

A different way of working – together

1. Summary of impact

Articulating the aims of Nelly’s Healing Centre in ways that make sense to both Indigenous women and government funding bodies isn’t always easy.

There’s not only a gap between government bureaucracies and the lives of many of the people who may need their assistance, but also between the world of social services and that of a university.

Lucy Klippan and Giti Datt who work out of UTS’s Design Innovation Research Centre (DIRC) used a \$5000 Social Impact Grant to build up trust and strong relationships between the Board of Nelly’s and UTS. From out of this, a new service model for Nelly’s was co-developed that utilised the strengths and experience of everyone involved, particularly Nelly’s Board.

The project team also created a poster used at the 2019 Health Justice Conference held at UTS. They’ll be presenting together on building partnerships between universities and Indigenous-led organisations at a conference in February next year.

2. The problem

Translating Nelly’s aims into language understandable to both its clients and government, and doing so in a way that brought the lived experiences of Nelly’s Board to the forefront was a challenge.

“Part of what we’re doing is trying to understand what it is Nelly’s are trying to provide and how they are trying to do it, and to find a way of expressing that visually, verbally, which is true to that, but which doesn’t replicate or mimic government services.”

Intake forms are a case in point. As the first official point of contact between an organisation and someone wanting to access services like counselling or legal assistance, they can ultimately determine if that person continues to seek help – especially if they cover difficult ground like prior convictions and personal relationships.

3. Beneficiaries

Ultimately it's hoped the new service model will benefit the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who approach Nelly's for support and healing. Many of the women who come to Nelly's have experienced the removal of children, domestic violence or the criminal justice system.

4. Approach to impact

Given the inherent power imbalance between a small not-for-profit run by Aboriginal women and a large mainstream higher education institution like UTS, developing new approaches to intake for Nelly's was never going to be straightforward.

"There's a long history of researchers going in and taking data that is ultimately of no benefit really to the Aboriginal people who are providing it – it was something we were conscious of and wanted to get away from, from the very beginning," says Giti.

For this reason, co-designing new approaches required sensitivity. But it also required the ability to listen – a skill often undervalued by academia.

"In design we often use tools, particularly 'empathy tools', and processes and frameworks and things like that in order to extract information and then do 'human-centred design', but the designer is still essentially the expert, the designer still has all of the power," says Giti.

An academic focus on 'objectivity' can also mean those working at universities sometimes feel obliged to jettison personal relationships that might affect project outcomes. But with the powerful advocates on the Board at Nelly's – some of whom

have lived experience of the problems they are trying to address – this approach clearly wasn't going to fly.

“I think quite quickly we worked out that we had to leave a lot at the door when we started having conversations with people” says Lucy.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

The project team produced a poster used at the 2019 Health Justice Conference. They'll also be presenting together on building partnerships between universities and Indigenous-led organisations at a conference in February next year.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

Lucy credits the women at Nelly's with transforming her expectations of what an academic project could look like.

“It's been an amazing experience to be able to work with these women. It's completely different to other work that we do, or work that we've done. There is a shared feeling and shared sense of trust between us and Nelly's now which is really great,” she says.

7. Challenges

Accepting that building relationships was an important output in itself was part of the challenge.

“From the beginning, this project was not just about project outputs but fundamentally about this partnership. To be perfectly frank it's ongoing. It's not like we've arrived. It's constantly going on, this negotiation, it's something we're constantly learning and re-learning how to do,” says Giti.