A Mission Possible

Australia’s first university courses for homeless people are taking place in East Sydney. Page 2
Associate Professor Jude Butcher, former Head of the School of Education (NSW) and a founder of the Faculty of Education’s Office of Community Engagement: Equity, Social Justice and Education aptly says: “We have to be involved in the shadows of the world as well as the bright points of the world.”

In his three decades at the Strathfield Campus, Professor Butcher has watched ACU National’s approach evolve and grow from one of “community service” into one of providing the challenging yet effective “community engagement”.

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At ACU National, “community engagement” is real. We reject the notion of the ivory tower, where academics and students are lost in theory. Instead, our academics and students actively engage with the real world for mutual benefit.

From the meetings, rationale and initiatives of the University’s Community Engagement Advisory Committee, to the myriad links with local, national and international organisations, large and small, ACU National, through its students and staff, is an agent for change.

Our shared vision is of a better world, where social justice is forged through Catholic social teaching, shared knowledge and action. Community engagement enhances our opportunities to honour our “commitment to serving the common good”, expressed in our Mission.

In partnership with other organisations, the staff and students of ACU National are bringing about change, in their own research, learning, attitudes and actions, and in the lives of those they may never have met.

Our students are helping adults and children who are experiencing poverty and abuse, lending their own time and skills, and learning at the same time what text books cannot teach, about how it feels to find yourself disadvantaged and marginalised, and how it feels to be able to make a difference in your own community.

Several of our lecturers are sharing their knowledge with people who are homeless, raising their awareness of the long line of scholars who have explored fundamental questions of existence, to reignite their passion for the world of ideas.

Others are also taking their skills and experience to developing countries in our area. Lecturer Dr Ann Gervasoni from the Ballarat Campus has brought her mathematics teaching skills to East Timor, for example, while nursing staff and students from the North Sydney and Melbourne campuses have been working in Vanuatu. All are gaining a greater understanding of the advantages Australia enjoys and sometimes takes for granted. We must find better ways for our advantages to be shared.

In partnership with others, our researchers are actively exploring the lives of detainees and people who have been refused asylum in Australia. These findings are being presented nationally and internationally in the pursuit of truth and justice.

In the past year I have been pleased to make available ACU National’s facilities for public meetings in support of worthwhile causes, such as the Forum on the Trafficking of Women and Children at the Strathfield Campus. In this way, ACU National is playing a key role in enabling non-government organisations and concerned individuals to work together to tackle complex problems.

ACU National’s Canberra Campus is enjoying the addition of the large and refurbished Blackfriars Building. With this initiative, community organisations Centacare and a new Institute of Child Protection Studies are taking up residence, to help us create a research and delivery model for best practice in the provision of welfare services.

We remain open to the needs of our communities, and we continue to welcome communication with other organisations willing to work with us to advance our Mission.

As that Mission states: “In its endeavours, it is guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and for the dignity of all human beings.”

We reject the notion of the ivory tower, where academics and students are lost in theory.
Australia’s first university courses for homeless people are taking place in a long room in Vincentian Village, East Sydney. The delivery is modelled on the Clemente program, initiated in the USA by Earl Shorris, author of Riches for the Poor, who visited Australia in 2003.

The students, aged in their 40s, 50s and 60s, come from a range of inner city homeless services to attend lectures by ACU National academics, and to write their assignments with the help of business people operating as “learning partners”.

Dr Judith Brophy, a member of the management committee of Vincentian Village who coordinates the program, said learning partners were volunteers who mostly work in Sydney’s CBD, in banks, businesses and government organisations.

“They are professional people from the business world, and it’s been amazing that they have so generously offered to come in here,” Dr Brophy said. “Our client group is not the group they would normally mix with. It could be a little bit daunting, but it is remarkable how well they are working together.”

Vincentian Village CEO, Ms Sue Chant, said the only prerequisites for the courses were an ability to read the newspaper and a passion for learning. So far, ACU National lecturers have provided University level courses on Ethics, Australian History, and Spirituality, with Art History and Theory being offered in 2005. Some 30 students have taken part so far, and word is spreading.

“It’s an inspiration to see the students’ dedication and commitment to learning,” Ms Chant said, noting that many were also finding new computer skills empowering. “They have a very strong hunger for learning. They can be in the room for up to six hours, enjoying working, looking at information and supporting each other. A percentage of them have developed a strong social support group. In the main, they wouldn’t have had a lot to do with each other in the past.”

While charitable organisations have traditionally helped their clients meet critical basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter for the night, providing them with a university level education is new.

“Tertiary education isn’t automatically connected with people who have come from this kind of disadvantaged background. I think that’s why they really value it. They are seen as being worthwhile enough to have this offered to them,” said Ms Chant.

“Their right to learn has been denied by our society in general. There’s no support structure for them to get into any learning process,” said Dr Brophy.
“Everybody here has been through a hell of a lot.”

“The lecturers have been very successful. One knows that they are very competent as teachers, but we have such a different client group,” said Dr Brophy.

Dr Peter Howard, a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the Strathfield Campus, said “everyone has something to offer”.

“It’s all about the dignity of the human being,” Dr Howard said. “It’s very much what community engagement is all about.”

All lecturers have said they have found the experience enriching, and have valued the students’ insights.

Dr Ross Keating, senior lecturer in ACU National’s School of Religious Education, sees his role in teaching the course, Spirituality for Life, as helping the students articulate their own vision of spirituality.

“They are working from their own experience, which is very rich, and I have been really surprised by their perception and insights, their eagerness to learn, their responsiveness to classes,” said Dr Keating. “For me it’s been very rewarding, very engaging.”

The ability to see personal experiences in a different light, and learn from them, was very empowering, he said.

“In their assignments they articulate their feelings about what it means to be a human person, and hopefully it will be a quality transformational experience they can take into life. It is planting seeds, giving spiritual and mental assistance and a certain strength. ‘Knowledge shall set you free’.”

Associate Professor Peter Bastian of ACU National’s School of Arts and Sciences (NSW), who taught Australian History to about 10 students in the Clemente program, said the classes were “fairly lively and positive”.

“A couple of the students surprised me,” he said. “I thought they would struggle, but some did quite well.”

Students undertake undergraduate approved units and complete assignments which are marked as rigorously as those of regular students.

“Our students deserve the best, and that’s what they are getting,” Ms Chant said. “We are not pretending to give them something less than what we believe they are entitled to. We and the University are very definite about the fact that these are university courses with qualified lecturers.”

Dr Brophy added: “One student received a distinction, and it was extraordinary the ripple that went right around.”

Senior lecturer in the School of Religious Education, Dr Graham English, teaches habilitation students who work with people with disabilities, as well as in the Clemente program.

“I never ask the students at ACU National about their background,” he said. “It just doesn’t seem to me it is any of my business. I took the same attitude with the homeless people. Some were clearly university graduates in various things.

“It was a strange experience. You realise that there’s a culture, a world that exists that you don’t know about, of different agencies and refuges …

“One woman said it was the only time she had any serious conversation with anyone from one Friday to the next. It’s a whole world in there, with its own kind of language, a fairly fluid world.
The only prerequisites for the courses are an ability to read the newspaper and a passion for learning.

“For some people, the learning experience might make a difference, they might realise they have some power, that they can think and might order their lives. Others have settled into that lifestyle, but hearing lectures gives them something to do that is useful and thought provoking.

“Homeless people have the right to be able to be able to read, and read good stuff and be part of that tradition.”

From the philosophical to the practical, students were catching on, he said, realising their own questioning and thinking was part of a long tradition, stretching back to Aristotle and Plato.

A celebratory lunch at the end of the course reminded Dr English of a scene from the movie, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, when it is difficult to distinguish the doctors from the patients.

“I was very conscious of the thin line between being whatever we are, coping and normal, and people who are homeless. Most of these people have some kind of addiction, to gambling or substances, or some kind of psychological problem. You realise that everything is a fine balance. It touches your own insecurities.”

STUDENT INTERVIEW: “AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY”

Clemente student Tania Hilder said she had wanted to study the humanities since she was 19, but years of work, a battle with depression and changing circumstances worked against her until now.

“A friend brought me down here,” Tania said. “We have been very privileged to have been in this group. It’s just a fabulous opportunity. The learning experience has taken our minds off our own problems.

“Everybody here’s been through a hell of a lot. We support each other. This has been a wonderful community. We come to share as well. We don’t just come in to take.

“We are very grateful for everything that’s been offered to us. We try and do our best to thank them.”

The experience has opened up a new future for Tania. “We don’t know where it’s going to lead. I have always wanted to write and this is getting me into this mode.

It’s been wonderful. This has been an incredible journey of knowledge and opening up to the world."

Tania studied World War I and World War II during the Australian History course, finding it “horrific yet rewarding in its way” and enjoyed the course on Spirituality. “It was beautiful, very broad, drawing on all the ancient wisdoms and knowledge, all the religions of the world, making sense of it all,” she said.

“It has been handed to us now to make sense of life and our place here, to find our place in it. This circle is helping us to understand our place in the world and our journey in it. For the assignment we have really had to clarify our thoughts and how we feel about God and spirituality in a very wide sense and how it’s included in every part of our lives, and the more we become aware of that, the more enriched our lives are. We are seeing how you can still live in a very spiritual way. It’s just been wonderful.”
It makes intuitive good sense for us to share our expertise and experiences.”

MOVING MINDSETS TO BUILD ON STRENGTH

To complement its hundreds of services aimed at empowering people experiencing disadvantage and isolation across Australia, Mission Australia is planning to introduce tertiary education for homeless people at another site in Sydney and one in Queensland.

“Like ACU National and the St Vincent de Paul Society, we value the strengths of the people we work with very highly,” said Ms Anne Hampshire, National Manager Research and Social Policy with Mission Australia.

“We want to harness and build on the strengths of the clients at some of our homeless services, so they can take greater control of their lives.”

Ms Hampshire is a member of the ACU National Faculty of Education’s advisory board of the Office of Community Engagement and is also on the board of ACU National’s Flagship for Creative and Authentic Leadership.

She describes the partnership between the University and the community organisations as “powerful and based on common values”. “It makes intuitive good sense for us to share our expertise and experiences.

“We all bring complementary and essential skills to the table for a common purpose. We want the opportunity to engage with our clients and the community in new ways, and to be part of rethinking the role of universities,” Ms Hampshire said.

“We believe in the human dignity of each of the people whom we work with and in supporting them to pursue new possibilities and opportunities, such as a university education. We also believe we have much to learn from those we work with and our partner organisations.

“One of the important outcomes we’re hoping for through providing university education to homeless people is to change community mindsets about homeless people, to shift assumptions and expectations of what they can achieve and of what is possible.”

As well as providing lecturers, ACU National will lend expertise in qualitative and quantitative research, evaluating programs at each site to allow continual improvement.

“Our goal is to measure the outcomes not only for the participants, but also for the community organisations, for the learning partners, the University and the community. Through partnerships we’re hoping we can make an important contribution to the participation of homeless people in our community as well as help shape community views about what homeless people can achieve.”
Students make a difference

A Community Outreach Program adopted in 1999 by ACU National’s School of Education (NSW) sees all education students giving 70 hours of their time to others. Each year they provide some 22,000 hours of volunteer work in 150 agencies.

“We have a deeply held belief that educators have a responsibility to educate their students as citizens who recognise and challenge inequalities and unjust social structures in local and global societies,” said Associate Professor Jude Butcher, former Head of the School of Education (NSW) and a founder of the Faculty of Education’s Office of Community Engagement: Equity, Social Justice and Education.

“Teachers must be prepared to go beyond curriculum knowledge and skills outcomes to educate for social action and empowerment.”

Students are introduced to social justice issues and social analysis and action over 12 weeks. During placement with a community organisation, they keep a learning journal, noting their expectations, experiences and reflections. Afterwards, they debrief together with their mentors.

The transforming experience is revealed in their diaries. Initially they write of shock, surprise and fears, which evolve to enjoyment and pride as they confront their fears, experience acceptance and realise they are appreciated and valued in the new context.

Students must reflect on their understandings of the world and the structures which accentuate differences between people.

Dr Peter Howard, senior lecturer in the School of Education at ACU National’s Strathfield Campus, said: “It’s about creating a presence and a critical appreciation of their role within the community.

“My view is that the Faculty of Education graduates engaged citizens whose profession is as a teacher, and the University graduates engaged citizens who are going to be nurses or teachers or business people.”

Mr John Barlow, lecturer in technology, School of Arts and Sciences (NSW), who supervises Arts and Visual Arts and Design students undertaking volunteer experience, said: “We never cease to be impressed by the genuine sense of personal achievement and fulfilment expressed by students after completing their volunteer experience programs … after many initial misgivings and resistance.”
STUDENT INTERVIEW: “I HAD THE BEST TIME OF MY LIFE.”

For third-year Arts student Sarah Assaf, 21, of North Manly it was a joy to spend three weeks as a volunteer at Stewart House Preventorium, a school at beachside South Curl Curl for disadvantaged children from around NSW and the ACT.

Sarah’s former primary school had supported the not-for-profit organisation by donating clothing and toys, and although she didn’t know what to expect, she was looking forward to the experience.

Stewart House offers children facing sickness, poverty and violence in their home lives a two-week holiday by the sea. A hospital, charity and school, it caters for students from Kindergarten to Year 10 at no cost to parents.

“It was excellent,” said Sarah, who is majoring in computing and human resources. “I had the best time in my life.”

She found she enjoyed being with the children, hearing their stories, and assuring them that despite their current difficulties, there would be better times ahead.

“It was like a teacher’s role. I never wanted to be a teacher before, but when I’d finished there, I decided I may study further to obtain a Diploma of Education, upon completion of my current degree.”

Sarah said the teachers showed her that even kids with the worst possible problems can still have fun. She has decided to return as a volunteer when time permits.

STUDENT INTERVIEW: “I REALISED PEOPLE COULD USE MY HELP.”

Fourth-year ACU National Strathfield Campus student Rana Eid, 21, initially baulked at the idea of compulsory voluntary work, fearing it would be boring and take up time she could ill afford to give.

Faced with failure if she continued to avoid the experience, she hesitantly volunteered at a nearby St Vincent de Paul “op shop”, offering to serve at the counter.

“I was pretty hesitant,” Rana admitted. “I’d never been into one of those shops or been around people like that. I preferred to give money to charity and not see the poverty.”

Her enquiry was welcomed by the manager and she found herself there throughout her Christmas holidays and weekends, willingly working the required 70 hours.

“I loved getting to know the people who came into the shop. You’d get people who were really poor and couldn’t afford anything, and it opened my eyes. A lot of people would open up and talk to you. It was nice. I got to know their stories. I see them around now and it’s like speaking to a neighbour. I realised people could use my help. It was really rewarding,” said Rana.

Rana enjoyed watching the spectrum of people who visited the shop, including the wealthy property owners who would come in and try to bargain for every item. “I hadn’t realised how greedy and selfish some people can be.”

She has encouraged fellow students to embrace the challenge, and also believes the experience has made her more likely to become a volunteer in future. “I love helping people, especially little kids,” said Rana.
Master of Education student Sarah Forgan, 22, first became attracted to the realisation she could make a difference in people’s lives when she went to a pre-school during Year 10 work experience. She noticed a young girl struggling with letters and sounds in a pre-reading task. Sarah’s patience with her over a period of days paid off as the girl began to make sense of what had been totally confusing.

Sarah then had her own task … to choose between a business and marketing degree at one university, science at another, and teaching at ACU National. “I was really drawn to ACU National’s involvement with people,” Sarah said. “I admire that. It makes you think outside your own little square.”

Sarah’s first compulsory community outreach challenge at ACU National pitted her against her own preconceptions about the elderly. For 300 hours during second year she visited Mercy Family Centre, Waitara, Sydney, where she came to know a number of the geriatric residents.

“Before this experience, I used to find myself getting frustrated with elderly people because they could be very set in their ways, but this was a chance for me to become more understanding and to appreciate their point of view.”

For several years, and as president of Young Vincentians, St Vincent de Paul Youth Team Strathfield Conference at the University’s Strathfield Campus, Sarah witnessed how community engagement changes other students.

Every month a team of students volunteer to feed homeless people in the Sydney CBD between 7.30pm and midnight. “The night van is always an eye-opening experience. It’s quite phenomenal.”

Confronting yet motivating
“For some students it is very, very confronting yet motivating.” She has seen fellow students “really taken aback” who then reflect on their own luck and become regularly involved in their own ways. She described one student, “a very big and strong young man with a gentle heart”, who related particularly well with the Indigenous people on the van’s route, and spent a lot of time listening to their life stories.

Experience plus reflection equals learning
After every outing, the students take time to reflect. “School of Education senior lecturer Dr Peter Howard taught us that experience plus reflection equals learning,” said Sarah. “Without it, the experience can lose meaning.” In other voluntary work, ACU National students take part in Buddies’ Day, accompanying children from three of St Vincent de Paul’s refuges to the zoo or aquarium or on other outings, where they can forget any trauma or financial constraints and simply enjoy themselves. Yet another program supported by students supplies breakfast to children at Rosebery Primary School with Red Cross. “It’s in an industrial area. Many of the parents have left for work long before school starts, and some children haven’t eaten. I really enjoy giving them breakfast and chatting,” said Sarah.

The nourishment works both ways. “Community engagement makes you aware of how you can tie the idea of service into your new profession, whether it be in teaching or business. It gives you that awareness of how you can serve others and make a difference in your community, supporting those who need it whilst going about your job,” she said.
A former Dominican Friars’ Centre built in the shape of a dove in Canberra in the 1960s is taking on a new life as a welfare hub, a unique blend of academic research and teaching, and the practical delivery of services attuned to community needs.

Pictured right, Blackfriars was acquired by the University in partnership with the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn and is adjacent to ACU National’s Canberra Campus.

As refurbishment is completed in 2005, Blackfriars is becoming a physical embodiment of ACU National’s commitment to “community engagement”.

The large three-story building now houses not only staff and students of ACU National, but also staff of the Catholic welfare agency Centacare Canberra and Goulburn, along with staff of the newly launched Institute of Child Protection Studies, linked to the ACT Government’s Care and Protection services.

“Centacare is a major welfare provider in the ACT and Goulburn, and the Institute of Child Protection Studies is unique in Australia,” said Associate Professor Peter Camilleri, Rector of ACU National’s Canberra Campus.

“Our schools of Social Work and Theology are on the floors below, so there is a lot of synergy, with possibilities for research, training of students, and postgraduate work.”

Professor Camilleri described community engagement as “the lifeblood of ACU National”.

“It provides the opportunity for the University to be more in touch with the community,” said Professor Camilleri.

Many mutual benefits are envisaged, from Centacare receiving advice for particular cases and situations, to opportunities for joint research.

The Institute of Child Protection Studies also sees opportunities for collaborative research into best practice, to provide optimal service, and for improved training.

Weemala

An Indigenous Reflection Space on the Brisbane Campus provides a place for ACU National students, staff and the community, including school groups, to reflect, pray and gather for cultural activities on the University’s newest campus.

Since it was opened in early 2004, the space has been used for reconciliation talking circles, Indigenous festivals, a ceremony honouring elders, and for picnics. The area features a dance area, fire pit for kup muri meals, sandstone seating, a large pond, and views to Moreton Bay.

There are also mosaics which highlight the links between the personal journey, spirituality and education.

The Indigenous Reflection Space is unique in Australian universities, reflecting ACU National’s commitment to the reconciliation process and Indigenous culture.

At the launching of the space, ACU National Vice-Chancellor, Professor Peter Sheehan AO, also launched the book, Weemala – The Spirit Within, a celebration of the achievements of Indigenous students at ACU National over the past 15 years.

Brisbane Campus was relocated to Banyo in 2003, and the Reflection Space reaffirms strong Indigenous spiritual links with the new site.
ACU National academics have a unique opportunity to work towards an understanding of the most pressing social problems of our day. They have independence, research credibility, and the ability to collaborate with community organisations.

Dr Tony Morris, ACU National lecturer in the School of Education (NSW), is a member of a project team which is assessing the level of safety of asylum seekers who have returned to countries of origin, or to “third” countries, after their claims for asylum in Australia have been rejected. The team is coordinated by Mr Phil Glendenning, director of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (ERC).

At ACU National, Dr Morris spends much of his time teaching in several programs which have social justice and human rights at their centre. These include habilitation and Indigenous undergraduate programs and the Masters of Education in Communities and Social Justice.

Over the past two years, Dr Morris has travelled to the Middle East, South Asia, and the UK and Europe interviewing and observing rejected asylum seekers. Findings on 40 asylum seekers were recently released in Australia and distributed to government and inter-governmental agencies in Geneva at the annual UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ Executive Committee Meeting.

“In the vast majority of these cases, clear refoulement has happened,” Dr Morris said, indicating that Australia’s decision to refuse to grant asylum has resulted in people being placed back in danger, in breach of Australia’s obligations as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

“The findings indicate glaring holes in Australia’s determination procedure,” he said.

As an ACU National academic, Dr Morris feels an obligation to contribute to human rights, fairness and equal access to resources for all people so they can have a decent quality of life.

“If you believe in these principles, it motivates you to engage in understanding and seeking solutions to critical public issues. It is important to be involved in the public debate,” said Dr Morris.

Dr Morris works closely with the non-for-profit civil society organisation, the ERC. He believes the diverse social networks the ERC has with minority groups, as well as government, business and schools, allow him access to a plethora of contacts.

“There are many groups within a community with their own values and interests. To engage in social problems, an academic needs to understand the needs and views of all the groups – those that are being disadvantaged, such as Aboriginal people, refugees, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, the unemployed and the homeless – as well as those groups in society which yield power.

“If you believe in a strong democracy, you have to have a counterpoint to government and business. This is the role of civil society organisations like the ERC. I can add value through my research skills,” said Dr Morris.
“It is wonderful to know that you are contributing in a small way and, through email, are able to continue to give some support and encouragement, and to continue learning yourself.”

Dr Ann Gervasoni, a lecturer in Mathematics Education at the Ballarat Campus, only saw some of the better schools in the Baucau district when she went to East Timor recently to help develop mathematics teaching skills at the newly established Catholic Teachers’ College in Baucau.

Even so, the schools had broken windows, no electricity, no water and no toilets. The classrooms had desks and a blackboard, but no other resources, not even readers.

“Ninety-five per cent of the teachers are untrained and are expected to instruct in Portuguese, a language they don’t know themselves,” Dr Gervasoni said. “It’s a very big challenge.”

The lecturers Dr Gervasoni worked with at the teachers’ college are graduates in agricultural science, with no formal training in mathematics education.

Of particular value has been the sharing of research-based information developed at ACU National’s Victorian campuses (Melbourne and Ballarat), on key growth points in children’s mathematical learning as well as a new assessment interview technique.

Links between ACU National and East Timor were already established, with Ms Margie Beck from ACU National’s School of Education (NSW) based full-time in East Timor, and three students from East Timor enrolled at the Ballarat Campus over the past four years, who have now graduated.

ACU National’s Vice-Chancellor Professor Peter Sheehan AO, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Affairs) Professor Gabrielle McMullen, Professor Tony d’Arbon and Associate Professor Jude Butcher attended the opening ceremony of the teachers’ college in 2003.

Since Dr Gervasoni returned, she has encouraged the Ballarat Campus students and members of the local community to collect mathematics teaching materials for East Timorese schools, such as dice, calculators, playing cards and counters, and she has kept in touch by email, helping wherever possible.

Schools in the Ballarat Diocese have also been active. For example, Diocesan schools have printed and posted back 1,000 copies of East Timor’s first schools’ songbook that was developed by staff at the teachers’ college. These were distributed to teachers during workshops from September to December 2004. Ballarat Campus students and staff also contributed to printing these songbooks.

Dr Gervasoni describes her visit and continued contact as “very enriching and important for me”. “It is wonderful to know that you are contributing in a small way and, through email, able to continue to give some support and encouragement, and to continue learning yourself.”
Two weeks in Vanuatu might sound like a holiday, but for second-year ACU National Bachelor of Nursing students, it is “life-changing” experiential learning at its best.

Living with Ni-Vanuatu (Indigenous) families in northern villages, they work alongside local nurses, vaccinating school children, assisting with births, and giving primary health care.

For some students, a week in Vila working in the Pacific island’s top hospital adds to their experience, as they see what can be achieved despite a lack of technology and equipment.

Others travel north to Vanuatu’s largest island, Espirito Santo, where they help women give birth after the women have walked and travelled for days on small canoes. The students also treat patients with TB, leprosy and malaria.

“Students drew up a wish list of items they would like to donate to the hospital,” said Dr Michelle Campbell, Head of ACU National’s School of Nursing (Victoria).

“They have now raised about $5,000 and sent midwifery equipment, blood pressure machines, stethoscopes, earpiece thermometers and other equipment,” Dr Campbell said.

The increasingly popular elective unit, Health and healing practices in Indigenous communities, is the brainchild of ACU National lecturer in the School of Nursing (NSW), Mrs Jacqui Guy, who has always been interested in developing countries and international health and “looking outside the borders of the students’ normal nursing practice opportunities”.

For a decade, Mrs Guy has been a volunteer with the Solomon Islands Patient Program, hosting and supporting patients receiving treatment at Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital. Through this, she has developed many links with the Solomon Islands and Pacific Health, organising field visits by students to the islands in 1996, 1997 and 1998.

When civil unrest put an end to these visits to the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu health professionals welcomed Mrs Guy, and her ACU National students from the North Sydney Campus in 2002, 2003 and 2004. In addition, students from the Melbourne Campus took part for the first time in 2004, with Dr Campbell and School of Nursing (Victoria) postgraduate course coordinator Dr Colleen Rolls. More trips are planned for 2005. “Each visit is unique,” said Mrs Guy, who recently presented a paper on the program at a Nursing Education Conference in Toronto, Canada.

“The people are so wonderful, and the nursing is so different and challenging, and it opens up a whole new world for the students and myself. It is a wonderful learning experience.

“Every student I have taken has said it is life-changing and one of their best experiences. I would say that the friendships developed and the remote nursing opportunities I have been

“Nursing in ‘Vanuatu time’ is different to the pace experienced here.”
doing have been a highlight of my own life as well.

“The students have the opportunity to gain an understanding of another culture and the influences of custom beliefs on health in a developing country with differing health needs and contexts,” said Mrs Guy.

Students must show culturally sensitive behaviour and dress in a culturally appropriate way, with skirts past their knees, for example. They value the shared nursing experiences with Ni-Vanuatu nurses who are the backbone of all health services in Vanuatu.

“Nursing in ‘Vanuatu time’ is different to the pace experienced here and they appreciate the differing competencies expected of Primary Health Care with minimal resources. In Vanuatu, there are few doctors, and nurses have many demands placed on them.”

The Australian students are welcomed and encouraged in a stress-free learning environment to work alongside the local nurses.

The experience also gives the students confidence. “Even after two weeks, I see a difference in them,” said Mrs Guy. “You see them grow and mature. The students come back and really appreciate their nursing opportunities here and the fact that they have so much in the way of equipment. However, Ni-Vanuatu nurses do not complain. They make the best of the resources they have.”

Dr Campbell said the Australians were touched by the generosity of the Ni-Vanuatu nurses and patients. “They have nothing, but they give everything,” she said, adding that they threw a party for the Australian visitors, and asked the students about nursing in Australia. “Our students were able to do a lot of teaching as well as a lot of learning.”

Many of the students have later gone on to take rural and remote nursing electives back in Australia, while keeping in touch with each other and those they met while away.

“They send gifts to Vanuatu families and equipment for the hospital, and each year the Faculty of Health Sciences sends nursing books,” Mrs Guy said.

Mrs Guy says she looks forward to the unit each year. “It is something I am quite passionate about, it is so rewarding.” Her comments are echoed in the students’ journals, reports and PowerPoint presentations, and the fact that many want to return.

“They helped women give birth after the women have walked and travelled for days on small canoes.”

Left to right: Nursing student Jess Boon with a Ni-Vanuatu mother and child (left); a student with a midwife and new baby; two students with patients; Head of ACU National’s School of Nursing (Victoria) Dr Michelle Campbell with a baby.
ACU National has joined forces with the Brigidine Sisters and other organisations to help tackle the complex and hidden problem of the international trafficking of women and children in the sex industry.

“It’s an area that both disturbs and alarms us,” ACU National counsellor Dr Maree Marsh told at least 50 individuals and representatives of some 15 Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) who gathered recently at ACU National’s Strathfield Campus for a Forum on the Trafficking of Women and Children.

“They are not traded in chains in the town square, but trafficked women and children are nevertheless bought and sold. The world’s poor in search of a better life are trapped, deceived, taken to unknown places and stripped of all dignity; human cargo at the mercy of economic forces.

“The issues are very complex, and to remedy and redress such a multifaceted problem is no easy task,” said Dr Marsh. The Forum heard that up to 1,000 trafficked women are currently working in Australia in legal and illegal brothels and in escort agencies; victims of a pattern of poverty, coercion, abduction, exploitation of ignorance about migration procedures, and deception through half truths.

Women who thought they were travelling to Australia to a better life were starved and beaten, said guest speaker Ms Kathleen Maltzahn, Director of Melbourne-based anti-trafficking NGO Project Respect, which focuses on issues of violence against women in the sex industry.

“The women were trapped into thinking they were ‘under contract’ to perform up to 1,000 sexual acts, day and night, and whether healthy or ill, in order to ‘earn’ their freedom in Australia,” she said.

Such contracts are illegal, but with neither money, English, nor freedom, the women felt they had little choice, and periods of brutality followed by kindness also served to blind them to their fate.

“Trafficking clearly is a gross violence against women – verbal, physical and financial abuse,” she said, then outlined the emergence of the problem in Australia.

High levels of violence against Filipino women in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s were linked to the rise of “mail order brides”. This could have been seen as trafficking for marriage, in which expectations raised by the international sex tourism industry were “linked into very intimate issues of marriage between men in Australia and Filipino women”.

“The world’s poor in search of a better life are trapped, deceived, taken to unknown places and stripped of all dignity.”
Ms Maltzahn said since 2000 she had investigated about 300 cases in Australia, including Thai women, Chinese Malaysian “hairdressers”, Russian “table top dancers” and increasing numbers of women from South Korea.

Tell-tale signs included women working long hours, drug and gambling dependency, malnutrition, lack of passport and visa, not being paid, and being transported to and from work by regular drivers.

Their isolation was often intensified by their lack of English.

Despite improved training among Australian Federal Police, the lack of communication between local, state and commonwealth authorities was a “major impediment”. Victims required support, not just witness protection.

During the forum, working parties shared ideas and planned joint action to educate the community and lobby for legislative changes.

Sister Louise Cleary, congregational leader of the Brigidine Sisters, praised the “striking” openness of ACU National’s Vice-Chancellor and his willingness for the University to sponsor a number of outreach programs and events. “It is indicative of the calibre of staff,” she said. “There are some great people.”
Volunteer fire fighters; Mr Mick Ryan, research officer in ACU National’s School of Education (NSW) with Associate Professor Jude Butcher, former Head of the School of Education (NSW). The role of volunteers is being examined by Mr Ryan in collaboration with the NSW Rural Fire Service and other organisations.
V21 Enhancing Volunteering for the 21st Century
is in partnership with the Benevolent Society, NSW Rural Fire Service, and the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Volunteers are a precious resource, but are they happy in the service? Do they possess skills yet to be tapped? What assistance might they need to enhance their contributions?

In collaboration with three Partner Organisations (POs), ACU National is surveying some 720 volunteers and 180 employees to shed light on their experiences and preferences.

Mr Mick Ryan, a research officer in ACU National’s School of Education (NSW), is coordinating the three-year, Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study, V21 Enhancing Volunteering for the 21st Century, in partnership with the Benevolent Society, NSW Rural Fire Service, and the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Mr Ryan brings to the study diverse experience in education and from his years as a business consultant, where his work with employers and staff enabled businesses to adapt to changing market conditions and other challenges.

At ACU National, where “a commitment to serving the common good” is an integral part of the Mission, his study is contributing to the POs and the wider community through fostering and advancing “a multidimensional understanding of volunteer capacity”, to enhance the efforts of volunteers.

Mr Ryan is quick to point out that the benefits of the joint study will be shared. Critique of practice, mutual learning and skills transfer are expected to emerge as the POs pursue their common goal of maximising their volunteer resource.

Even in early stages of the study there have been a number of valuable shared insights and surprises, as they become familiar with their similarities and differences.

The Benevolent Society is an example of a social enterprise – an organisation that integrates traditional welfare programs with projects, which provide employment, connection, self-reliance and greater community sustainability. The Benevolent Society operates mainly in the Sydney metropolitan and Macarthur regions, and has more than 700 volunteers and 640 paid staff.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul operates more as a charity, with more than 21,000 volunteers and 2,000 paid staff in NSW and the ACT.

The NSW Rural Fire Service is a statutory body with 67,000 volunteers and 640 salaried officers.

ACU National, with more than 12,000 students, provides a changing pool of students who learn about themselves and others as they contribute to a range of organisations and services, completing voluntary service as part of their learning experience.

Each PO wants to develop more flexible structures and processes to maximise the volunteer pool, Mr Ryan explained. They want to make more effective use of the interests and abilities of their current volunteers; provide opportunities which will attract new volunteers from across all age, ethnic and socio-economic groups; support existing volunteers; and set up a range of volunteer pathways which encourage volunteers to remain involved throughout their lives.

The St Vincent de Paul Society and the NSW Rural Fire Service have placed particular priority upon this in rural areas where they face difficulties, not only in recruiting volunteers but also in providing adequate and appropriate organisational support.

In addition, the Benevolent Society has emphasised its strategic goal of socially empowering its “clients”, moving them from a situation of social dependence to one of independence, from which they may become volunteers.

Aside from the immeasurable social value of volunteers and the sense of satisfaction and belonging they achieve personally through donating their time and skills, en masse they are estimated to contribute more than $40 billion annually to Australia’s GDP.

While many give their time and skills to their children’s schools and sporting groups and their own hobbies, Mr Ryan points out that the V21 project focuses on “formal organisations that provide some particular community service where the clientele is beyond the membership and the membership’s families, where the beneficiaries are the broader community”.

With the advent of occupational health and safety requirements, the need for insurance against legal liability, and checks of criminal records, the recruitment, induction and management of volunteers has become increasingly formalised.

“What we are specifically looking at is the idea of how organisations can take account of an individual’s self-efficacy – their confidence in their ability to be an effective volunteer – to place them in suitable activities; that is, to match the capabilities and interests of the volunteer with the needs of the organisation so that the volunteering experience develops the capacity of both the individual and the organisation.

We are wanting to maximise the return to the organisations and to the volunteers.

“Moreover, the capacity to volunteer varies over time as volunteers gain confidence,” said Mr Ryan.

Teamwork, training and support for each person from the organisation also play a part in increasing a volunteer’s capacity.

“We are wanting to maximise the return to the organisations and to the volunteers,” said Mr Ryan.

Among questions to be explored are the reasons individuals leave or stay with a particular organisation, or change their involvement in some way.

Are existing models of volunteering responsive to the changing personal, social, economic and organisational realities affecting individuals and organisations in the 21st Century?

“We need to ask what organisational structures and processes enhance volunteer capacity at key points of an individual’s engagement, and what volunteer pathways would be most responsive to their changing lifestyle, needs and expectations,” said Mr Ryan.
ACU National lecturer, Dr Maarten Immink and three third-year students set off on the 100 kilometre Oxfam Trailwalker Sydney course aiming to finish in 24 hours instead of the allocated 48 hours, measuring their bodies’ physiological responses along the way as part of an assessment.

The team battled knee pain, blisters and busted toenails, and overran their deadline by several hours, but the experience was well worth it, according to Dr Immink.

“What kept us training and pushing to gather money was the idea that our efforts would help others,” Dr Immink said. “While the race became really challenging mentally, we kept putting one foot in front of the other because this wasn’t just ‘our’ race. It was for the human race.

“The best part of the Oxfam Challenge is when we submit all the money raised (about $4,000) to Oxfam Community Aid Abroad. We know our achievement will have an impact on others. How often do you get the chance to really test your limits?” Dr Immink asked.

Measuring their blood chemistry, power output in their legs, their weight and reaction times at each check station, they confirmed they each needed the equivalent of three kilos of peanut butter and 29 litres of water to make the distance. “We each took about 77,000 steps and consumed about 33 litres of oxygen in nearly 35,000 breaths,” said Dr Immink.

At 67 kilometres, the going started to get very tough, forcing the water, food and equipment coordinator student David Ikin to pull out due to dehydration, along with about one in five other competitors. Fellow students, first aid and safety coordinator Tristan Conn and team navigator Sam Byrne managed to hold on until the end, as did team leader Dr Immink, but it was a true endurance test.

“About 70 kilometres into the course things started to really happen,” Dr Immink said. “I had lost 2 kilos, developed really bad knee pains, and the last five kilometres seemed like another 50 kilometres.”

The effort took from 8am Friday morning to noon the following day, four hours and five minutes over their personal deadline, giving them 146th place among more than 380 teams making their way through challenging bushland between Sydney’s Hunters Hill and Manly.

While the students analysed and presented their data, Dr Immink focused on collecting money for Oxfam through their team, dubbed Eight Odd Feet with Grunts (EOFWG).