



**CHARTER FOR  
COMPASSION  
AUSTRALIA**

## **Inaugural ACC Scholars Compassion Research Forum**

Managing Change and Complexity with  
Compassion: New Research and Application

**Forum Report  
November 2020**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**  
—  
Business School

**Body, Heart and Mind in Business Research Group**  
[sydney.edu.au/business/research/bhmb](https://sydney.edu.au/business/research/bhmb)

# Background

On 9 November 2020, the ACC Scholars Network held its inaugural Compassion Research Forum. The [webinar video](#) is available for all who registered for the event.

The ACC Scholars Network comprises 25 researchers from across Australia who work at the forefront of compassion research. [View full list of Scholars](#)

The Forum aimed to showcase and share the wide diversity of compassion research taking place in numerous universities and institutions around Australia.

The structure of the Forum consisted of an overview, a Keynote presentation by a distinguished international speaker and three presentations from ACC Scholars. Interactive discussion sessions were also held that focused on questions associated with compassion in healthcare, education, and organisations and society.

## Presentations

[View full program](#)

### – Overview of compassion research in Australia

#### Professor Felicia Huppert

The Director of the ACC Scholars Program, Professor Felicia Huppert, opened the forum by stating that compassion research is a rapidly emerging field of science with significant implications for improving our collective human well-being. She noted that compassion research is very timely when the world is grappling with a global pandemic; systemic racism; inequities in access to healthcare, and social and economic resources; increasing polarisation; and threats to our global environment. The ongoing work of compassion Scholars could be used to address many of these challenges.

In introducing the Forum's keynote speaker, the eminent neuroscientist Prof William Mobley, Felicia recognised that compassion research is now being seriously supported and referenced the generous donation of the US philanthropist, T. Denny Sanford of \$100M to establish the Institute for Empathy and Compassion at UC San Diego.

### – Why the Scientific understanding of empathy and compassion has never been more important

#### Professor William Mobley

The Keynote speaker Professor William Mobley, Neuroscientist and Director of the Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion at the University of California San Diego, was well placed to provide an overview of the developments in compassion research.

He reflected that it was in 2005 while he was at Stanford University that he 'saw' empathy and compassion emerging as real issues for new research in the cognitive sciences, including social neurobiology. He said that the emergence of fMRI technology has transformed our understanding of the brain and how it develops the neural circuits in both functional and dysfunctional emotions and the subsequent behaviours those emotions drive.

Prof Mobley believes that we now have an incredible opportunity to improve humanity's wellbeing, but we first need a massive breakthrough in terms of our basic human care

for one another. He referred to the research occurring in his, and other institutes around the world including that of Prof Tania Singer at the Max Planke Institute which is demonstrating a marked difference in the behavioural and neurobiological outcomes between empathy training and compassion training. These studies are showing that while empathic distress can result in burnout in medical and other settings, compassion training resources people by engaging at the level of cognitive perspective taking, which in turn allows them to alleviate suffering without becoming overwhelmed.

*“I can’t think of another research discipline that can assist so rigorously in the process of growing social justice and global wellbeing in such a fundamental way.”*

Prof Mobley finished his presentation with a call out to Australian compassion researchers to consider applying for a research grant from his Institute’s recently established collaborative pilot programs which will be released in December.

## – **Creating a compassionate society**

### **Dr Paul Atkins**

Dr Atkins began by asking participants about their image of a compassionate society. There was a wide range of responses including: social policies created by people who listen to understand; flourishing nature and ecosystems; a celebration of difference; a society that values all human relationships; compassion shown towards all living beings...not just humans; more people being kind to each other; reflective, compassionate leaders; aware people creating aware systems; justice and fairness; a society that deeply honours our indigenous people and their ways of thinking.

Picking up the references to the importance of compassionate systems, Dr Atkins specified that the Prosocial perspective views our social worlds in terms of dynamic evolving systems, that integrate three key ideas:

- the evolution of complex adaptive systems
- the science of behavior change
- and the social science of co-operation.

He stressed the important role that governments and organisations play in developing systems that support psychological safety for all, and developing that psychological safety requires an approach to power that is not about ‘power over’ but is about ‘power with’. ‘Power with’ is about meeting the needs and mobilising resources for all, because developing a compassionate society needs to occur at all scales – from small groups right through to networks of larger groups.

## – **Research findings on a multimethod RCT of wellbeing and compassion in healthcare among nurses**

### **Professor Felicia Huppert, Nickolas Yu & Associate Professor Helena Nguyen**

As chief investigator on this study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation and St Louis University, Felicia Huppert presented the research aims and study design. Nickolas Yu presented details of the interventions he designed and implemented, and Helena Nguyen described her analysis of the quantitative results.

This multidisciplinary, multi-method RCT compared two very different interventions both designed to enhance staff well-being and compassionate care. One was based on mindfulness meditation practices, the other on positive psychology practices. Participants were 247 nurses from 52 wards and community health centres in Sydney which were randomised to one of the intervention conditions or a control group.

Results showed significant improvements in the intervention groups compared to controls on numerous measures including well-being, self-compassion, and burn-out. Differences were generally larger and longer lasting in the mindfulness meditation group. Patients reported higher levels of care from nurses who participated in either of the intervention programs, although there were some differences in the type of care reported. The presentation concludes with a discussion of how to embed programs of this type in a complex healthcare organisation.

## – **Learning compassion when it matters the most: RCT of the Think Equal early childhood program**

**Dr Lynne Reeder & Dr Sue Emmett**

In developing approaches to learning that are informed by education, psychology and neuroscience, it is now recognised that social and emotional learning needs to occur at the beginning of children's lives. The developers of the integrated Think Equal program underscore the crucial nature of the early years as a window of opportunity when new neural pathways are rapidly developing and hence when transformative learning thrives.

*“As with all aspects of early childhood learning, this is the time when all learning, including compassion learning matters the most.”*

Think Equal is an international early year's social and emotional learning program that has now been implemented and evaluated in a number of countries including Singapore, Canada, Botswana and Australia – indeed programs are now running in 14 countries on 5 continents. Australia has recently undertaken the largest study of its effectiveness in an RCT of 496 children in Melbourne and Brisbane. Dr Lynne Reeder and Dr Sue Emmett noted that the qualitative findings of this study provide robust observable evidence that transformation in children's thinking and behaviour occurred as a result of participation in this program. This RCT found that the children who completed the 30-week program were better able to manage their emotions when connecting to others, and more deeply engage with the diversity of other children within their class. It provided children with the tools to self-regulate; problem solve; identify, and challenge inequity and manage conflict. Interestingly, parents of participating children also noted significant changes in children's language and behaviour in the home context. For example, children supported siblings and parents in identifying, labelling and managing emotions such as anger and frustration.

*“Deep learning takes place during the early years which establishes a foundation – one that has the potential for the development of highly compassionate and mindful young people contributing to their societies.”*

## Discussion Sessions

Participants were invited to select one of three topic areas and take part in a discussion session. The topic areas were: Healthcare, Education, Organisations and Society.

The following questions were offered for the participants to consider:

1. How and why is compassion important in your area of your work?
2. What are the compassion issues you would like to see more research into?
3. Are you aware of any compassion programs underway in your area – are they being evaluated?
4. What more research or evaluation do you think needs to be done?

Although the discussion sessions were not recorded, responses to the questions and other comments were collated to be fed back into the next ACC Scholars meeting.

## Wrap up and future directions

### – Associate Professor Anya Johnson

In her summary, Prof Anya Johnson the Co-Director of the Body, Heart and Mind in Business Research group at the University of Sydney re-stated that compassion research is an emerging area of multidisciplinary study and an increasingly important area of investigation.

*“Our intention is to grow compassion research and its application across Australia, and this Forum was a first step in positioning the ACC Scholars Network as a ‘one-stop shop’ for Australian and global research partnerships.”*

Anya concluded that through its members research, the ACC Scholars Network will play a key role in developing a deeper understanding of the evidence base of compassion research and its applications.

## Further information

Please visit the [ACC Scholars Network](#) for further information about the history and aims.

Visit our website for more information about our research and activities:

**Body, Heart and Mind in Business Research Group**  
[sydney.edu.au/business/research/bhmb](https://sydney.edu.au/business/research/bhmb)