

## **Catholic universities focus on vulnerability under Covid-19**

Catholic universities are responding to the international crisis provoked by Covid-19 with a call for research on the vulnerability of humankind and the world we inhabit.

The Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities (SACRU) commissioned a working group to examine the research and teaching responses that could best respond to the Covid-19 crisis.

The working group has produced a paper which calls on Catholic universities to focus on the vulnerabilities which Covid-19 has exposed not only in health, but also in social and economic systems. The paper says that these vulnerabilities combine with the ongoing crisis of ecosystems and natural resources to create an unprecedented condition of risk for humans.

Australian Catholic University (ACU) ethicist Dr David Kirchhoffer, who is a member of the working group, said while vulnerability was a normal human condition, the current circumstances had forced us to recognise vulnerability we had previously ignored.

“The pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing conditions of human vulnerability. We have become aware of our interconnectedness and our dependency on each other and on the effectiveness of governments.

“We have seen the huge difference between societies where the virus has been contained because governments and citizens could respond quickly and effectively, compared with those places where there has been no effective control.”

The working group has identified three areas of vulnerability: health and healthcare, ecosystems and natural resources, and social and economic systems.

Dr Kirchhoffer said in all three areas, the Covid-19 crisis had exposed ethical questions. “In health care we have had to make decisions about the allocation of scarce resources as well as our approaches to protecting the community. Countries that chose a ‘herd immunity’ approach focused on reducing the future vulnerability of the human population, while those that chose ‘hard lockdown’ focused on the present vulnerability of those at risk.

“In the social and economic sphere, Covid exposed and exacerbated inequality both within and between countries, and in the ecological context, it has reminded us of our dependency on our physical environment and our vulnerability to environmental change.”

The paper calls on Catholic universities to attend to these areas of vulnerability, not only through their research and teaching programs but also in the care members of university communities display for one another.

The Vice-Chancellor of Australian Catholic University, Professor Zlatko Skrbis, who is on the governing board of SACRU, welcomed the attention SACRU is giving to the wider outcomes of the pandemic.

“Awareness of vulnerabilities aligns closely with our mission to work for the dignity of the human person and the common good. The Covid-19 pandemic has required all of us to rebuild our systems and structures for a changed world. ACU’s world class research makes an important contribution to addressing the vulnerabilities identified in this paper in health care, social structures and the environment. The current circumstances remind us of the importance of this work.”

**Dr David Kirchhoffer is available for interview.**

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