Beyond Borders

Capacity building in East Timor

“Mana Margie” is a familiar face around town in Baucau, East Timor. More formally, Ms Beck, pictured with two graduates, is known as an ACU National education lecturer from the Strathfield Campus in Sydney.

She is also Deputy Director (Academic) of the new Catholic teachers’ college in East Timor, established by the Melbourne Province of the Marist Brothers in the wake of devastation wrought by the new nation’s struggle for independence in 1999.

“Mana” means “big sister” in Tetum, the local language of the East Timorese. It is a term of endearment given to Ms Beck during her five years’ dedication to helping establish sustainable teacher training systems while on secondment in East Timor from ACU National.

More than half of the population of this new nation, considered the poorest nation in Asia, have had no schooling. Most secondary teachers and many primary school teachers returned to Indonesia at independence, and teacher training had to begin from scratch.

At her first visit in 2002, Ms Beck found schools without doors and windows, children perched three to a desk, and whole schools huddled around one blackboard. The country was struggling to find its own curriculum using both the national language, Portuguese, and Tetum.

Instituto Católico para Formação de Professores (ICFP) was being established under the leadership of founding director Brother Mark Paul FMS. Ms Beck and her colleagues were invited to work with the Marist Brothers to write and implement a teacher education program and other educational systems relevant to the new nation’s needs. Through the efforts of Ms Beck and other ACU National staff, the University continues to provide support with student administration, resources and other services.

The new teachers’ college attracted 53 students in its first year, its first 48 primary school teachers graduated with ACU National accredited degrees late last year, and a further 49 graduated recently. Most have brought their skills back to their villages throughout the country, while some others are now teaching in Dili.

Although facilities are improving, most schools are still without books, and the need for support continues.

“I love what I am doing,” Ms Beck said. “To watch young people learn is incredibly rewarding because their opportunities have come from nothing. To go into schools and watch these young students teach and to know I have been part of the process of helping them deliver is a wonderful experience.”
Diana Viana Boavida was among 49 students to graduate in East Timor recently with Bachelor of Education (Primary) degrees accredited by ACU National.

“Tonight is a milestone in my life,” a euphoric Diana told ACU National graduations officer Ms Kathy Macpherson. “These opportunities are very big for my family. Not only is this national accreditation, but international. That’s why my family is very, very happy and proud.”

Catholic teachers’ college director Brother Fons van Rooij FMS told graduates and their families that the success of a nation was very closely linked to the provision of a quality education for all.

At the graduation, ACU National Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Affairs) Professor Gabrielle McMullen described the college as “a source of hope for Timor-Leste, both nationally and internationally”, and saluted “the wonderful capacity-building achievements of the college”.

“We celebrate what you have offered in this fruitful partnership that has brought us to a new understanding of our mission and to engagement with communities, which we are honoured to have as partners,” Professor McMullen said.

Support welcome

Some 150 students are enrolled in the Catholic teachers’ college in Baucau, attending at great sacrifice to their families.

Three of the students have been fortunate enough to receive Maria Gorete Joaquim Scholarships, established through the ACU National Foundation in 2004 by an anonymous donor to honour a young female leader of East Timor’s independence.

The scholarship fund has grown with support from the Marist Brothers and donations from ACU National staff and students.

One scholar is Angela Getrudis Ole from Oecussi, an East Timorese enclave in West Timor, which was razed to the ground in 1999. Angela’s family are subsistence farmers and she left a life on the land, sewing, cooking, farming and doing housework with her five brothers and sisters to attend the college.

“It is important to come here to train,” Angela told ACU National fundraising and development manager Ms Bea Brickhill in Baucau late last year. “I know it will be a good degree and I will be a good teacher.”

She and Angelina De Jesus Freitas were awarded the scholarships in 2006 after receiving high academic results in their first year at the college, while Maria do Rosario Guterres Savio received one this year. “We want to thank you for your support, in both material and spiritual things for us,” Maria said. “We will study very hard to make you proud of us.”

Ms Beck outlined the students’ costs. “It takes $60 a month to provide tuition, accommodation and food for one student in Baucau, plus $20 for textbooks, course materials and stationery, and $10 to help them pay for power, water and transport to and from the college,” Ms Beck said. “All up, for one year, $900 is needed per student. When you know that they will be earning just $1 a day when they are teaching, it puts their financial need in perspective.”

The Australian Catholic University Foundation provides two scholarships for students in East Timor through a named East Timor Scholarship Fund, but more are needed. If you can give financial support, please contact the University’s national manager of fundraising and development Ms Bea Brickhill at foundation@acu.edu.au or on (02) 6209 1194.