‘Enthusiasm to learn’

It was a long way from Baucau in East Timor to ACU National’s Strathfield Campus in more ways than one for Master of Educational Leadership student Mr Jose Mendes, 42.

Jose was in Australia for three months before returning to the Catholic teachers’ college in East Timor, where he is director of student services.

Jose was struck by the contrast between the educational facilities in East Timor and Australia.

East Timorese schools were razed seven years ago during the struggle for independence from Indonesia, and a number of community schools were burnt down again during civil unrest at the time of recent elections last year.

“Australians must say thanks to God,” he said. “You are so lucky to have a good environment and good education. East Timor is a very poor country and a very new country, where there has been a lot of destruction, but we have enthusiasm to learn.”

Jose explained that new teaching methodology and curriculum are slowly replacing the former teacher-centred way of learning. Only 75 per cent of East Timorese children are estimated to attend school, with others working with buffalo in country areas, or working in Baucau selling newspapers, for example.

Those at school are mostly taught by local teachers who volunteered when the Indonesian teachers left in 1999. Teachers have also come from Brazil and Portugal to teach in Portuguese, working alongside graduates from the Catholic teachers’ college using new methods such as discovery learning.

“Education is very important for us in East Timor, to help us grow. We need a good education, and we need the support of the international community, especially Australians. ACU National is really supporting us so we can learn more and become good, well-educated citizens.”

Quest for harmony ‘inspirational’

ACU National’s long-standing partnership with the Notre Dame Institute of Education (NDIE) in Karachi, Pakistan, administered by the Australian Sisters of Mercy on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of Pakistan, continues to bear fruit.

In a country in which degrees can be purchased, ACU National’s accreditation of the International Certificate of Education and Master of Education programs adds vital credibility to NDIE’s courses, but the benefits are mutual.

Many ACU National academic and administrative staff have gladly given their time, expertise and resources over the past 16 years, helping develop and review the curriculum, cross-marking assignments, processing student records and attending graduations.

School of Educational Leadership senior lecturer Dr Annette Schneider RSM of the Ballarat Campus, whose doctoral research was on teacher education in developing countries, spent more than three years in Pakistan as NDIE director until 2001.

“I would hope that through our involvement we have a deeper appreciation of the issues and challenges facing our colleagues in countries like Pakistan where the infrastructure is less developed and where there are fewer resources,” said Dr Schneider.

NDIE has a local Board of Governors who take responsibility for the direction of the Institute, and the student cohort includes
people from all faith backgrounds, including Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Baha’i. “We try and focus on what draws us together as educators, rather than on what divides us,” Dr Schneider said.

“We have learnt that while there are lots of cultural and religious differences, there are also common issues, such as how to make learning engaging. What we learn about each other’s cultures is also important. For example, I am always delighted by the hospitality we are shown in Pakistan and the willingness of the NDIE participants to learn. Their strong belief that what they are learning will make a difference is inspirational.”

‘Objective, open and accepting’ education

Visiting scholar Mr Ashar Khokhar is among a number of members of staff of the Notre Dame Institute of Education (NDIE) in Karachi, Pakistan, to pursue further education at ACU National. He has praised and thanked the individuals and organisations helping support private education in Pakistan, “education which is objective, open and accepting”.

Mr Khokhar has been at ACU National’s Melbourne Campus on an Endeavour Scholarship, studying methods of running and assessing teacher practicum placements.

He said graduates of Notre Dame Institute’s teacher education programs were highly sought after by the private schools of Pakistan. The institute is open to students of all faiths, and offers scholarships to needy students.

Under the constitution of Pakistan, primary education is compulsory, but the policy is not enforced. Muslim children may attend public schools, but non-Muslim students are prevented from accessing public education, medical care and jobs.

“Being a member of a non-Muslim minority, we do feel that if we want to make Pakistan a place which is open to all people, with access to jobs, education and scholarships, the only way forward is that people must have access to education that promotes harmony, equality and tolerance amongst the followers of all religions in Pakistan,” Mr Khokhar said.

“We try and focus on what draws us together as educators, rather than on what divides us.”