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
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.