Strathfield Campus 2005 education graduate Sarah Forgan Doane, 26, currently working with teachers and students in Namibia in western Africa, is part way through a Master of Education (Communities and Social Justice) degree with ACU National as an external student.

Helping local community
The idea of using her skills to improve education in Africa arose during her first teaching position, at St John’s Primary School in Auburn in Sydney’s inner west, which serves a large African population.

“Pupils’ parents said they loved Australia, but were also sad to leave their homes in Africa, where one of the biggest problems is the lack of schools and facilities,” Sarah said. “I decided I wanted to help work with a local community to develop and build up their education system.”

‘Amazing’ contrasts
Australian Volunteers International and Voluntary Service Overseas matched Sarah’s skills and experience with community needs in Ongwediva in the north of Namibia in the Oshana Region, above the Red Line drawn by early colonists.

“South of the Red Line, the country is chopped neatly into predominantly white-owned farms, farming livestock and game with big electric fences,” said Sarah, pictured above in Namibia.

“Above the Red Line is what people think of as ‘real’ Africa. There are homesteads with wooden kraals, and mud huts scatter the landscape. Dirt roads and tracks lead into the bush, and donkeys, cows and goats wander around freely, a hazard at night, often causing car accidents.

“There are other amazing contrasts. In one part of Ongwediva there is a supermarket, bank, post office, telecom shop and a few other little stores that sell very ‘normal’ Western packaged goods, yet 200 metres away in the open market you can buy cooked mopane worms, home-grown vegetables and meat from a cow or goat carcass, freshly slaughtered and hanging from a tree.
"In some parts of town you can find lovely big houses made from bricks but just two minutes around the corner you will find a shanty town or temporary settlement made out of corrugated iron, sticks and rocks."

**Dramatic improvements**
Sarah visits schools to see what support the teachers need, gives demonstration lessons and organises and presents workshops for teachers on how to teach reading and phonics to young students.

"I also work with the teachers to make games and different educational activities from recycled materials."

Her favourite activity is helping implement a shared reading and phonics program at her pilot school, Oshakati West Primary School, where the teachers are young and enthusiastic despite the lack of resources.

"I have worked with teachers to create big books and shared reading texts. The children have improved dramatically. It has been fantastic."

**A humbling experience**
She is also working at the National Institute for Educational Development, writing a new English as a second language course, and reviewing and editing other parts of the syllabus, including a new handbook to help teachers cater for students with learning difficulties.

"The thing I love the most is seeing the teachers’ faces after they have developed something new at a workshop, and how proud they are of their new resources and skills. After my second workshop the teachers were so grateful they did a dance of praise for me. It was a very humbling experience."

**Overcoming prejudice**
Sarah, whose views on community engagement were featured in Volume 1 of *acunique* in 2005, said she had always hoped to have an opportunity to work in a developing country.

"Working in Namibia has certainly enabled me to develop a whole new range of skills not only professionally but also personally. I would certainly recommend volunteering to others."

She values her studies at ACU National, which give her insight into social justice, including finding ways to consult with communities about their own goals rather than imposing an agenda as an outsider.

A unit on child abuse and community development is helping her deal with the large problem of child abuse in Namibia, caused by the ever-growing number of orphans and vulnerable children due to the AIDS pandemic.

Personally, Sarah’s largest challenge has been to overcome prejudice against her own age and skin colour.

"Because of apartheid there is still a lot of resentment towards white people, and even though I am Australian and have no involvement in their oppression there is still an assumption made about me because of the colour of my skin. Also being young has been a huge issue. I have had to work really hard to prove my ability and gain the respect of my colleagues."

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**
- Visit http://web.mac.com/sarahdoane to learn more about Sarah’s life.