A nursing elective unit developed in the South Pacific has paved the way for a University-wide Faculty of Health Sciences policy on international community immersion, and earned a Carrick Award for its founder.

A Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning was recently awarded to School of Nursing (NSW and ACT) lecturer Ms Jacqui Guy. “for pioneering an innovative model of experiential learning for nursing students in partnership with a healthcare system in a developing country”.

A decade in the making, the unit currently enables nursing students to undertake an elective unit involving two weeks of clinical experience in Vanuatu during their mid-year holidays. “I was honoured to receive this citation,” said Ms Guy.

“It takes passion, ongoing persistence and much negotiating with the host country to offer an experience such as this, but the learning outcomes are obvious and the intrinsic rewards are great for both students and staff alike.

“The experiential approach engages students in active learning and challenges their attitudes and understanding of primary health care in a developing country,” she said.

“It stimulates them to examine the influence of cultural patterns on their own health and that of those from other cultures, and increases their level of cross-cultural awareness and competency. They begin to recognise issues of global interconnectivity and social responsibility, important competencies for nurses to develop. It also awakens students to social justice issues.”
Alison Arnott
Second-year nursing student Alison Arnott, 28, pictured left, was a graphic designer for six years before deciding she really wanted to work with people instead of computers. “I chose to study nursing because I wanted to help people, and I chose ACU National’s North Sydney Campus because it was small and people appeared to be very caring,” she said. “I love it. There is so much opportunity.”

Alison recently joined 18 fellow students for two weeks volunteering in health clinics in Vanuatu, and is looking forward to going to Broken Hill in September to experience nursing in Indigenous communities. “It has been so fulfilling, so enriching,” she said. “Nursing education is not just about books. It’s really hands on.”

In Vanuatu, Alison spent a week at Port Vila hospital, and a week in the rural town of Emua, performing health checks on school children, assisting at maternal-child health clinics and assisting with management of wounds.

“A lot of the help we gave was in the form of raising $8,000 and taking over equipment they needed,” she said, adding that the people were so welcoming that in many ways she felt she gained more than she gave.

A highlight was watching a birth, an experience she found so inspiring she is considering specialising in midwifery.

Roslyn Jones
Respect for the skills and dedication her international colleagues and a wish to help out again have stayed with second-year nursing student Roslyn Jones, pictured above, in the weeks following her study tour to Vanuatu.

Roslyn, 24, was one of 14 students from the Melbourne Campus who travelled with University staff to the island of Santo where the hospital serves the needs of four provinces in Vanuatu.

She and a fellow student from the Melbourne Campus, Emily Patton, organised a trivia night which raised $2,500. University staff arranged for an electrocardiograph (ECG) and other medical equipment to be sent to the Santo hospital with the funds raised.

“When we presented the new ECG machine to Dr Santos, he told us that Santo Hospital had been trying to raise money for more than six months to buy an ECG machine. In Australia it took us just a couple of weeks of planning and the one night to collect enough to make a real difference.”

The students watched a number of births, and realised that there are very few baby clothes in Vanuatu. “They wrap the babies in ragged blankets and clothes that are too big, as you cannot buy newborn clothing in Santo. Often the blankets aren’t big enough to cover the babies’ feet. My friends and I are now collecting baby clothes and blankets to send across.”

Roslyn said she was very impressed by the skills of the medical staff, especially considering their lack of resources.

“While we have non-stick dressings, barrier cream, a fresh pair of scissors for every patient, alcohol swabs, sterile equipment, a sterile environment and far more advanced technology, over there, the only option is to dress a wound with saline, gauze and betadine. They even have to use the same pair of scissors for each patient.

“I learnt in Santo that it is always possible to do your best, no matter what environment you are in. The nurses achieved the best possible results for their patients, with very little resources available to them. It has made me really aware of the resources and equipment we have available to us in Australia and not to take our situation for granted.

“You can still work to the best of your ability and make a really big difference in someone’s life, even if you come from different backgrounds, and no matter where you are and what resources you have.”

While she feels that the majority of Western tourists tend to hide away in resorts, Roslyn remains grateful for her extraordinary opportunity to see a more realistic side of Vanuatu.

“Underneath the veneer of the tropical beach resorts, Vanuatu is a struggling, developing country. I would like to go back but save any money I would have spent at a resort on some of the things the hospital really needs.”