Building capacities in Baucau, Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, is in a phase of infrastructure renewal, after its existing capacities were destroyed in 2001 with the Indonesian withdrawal. ACU is involved in a number of capacity-building collaborations in Timor’s second largest city, Baucau, in several educational fields.

Rebuilding teacher training

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

“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 years of dedication to helping establish sustainable teacher training systems while on secondment in East Timor from ACU.

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, and Ms Beck and her colleagues were invited to work with founding partners the Marist Brothers to write and implement a teacher education program and other educational systems relevant to the nation’s needs.

“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.”

‘Source of hope’

Several years after its foundation in 2000, Diana Viana Boavida graduated from ICFP with a Bachelor of Education (Primary) accredited by ACU, describing the experience as a milestone in her life. “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.”

The students are enrolled at ICFP at great sacrifice to their families. Margie 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.”

A few students are able to benefit from the Maria Gorete Joaquim Scholarship, established through the ACU 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 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 to ICFP to train,” said Angela. “I know it will be a good degree and I will be a good teacher.”
Valued graduates and financial accountability

ACU is an ongoing partner in the professional development of staff and students at ICFP, helping build institutional infrastructure and sustainability, and ensuring international recognition of ICFP and its academic awards.

Even through periods of civil unrest, ICFP has achieved remarkable results, including:

- the establishment, in partnership with ACU, of the first internationally recognised degree course for primary teacher education in East Timor since independence;
- offerings of quality professional development education and business courses nationally;
- extremely high student satisfaction and retention rate (more than 96%);
- academic staff training in student-centred methods of teaching, providing a strong and positive model for classroom instruction. The lecture/tutorial approach is regarded as a significant innovation by other higher education institutions in the country, and these institutions have benefited from employing ICFP staff to provide leadership in quality teaching and learning.
- ICFP’s inclusion by the East Timor Ministry of Education in developing higher education policies; and
- successfully meeting all financial accountabilities, nationally and internationally, through advice, support and training offered by partner Deloitte Growth Solutions. This partnership contributed to the development of the management capacity of ICFP East Timorese staff, with some now having significant executive roles.

Clinic at the heart of health services

As the college was being established, it was clear that the staff and students at ICFP and the local community of Baucau were in urgent need of basic health services. The medical staff of St Joseph’s College, Hunter’s Hill, Australia, in collaboration with ACU, consulted with ICFP, and prioritised a significant physical renovation and modernisation of medical resources and equipment. The team’s first achievement was the renovation of a building provided by the Parish of St Antonio as a medical services clinic, which is now the cornerstone for the revitalisation of health services in Baucau.

The clinic has been used for training local nurses, guided by ACU’s schools of Nursing. Student nurse immersion programs, in the form of reciprocal exchanges between ACU, St Joseph’s Hunters Hill and medical clinics in and around Baucau, provide opportunities for truly authentic learning in health services.
Life skills through soccer

Nathan McLean was one of six exercise science students from Australian Catholic University (ACU) who spent a month in Baucau establishing a community soccer program as part of the Future in Youth project, teaching leadership, health, and life skills to more than 400 children and young people through soccer.

“We taught an orientation and education program to the young coaches, and a sports education program for the kids – which they absolutely loved,” Nathan said. “Every day we had more and more turning up as word spread about what we were doing.

“I realised just how much they were enjoying themselves one day when every single kid turned up despite thunderstorms and torrential rain.”

“East Timor was a fantastic experience and one that I am incredibly grateful for,” Nathan said. “Before I went I learnt a little about the crippling poverty and struggle the East Timorese face just to live, so I expected to meet relatively unhappy individuals.

“However I was totally shocked by how happy they are. They may not be able to attend school, afford dinner or drink clean water but they will still find ways to live a happy existence.

“Such a positive outlook on life was inspiring to me.”

Nathan said the trip was a steep learning curve, with some challenging obstacles along the way.

“At the very start, the one tonne of sporting equipment that we had ordered hadn’t arrived, and although it was the dry season, we had some days where it absolutely poured,” he said.

“We also shared the training pitch with the local Baucau football team who took first precedence, and had to learn to adjust to “Timor time”, which definitely taught me to be a little more patient and flexible.”

Despite limited infrastructure when it comes to sport, Nathan said soccer was easily the game of choice for East Timorese children.

“Sport is such a great conveyor of life lessons, and I could see how much the kids had learnt about teamwork and sportsmanship by the end of the program,” he said.

“I really feel like we have given the children hope that there is something greater to be achieved in life, and reignited a passion for sport in the broader community.”

ACU exercise science senior lecturer Dr Paul Callery set up the program with fellow ACU senior lecturer and AFL Hall of Fame inductee Dr Ross Smith, responding in part to the nearly 100 per cent youth unemployment in the Baucau region.

“These kids love soccer, and by developing sports programs we hope to teach them to become leaders,” he said. “A club mentality will hopefully help them to stay out of trouble, support each other, and give them hope for a different future.

“We set up some structures when we were there so the newly trained coaches can continue to teach without us, but we’ll also be taking more students back and making it a longer-term project.”

A personal note

José Manuel Mendes is a graduate of ACU’s Masters of Educational Leadership and Head of Student Services at ICFP, where ACU is collaborating in improving infrastructure, strengthening course offerings, and building capacity in students and staff. He spoke of his hope for the teacher trainee graduates of ICFP.

‘As Timorese we expect that these graduates will be people of hope for our community, Church and our country of Timor Leste.

‘As a Timorese I strongly believe that through education we will rebuild our nation in peace and prosperity. As a past Vice-Chancellor of ACU, Peter Sheehan, said, education is at the heart of nation-building and will lay the foundations for the future peace and prosperity of East Timor.

‘I firmly believe that ICFP needs continuing support from ACU and IACE because in East Timor most families could not financially support their children in their studies. The situation in Timor Leste is not secure for families or students to actively participate in education. Also most families are very poor. Students must leave home and then find extra energy to find money for their studies and living cost.

‘ICFP and ACU, through the Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE), are working together “servisu hamutuk” to develop quality education at international standards.’