Fourth-year teaching and arts student Melody Gardiner has set herself a challenge beyond the lecture halls, learning Tetun, the language of East Timor.

The award-winning student, who chose to study at ACU National because of its “emphasis on social justice”, is part of Learning Together, set up by the University’s Institute for Advancing Community Engagement.

“We are a small, self-taught group of students and staff who have chosen to learn Tetun so that we can communicate with students at the Instituto Catolico para Formacao de Professores (ICFP) in Baucau, East Timor,” Melody said.

“We each have a learning partner in Baucau. We write emails to them in Tetun and they respond in English. It is hard because we are just beginning to learn Tetun but it is getting easier with the help of our learning partners.”

ACU National works closely with the Instituto, also known as the Catholic Teachers’ College in Baucau, helping build capacity in the developing nation. The two institutions collaboratively conduct ACU National’s Bachelor of Teaching course for East Timorese students, offering postgraduate studies to ICFP staff, and developing ICFP administrative systems.

“Recently, we were lucky enough to have our three learning partners come to Australia for three weeks for World Youth Day with assistance from the ACU National Dean of Students Office. We formed an ACU National East Timor group for World Youth Day with students from diverse backgrounds and together we learned a lot about our respective cultures and the work still to be done in achieving social justice for the people of East Timor.”

Melody was awarded a James Carroll Scholarship in 2006 from the Sydney Catholic Education Office for demonstrated involvement in community life and commitment to the ideals of Catholic education.

An East Timorese cultural group, pictured above, helped provide the entertainment when more than $60,000 was raised recently to support teacher education in East Timor.

The fundraiser was the first to be held by the newly created eMerge Foundation, set up by financial planner Ian Mac Ritchie of IMR Financial Advisors and colleagues.

“The heroes are the teachers,” Mr Mac Ritchie said. “We are all very, very fortunate. We have had the benefit of an excellent education.”

Mr Mac Ritchie, who has long been a supporter of education in developing countries, was inspired to focus on East Timor after realising it is one of the poorest nations on earth and that 400,000 people perished during recent struggles for independence.

“They suffered, not only as a nation, but in terms of resources, yet they are extremely courageous. Their prime minister was released from jail after 24 years and declared that they had to forgive their oppressors.”

Almost half of the population of one million people has had no formal education.

“I just felt the least we could do was to raise money so that the young people can get a world-class education and go back into their villages to become agents of change. It is something you have got to do.”

The fundraising dinner, held recently at Cockle Bay in Sydney, was hosted by Channel Nine federal political correspondent Daniel Street. The money raised will provide students with sponsorship of some $3,000 covering fees, food, transport, books and stationery during the three-year ACU National Bachelor of Teaching course in East Timor.

Visit www.emergefoundation.org.au for more information about eMerge.