personal development, shifts in attitudes towards community issues, and changes in behaviour as a result.

100 per cent of students agreed there was value in completing the unit and that they have a better understanding of the issue(s) of homelessness as a result of this unit.

“This unit really opened my eyes to the fact that homelessness does impact anyone, and can impact anyone at any time … and that anyone who is experiencing homelessness deserves to have a place to live.”

“I think the management and general care to the unit and the students has been potentially the best I have experienced while studying at UWA.”

“I previously felt like my capacity to contribute was limited to an extent and didn't feel like my individual efforts matter in the grand scheme of things but this unit has taught me that even small efforts to engage with something do truly matter.”

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“I have learnt that everyone has some capacity to give back to the community.”