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Abstract | The University of Sydney and Youth Justice New South Wales signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in July 2021. This MoU builds on various prior collaborative activities between the two organisations and related work in other jurisdictions. This paper reflects on the progress and challenges of collaboration of this kind. Specifically, there has been tentative progress in engaging non-traditional parts of the university in youth justice projects.

The initial stage of the collaboration highlighted challenges, including structures within the university which can frustrate interdisciplinary work. Time lines, staff turnover and resources also impacted this collaboration. We conclude with an outline of what might be achieved through ongoing collaboration and signal the importance of ongoing research to capture data and insights regarding the nature of this relationship as it develops.

A whole-of-university response to youth justice: Reflections on a university–youth justice partnership

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The University of Sydney and Youth Justice New South Wales (YJNSW) entered into a formal memorandum of understanding (MoU) in July 2021. This whole-of-university approach to youth justice builds on various successful relationships that are broadly similar in many respects. Universities have the potential to offer academic expertise, knowledge and new ideas to different industries which can support innovation (Bacon & Williams 2022). As social issues become increasingly complex, these multidisciplinary partnerships are considered vital to the resolution of these issues (Bacon & Williams 2022). It is unsurprising that universities, youth justice and other criminal justice agencies have formed partnerships of various kinds over the years.

Celebrating
50 years

Cross-university engagement and whole-of-university responses

University–industry partnerships and research collaborations have been the subject of renewed academic interest. There is increasing recognition of their benefits, in terms of diffusion of expertise, skills and people; creation of mutual value over time; and promotion of economic success and innovation more broadly (see Plewa et al. 2013). For universities, partnerships with industry organisations can expose students and staff to ‘industry’ or ‘real-world’ experiences, increase employment opportunities for students, offer financial support for educational and research endeavours and identify relevant problems and research topics of significance. For industry partners, university collaborations can give access to academic expertise, establish student placements that may evolve into recruitment opportunities and facilitate transfer of current knowledge or ‘best practice’ from academia to industry (see Prigge 2005). Ultimately, these collaborations can ‘open the frontiers of knowledge’ and ‘accomplish goals of mutual interest to both industry and the university’ (Reams 1986: 149). In Australia, university–industry research collaborations have steadily increased since the 1980s (Plewa et al. 2013). These collaborative research projects have been supported through research funding schemes such as the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Program, which funds projects between university researchers and industry partners, with the overall aim of stimulating long-term strategic alliances between universities and industry.

Opportunities for collaboration have also expanded, with burgeoning cross-university research centres involving staff across numerous disciplines and faculties. The University of Sydney, like other Australian universities, hosts several such multidisciplinary initiatives and research centres. These centres draw on expertise from a wide-ranging subset of academic staff and students at the university to facilitate unique insights into a variety of research areas, including:

- [Matilda Centre](#)—focused on prevention and treatment of mental and substance use disorders;
- [Brain and Mind Centre](#)—focused on conditions that affect child development, youth mental health and brain ageing;
- [Research Centre for Children and Families](#)—focused on research with children, young people and families;
- [CREATE Centre](#) (short for Creativity in Research, Engaging the Arts and Transforming Education, Health and Wellbeing)—focused on creativity research and the role of the arts in creative education, health and wellbeing;
- [Centre for Disability Research and Policy](#)—focused on policy and practice initiatives that improve the lives of people with disability in Australia and the Asia-Pacific;
- [GambleAware](#)—focused on problem gambling;
- [Cyberpsychology Research Group](#)—focused on digital solutions that aim to positively impact health outcomes and expand education and training in the field of cyberpsychology and digital health;
- [National Centre for Cultural Competence](#)—focused on cultural competence research and transformational education;
- [Rural Health Centres](#)—multidisciplinary centres for education in rural health for medical, nursing and allied health students;

- [Sydney Informatics Hub](#)—support, training and expertise in research data management, statistics, data science, software engineering, simulation, visualisation, bioinformatics and research computing;
- [Sydney Policy Lab](#)—focused on investigating complex policy issues;
- [Centre for Continuing Education](#)—offers a series of short courses and corporate training backed by the expertise of the University of Sydney and expert educators;
- [SPEECH Clinic](#)—offers a wide range of speech pathology services to the general public; and
- [Nano Institute](#)—focused on molecular nanoscience, nanophotonics, quantum science and materials on the nanoscale.

Staff from the university also play key roles in several external research centres, including but not limited to the [Wellbeing Health and Youth Centre of Research Excellence in Adolescent Health](#), the [Life Course Research Centre](#), and the [Centre for Research Excellence: Indigenous Health and Alcohol](#).

Within the criminal justice space are various criminal justice or criminology research centres and consortia across Australia. For example, the University of Melbourne's [Centre for Health Equity](#) (formerly the Justice Health Unit) partnered with the [Youth Support and Advocacy Service](#) to examine the complex and concurrent health issues—including mental health, substance use issues, suicidality and self-harm—that arise in young people embroiled in the criminal justice system. The University of Melbourne's Centre for Health Equity has also signed an MoU with the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) to collaborate on issues related to the health of those in custody. The partnership has extended the Centre for Health Equity's impact by giving it international recognition for the delivery of short courses and has allowed the unit to tap into the prison health expertise this committee can offer.

Similar centres established since then include the [Designing Out Crime Research Centre](#) (DOC-RC) at the University of Technology Sydney. Established in 2008, DOC-RC partnered with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice to develop and use design innovation methods to create new ways of reducing crime-related problems. It has since undertaken over 200 research projects and run more than 100 teaching studios.

Additional criminal justice or criminology research centres and consortia include but are not limited to:

- [University of Western Australia's Crime Research Centre](#) (1989–2014);
- [Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies](#);
- [Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium](#);
- [Monash University Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre](#);
- [RMIT's Centre for Innovative Justice](#);
- [Griffith Criminology Institute](#);
- [Queensland University of Technology Centre for Justice](#);
- [Flinders University Centre for Crime Policy and Research](#);
- [University of New England Centre for Rural Criminology](#);
- [UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research](#);
- [UNSW Centre for Criminology, Law and Justice](#);

- [UNSW National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre](#);
- [Charles Sturt University Centre for Law and Justice](#); and
- [University of Sydney Institute of Criminology](#).

Common across these justice research centres and consortia is a focus on interdisciplinary and collaborative research that engages stakeholders from government and the community in the study and application of criminal justice and criminology. These examples demonstrate part of the history of collaboration between universities and youth justice/criminal justice agencies. Some of these examples demonstrate deeper and more sustained engagement with a single agency; others are more project based and episodic, arising as issues emerge or mutual need dictates.

Memorandum of understanding and related activities

With the benefits of university–industry partnerships in mind, the University of Sydney and YJNSW entered into an MoU in July 2021. This MoU has the following key areas of focus:

- student placements from relevant university schools and faculties;
- professional development of YJNSW employees;
- collaborative research, joint symposia, lectures and conferences of mutual interest;
- cooperation in research and other areas of mutual interest;
- exchange of resource materials and publications that are of mutual interest and permissible under the parties’ legislative frameworks; and
- other matters of exchange relative to the functions of either party and cooperation based upon mutual agreement and understanding.

This agreement builds on previous individual collaborative projects, including jointly hosted public education seminars, commissioned research projects and student internships. While these initiatives were important and beneficial, they did not join up or create a sustainable platform for ongoing engagement. Moreover, these individual initiatives were often siloed within the specific disciplines of psychology, criminology and social work. Consequently, diverse and ‘non-traditional’ areas of the university were less likely to be engaged or contribute to collaborative activities. The MoU seeks to address these limitations by catalysing a whole-of-university response to youth justice. Engaging as many areas of the university as possible will assist in the development of novel approaches to various youth justice issues and challenges. Several activities have been undertaken since the MoU was signed. Some are summarised briefly below.

Collaborative workshops and webinars

The University of Sydney and YJNSW have held three major collaborative workshops. The first was an online workshop (because of COVID-19). Over 60 staff from across both organisations attended. This workshop foreshadowed the signing of the MoU and provided an opportunity for both organisations to showcase some of their work and strategic priorities.

A second online collaborative workshop offered an opportunity for YJNSW to identify research gaps that could be addressed through the partnership with the university. This workshop involved

60 participants from both groups. Five YJNSW presentations highlighted a variety of significant and relevant problems and research topics pertaining to their work.

The third significant collaborative workshop reviewed progress to date and involved a smaller delegation of staff. This workshop identified a particular challenge around placement of university students from different faculties or schools with YJNSW. Student internship and placement agreements have traditionally been siloed and established by individual faculties or schools, which meant that separate agreements were required for student placements for each faculty or school. This was a time-consuming and duplicative process; creation of a single head agreement that requires simple documentation covering each cohort of students being placed at YJNSW sites has resolved the issue.

University staff also delivered two webinars to YJNSW, showcasing work undertaken by areas of the university with direct or indirect relevance to youth justice. These included a presentation from the Matilda Centre and the Research Centre for Children and Families with staff from the Department of Communities and Justice's Youth Frontiers Program.

Internships and student placements

Several student placements and internships for University of Sydney students with YJNSW have occurred since the signing of the MoU. Placements have included students from various disciplines and faculties across the university, including criminology, social and political sciences, media and communications, and social work.

Beyond these arrangements, discussions have taken place with other university faculties to identify further student groups who might benefit from placements with YJNSW. Speech pathology, occupational therapy and exercise science have been central to these discussions. Given that young people in conflict with the law have disproportionate rates of intellectual disability, poor educational experiences and mental illness, numerous possibilities exist for speech pathology and occupational therapy students to usefully work in community and detention youth justice settings. Moreover, exercise science students are well placed to deliver fitness programs in youth detention facilities. Supervisory arrangements can complicate these placements, because these disciplines do not have the same representation in the youth justice system as social workers; however, these challenges are not insurmountable.

Student-led projects

As well as student placements and internships, several student-led projects have focused on YJNSW issues. Law School students have worked on YJNSW projects relating to bail, terrorism and high-risk offenders, traffic and short-term remand. More recently, Law School students have been working on two projects for the Children's Court of New South Wales about sentencing of young people. Students studying computer science have developed two virtual reality programs designed to assist in the recruitment and training of Youth Officers who work in youth custodial centres (known as Youth Justice Centres in NSW). The first program contains 18 virtual reality scenarios that Youth Officers may experience at a Youth Justice Centre, allowing future officers to be recruited, trained and upskilled without compromising the young people's privacy or centre security.

The second project was designed to assist with training Youth Officers responding to aggression or violence from a young person in custody. It consists of multiple training scenarios with a young person as an avatar. The program is underpinned by psychological research that has helped determine appropriate skills and strategies required in these situations. Digital Innovation students are also working to gamify a common intervention program used by YJNSW, to make content more engaging for young people.

An Oral History Project underway is a joint enterprise between the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Law School, with the aim of collecting stories from YJNSW staff that allow YJNSW officers to discuss their experiences of life inside youth correctional centres.

Postgraduate design students recently worked on a YJNSW project that involved designing an alternative accommodation option for young people. Postgraduate occupational therapy students worked with Classification Officers to design resources to help young people better understand the classification processes in custody. Two Industry and Community Project Units have focused on YJNSW issues, including improving outcomes for culturally diverse young people entering the youth justice system and how youth justice settings might embrace a digital transformation. These initiatives bring together students from various faculties and schools to work collaboratively on an industry-based problem.

Research

Staff in the university's architecture department have tested the acoustics within custodial environments and have captured sound measurements from a Youth Justice Centre and the Yasmarr Training Facility (formerly a Youth Justice Centre). These sound measurements have informed a preliminary report that outlines possible next steps.

A review of the Pasifika Program, implemented in a Youth Justice Centre, is currently underway. Professor Jioji Ravulo, Professor and Chair of Social Work and Policy Studies in the School of Education and Social Work, is leading the evaluation. This Pasifika program works alongside young people who identify as being from an Indigenous-Pacific heritage to support insight and understanding of cultural strengths and perspectives that support individual and family identities and wellbeing.

The University of Sydney has also begun a research project that will track the collaborative relationship between the university and YJNSW over the course of the MoU. This project aims to collect data on the experiences of both organisations' staff and students to identify benefits and challenges to inform future developments in the collaboration.

Additional activities

Adding to these more formal activities are numerous meetings and conversations between University of Sydney and YJNSW staff canvassing a wide range of issues. These discussions have contributed to growing networks across both organisations and familiarisation with current challenges faced by each organisation. Some are listed here to provide a sense of the nature of these dynamic and important exchanges.

Digital innovation in youth justice has been the focus of meetings involving university staff from the School of Architecture, Design and Planning; the Cyberpsychology Research Group; and the

Digital Innovation team. Discussions have explored the development of serious games for use in rehabilitation interventions, mapping existing digital technologies that could be repurposed for use in a youth justice context and the digital needs of the youth justice system more broadly.

Staff from psychology, social work and occupational therapy areas of the university have liaised with clinical staff in a youth detention centre to discuss the use of sensory modulation equipment with young people. Similarly, staff from the university's Centre for Disability Research and Policy and the education area have been engaged in some discussions about the YJNSW Disability Action Plan.

Finally, the University of Sydney Youth Justice Collaboration Research Centre was established in 2023, heralding a whole-of-university approach to the targeting of youth justice issues. The research centre brings together staff from across the university with an interest in improving youth justice outcomes and preventing youth crime, including the Matilda Centre, the Research Centre for Children and Families, the Centre for Disability Research and Policy, the Cyberpsychology Research Group, the Gambling Research and Treatment Clinic and the Communication Disorders Treatment and Research Clinic.

This section has covered just some of the multiple conversations opening up across and between the two organisations. Increasingly, this collaboration is touching on or involving numerous parts of the university, providing opportunities for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches and involvement of non-traditional sections of the university in the youth justice arena.

Collaboration challenges

While considerable progress has been made in the first two years of the formal collaboration, the partnership has faced various challenges. Many of these challenges are attributable to key differences in the organisational and institutional cultures of the university and YJNSW. These differences and concomitant challenges are frequently reported in literature exploring obstacles to university and industry partnerships. Perkmann, Neely and Walsh (2011) highlight institutional and organisational cultural differences, incentive misalignment and difficulties relating to project management as notable obstacles to university and industry collaboration. Fairweather (1991) also acknowledges these obstacles in his identification of six factors believed to be crucial to the success of research and collaboration partnerships:

- an understanding of cultural differences;
- leadership;
- organisational structure and research differences;
- institutional policies and contractual differences;
- capacity and resources; and
- faculty workload.

Issues in collaborative partnerships are unlikely to be attributable to a single factor; instead, these challenges probably arise from the myriad conditions and differences that characterise each participating organisation (Bacon & Williams 2022). The following section will briefly explore a selection of Fairweather's principal factors of relevance to the collaboration between the University of Sydney and YJNSW.

Cultural differences

Cultural differences can manifest themselves in the research mission, methods of operation and planned or perceived outcomes of the projects (Nimtz, Coscarelli & Blair 1995). When universities engage in research or collaboration, they usually do so with a longer term focus over an extended period. On the other hand, industry partners are usually focused on the short- or medium-term outcomes needed to produce new and effective strategies (Perkmann, Neely & Walsh 2011).

There has been some evidence of this tension about time frames. Some requests from YJNSW to the university demonstrate an urgency that weighs on YJNSW staff but can be difficult for university staff to respond to appropriately, especially because the bulk of the initial work has involved student-led projects, which often conform to semester timetables. Conversations regarding research priorities also hit similar issues, because university staff are acutely aware of the lengthy processes required to gain various ethical research approvals before they can undertake any novel fieldwork or research.

This issue is commonly reported in literature exploring university–industry partnerships where priorities for research topics do not necessarily align, based on differing perceptions of value, time pressures and operational procedures. It is hoped that, over time, such attitudinal differences will converge to allow both partners to share common ground about the nature of the collaboration, the research process and the outputs.

Leadership

Fairweather's second factor, leadership, is important to the provision of necessary resources, preservation of the organisational structure, identification of solutions to problems that arise and maintenance of communication channels (see also López Turley & Stevens 2015). Given the importance of this relationship building between respective leaders, early stages of research partnerships can be fraught: relationships are being developed, and time and resources are reciprocally invested.

In this context, building trust is critical. Youth justice and other criminal justice agencies often interact with universities when researchers approach them for funding, access to data or approval to conduct research. They also consume scholarship arising from these projects or other research endeavours which can be critical of aspects of their work. Cumulatively, these interactions can disincentivise youth justice and other criminal justice agencies from collaborating with universities. Conversely, university staff can be frustrated in their efforts to engage with industry partners where administrative or bureaucratic barriers foil their efforts and make it difficult to engage the right people. To minimise these barriers to effective collaboration, it is important to build inter-organisational trust through informal reciprocity, long-term investment, mutual understanding around different goals and incentive systems and consistent face-to-face interactions between academia and industry across a wide range of interaction channels.

With this in mind, the University of Sydney has hosted numerous events to expose university staff and YJNSW to each other's work, key staff and stakeholders, and to issues facing each agency. These events have also helped to develop trust, connections and insights between the two organisations. Periodic circulation of a list of achievements and current activities has maintained and aided regular communication. Much of this communication has been strategically ad hoc and informal, facilitating a level of flexibility and a capacity to respond to opportunities as they arise. These efforts at regular communication have been stymied, to some extent, by staff departures, leave arrangements, secondments and staff turnover generally across both organisations.

Organisational structure and research differences

The organisational structures of a university and an industry partner inform the conduct of research and can present challenges to effective collaboration. University organisational structures differ; some adopt bureaucratic red tape that impinges on the flexibility of faculty and staff to work outside their usual remit, while others adopt a decentralised approach that allows faculty members to control curriculum content and influence tenure and promotion decisions. Conversely, most industry groups are more homogeneous in their adoption of a top-down decision-making structure.

One aspect of the University of Sydney and YJNSW collaboration that reflects these complications relating to organisational structure is the agreement around student placements and internships. YJNSW and the University of Sydney Law School struck an initial agreement to accommodate student internships from a postgraduate criminology program. While this served its purpose for the placement of criminology students from the Law School, it was found not to be transferable to students across other faculties and schools. Consequently, a process was established to develop an overarching agreement that enabled students from all faculties to be placed in YJNSW offices. This process was lengthy and involved input from the legal departments of both organisations. Despite the establishment of this agreement, individual written documentation is still required for each student placement. This onerous approval process for student placements and internships across the university demonstrates the impact of organisational structure on collaborative research projects.

Summary

Ultimately, our brief foray into the literature surrounding university–industry partnerships and our reflection on the nascent University of Sydney and YJNSW research collaboration reveal that, from a university perspective, long-term and flexible strategic partnerships that adopt a shared vision to achieve common goals are key to mutually beneficial research partnerships (see Awasthy et al. 2020). However, university staff need support to take on the work flowing from participation in an industry partnership. Provision of resources specific to the research partnership could help to alleviate the work and time constraints that otherwise inhibit academic staff’s capacity to participate in the partnership. On the industry side, research demonstrates the importance of a university partner’s long-term commitment and continued interest in the project(s). Conversely, it is important that industry partners consider a research project to be useful to their practice. In this sense, the absorptive capacity of an industry partner is an important consideration in developing project goals and outcomes; the industry partner should have confidence in its capacity to absorb the research and translate it into effective practices and procedures or marketable products.

In building this collaboration over time, the University of Sydney hopes to develop a replicable framework for university–industry partnerships that can extend the scope of these collaborations in Australia and enable interdisciplinary focus, resources and expertise on criminal justice issues more broadly. While there are numerous examples of costly multidisciplinary initiatives of this kind (outlined earlier in *Cross-university engagement and whole-of-university responses*), we have intentionally pursued this collaboration at very low or no cost. Across the first two years of the collaboration, YJNSW has not contributed financially to MoU activities but has contributed significant in-kind support. This magnifies the potential replicability of our approach.

What next?

Beyond the benefits (and challenges) of this collaborative relationship, there are numerous indirect and prospective benefits that can emerge from close, deep collaborations of this kind. This fledgling relationship has the potential to grow considerably. There is scope for significant workforce development, with the university providing employment pathways for students to YJNSW as well as professional development opportunities for existing YJNSW staff. There is considerable scope to co-produce knowledge and research outputs to help infuse the wider scholarship with insights from the policy and practice of youth justice workers and systems in New South Wales. There is also as yet unrealised potential for the university to contribute to strategic policy deliberations through novel research, data analysis and interdisciplinary collaboration.

More specifically, some novel and exciting opportunities for the university to assist YJNSW and their clients have emerged from discussion with key collaboration stakeholders:

- Currently, young people in detention are physically checked by detention centre staff every 20 minutes throughout the night to confirm that they are breathing and well. The Sydney Nano Institute has developed photonic radar that can check signs of life, and this could possibly assist with the current requirement for regular physical checks.
- The university's Elite Athletes scheme, in conjunction with assistance from exercise physiology students, could facilitate talent spotting of young people in detention.
- Mood and behaviour of young people in detention could be managed and mediated through the use of sound and light.
- Speech therapy and occupational therapy support could be offered to the NSW Children's Courts and to Justice Health to assist with early assessment and identification of speech and communication disorders.
- Student hubs could be established in youth justice centres to more permanently place university students from education, social work, psychology, law, speech therapy and occupational therapy in these settings.
- Music and arts education programs could be run by College of the Arts and Conservatorium of Music students. These programs could be run remotely into youth justice centres and community offices.
- Media and Communications students could develop peer-to-peer podcasts and videos that help young people to navigate the justice system and prepare for life after detention.
- Technology developed in conjunction with the Brain and Mind Centre could be deployed to create digital records of the progress and development of young people throughout their youth justice journey and beyond.
- Longitudinal research projects could be conducted that explore stories of desistance among justice-involved youth.
- Rural health students could connect with regional centres and youth justice community facilities to provide various health assessments and interventions. This would be particularly helpful, given the low level of engagement by young people with relevant services.

Many of these opportunities will only be possible over time, as further trust and mutual understanding build and longer term plans are consolidated and funded. These opportunities open up novel ways by which YJNSW, with the university's assistance, can better support young people within their remit and prevent justice system contact and recontact. As this collaboration develops, and such opportunities are realised, further research into the material impacts of such collaborative efforts for justice-affected young people will be possible and necessary.

Conclusion

YJNSW and the University of Sydney entered into an MoU in July 2021. The MoU establishes broad parameters for both organisations to work together. The first two years of this MoU were very productive, with numerous student-led projects carried out at little or no cost to either organisation beyond the investment of staff time. These initiatives and activities have brought staff from both organisations together and developed a shared understanding of the drivers and realities facing each organisation. These processes have also highlighted some of the challenges of collaborative work of this kind, including the impact of staff movements, the often different time lines impacting each organisation, the internal challenges for the University of Sydney in working across faculties and disciplines, and capacity issues for both organisations in managing multiple activities simultaneously.

Nonetheless, there have been considerable benefits for both organisations to date. Students from the University of Sydney have been exposed to real-world problems, often with few or no simple solutions. The internships and student projects undertaken thus far have provided students with real-world learning opportunities that inform them about the substantive issues in the youth justice system and highlight the various skills required to work in these contexts. Some staff from the university have slowly been introduced to some of the practical and logistical demands of a youth justice system, helping them to refine their understanding of the operational context. YJNSW staff have been exposed to some of the research arising from relevant areas of the university and have learned about work in non-traditional areas that might well benefit the youth justice system. These activities have built some goodwill and trust and increased connections with different parts of both organisations.

Despite the importance of long-term collaborations between universities and industry, there is little evaluative research exploring the relational success factors that characterise sustainable collaboration. The university's research looking at the relationship between the two organisations will help to close this gap, provide important insights over time and contribute to shaping future work. We hope to illuminate the dynamic nature of the collaborative relationship over time and across different phases of the partnership. We anticipate reporting on findings of this research in the coming years, in the hope that similar deep partnerships and whole-of-university responses to youth justice can be enabled. There is clearly great scope for partnerships of this kind to be mutually beneficial and deliver meaningful outcomes for young people at little or no cost.

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