

Insights From Community Engagement Programs At The Australian Catholic University

Extract from

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Two programs that are helping ACU National in defining and implementing strategies for effective and purposeful community engagement are the work of Faculty and administrative staff with East Timor and homeless people. These two programs, implemented through the University's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement are described below.

East Timor and the Instituto Catolica para Formacao de Professores

East Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and regained independence in 1999 after a referendum was held. A campaign of destruction was launched by Indonesian-trained and equipped militias in the aftermath of the referendum in which 78% of the population voted for independence. In the ensuing violence, most of the infrastructure of the country was destroyed, particularly what was provided by Indonesia in health and education. The political situation remains unstable, with an estimated 100 000 Internally Displaced Persons (10% of the population) living in camps and with host families in the districts.

The government of East Timor is heavily dependent on international aid, which will decrease as oil revenue becomes available. There is a lack of skills among government employees because most of them were only permitted to occupy low-level jobs under Indonesian rule. There is a critical need for infrastructure reconstruction, provision of employment and better health and education services. In 2006, less than 10% of teachers have formal qualifications. Life expectancy is on average 56 years and is combined with an infant mortality rate of 52 per 1000 live births. Maternal mortality in 2000 was at a rate of 660 per 100 000 live births.

ACU National has sustained its commitment to capacity building in East Timor since 2000. The institutional focus for the University's work has been with *Instituto Catolica para Formacao de Professores* (ICFP), Baucau: the first teacher education institute in East Timor. This collaborative work has contributed significantly to ICFP becoming an educational lighthouse and source of hope for East Timor nationally and internationally. The aim of the collaborative program is promotion of the development of East Timorese personnel at ICFP, financial and other resource development for ICFP, institutional sustainability, and international recognition of both ICFP as a tertiary institution and of their academic awards.

The focus of the collaborative work with ICFP has included:

- sustaining a supply of internationally qualified beginning teachers who are capable of assuming leadership roles in schools and communities;
- having the teacher education course recognised nationally and internationally;
- meeting quality assurance requirements for its educational, financial and management accountabilities;
- being a provider of quality professional development courses to the education and other sectors;
- implementing evidence-based reporting, which informs the research and publication agenda.

ICFP's capacity building achievements, sustained through ongoing periods of civil unrest since 2000, include:

- the establishment, in partnership with Australian Catholic University, of the first internationally recognised degree course for primary teacher education in East Timor since independence;
- 150 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching course;
- the first graduation of 48 primary school teachers in November 2006;
- graduates currently involved as teachers throughout the different districts of East Timor;
- extremely high retention rate (more than 96 percent) and overall satisfaction of the teacher education students;
- academic staff trained in current 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. These institutions have benefited from employment of ICFP staff who provide leadership in quality teaching and learning;
- East Timor Ministry of Education involving ICFP in developing higher education policies.

These achievements are sources of hope in overcoming disadvantage in East Timor and demonstrate the power of collaboration and engagement in making a difference.

Clemente Australia and Homeless People

An education program, for homeless people, called *Clemente* was trialled by Australian Catholic University in East Sydney during 2003-2004 (Yashin-Shaw, Howard & Butcher, 2005). Since this trial the program has been established in three sites (Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra) and now has involved more than 100 marginalised people in the study of Humanities subjects with the purpose of re-engaging them with learning and the community.

The *Clemente* program was conceptualised by Shorris (2000) on the premise that education in the humanities would help move socially disenfranchised people out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness. The program is therefore different from 'life skills' or 'vocational' courses. It does not seek to train people directly for specific kinds of work, because work on its own is not seen as the "structural solution to poverty, particularly multigenerational poverty" (Shorris, 2000, p.63). Rather it is premised on the belief that studying the humanities through courses such as philosophy and ethics serves to engage and empower people to think about and reflect on the world in which they live, so that they might become less likely to react simply to contexts and events and more likely to examine, question and contemplate. In doing so, learners would engage in "activity with other people at every level" (Shorris, 2000, p.127) and become engaged 'public' citizens.

The *Clemente* program assumes that social isolation and the disadvantage that stems from that can, to some extent, be addressed through education that helps people to understand the inherent benefits of engaged citizenship (Butcher, Howard & McFadden 2003). Unfortunately such an education is often inaccessible to the very people who would benefit most. Because of the circumstances of homeless people, the *Clemente* program advocates that university level humanities courses with appropriately qualified university lecturers be taught in a community setting. Participants are supported between lectures with a volunteer learning partner, recruited from businesses and government; and also, where necessary, by welfare staff. It was expected that there would be substantial associated benefits in delivering the course in this way, and this was indeed found to be the case, e.g., participants formed supportive relationships among themselves and with others (such as lecturers and learning partners); achieved personal responsibility; and experienced success and changing perceptions (Snapshot, 2007). Students involved in Clemente have re-engaged with community, undertaken transformational learning processes and moved on to further tertiary studies and connectedness with others in their communities.

Evaluating Community Engagement Activities at ACU National

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the East Timor and Clemente community engagement activities highlighted the importance of the following principles and strategies for developing mutually beneficial, relevant and sustainable community engagement activities. At ACU National:

1. An explicit social justice framework underpins the community engagement activities.
2. Partners are able to explain how the community engagement activity contributes to the 'common good'.
3. Partners acknowledge that relationships are authentic, trusting and sustainable.
4. Goals are purposeful, articulated and mutually beneficial for all partners.
5. Strategies exist to ensure communication and sustainability.
6. Activities, processes and outcomes are acknowledged and celebrated by communities and the university.
7. The university provides appropriate structures to support the activity.
8. The processes and outcomes of community engagement activities contribute to and enrich the learning, teaching and research activities of the university.
9. Outcomes of community engagement research are used to inform and critique public policy.

Summary

The work undertaken in East Timor and with homeless people has had significant impact at personal and societal levels. The personal impact is apparent for those who have formed the relationships and partnerships necessary for the programs to be implemented. The personal commitment to overcoming the disadvantage is striking. Further, these projects are having an impact at the societal level in that they are impacting on public policy formation and changing the fortunes of homeless people and the East Timorese. Indeed, through these programs, Australian Catholic University has evolved an understanding of the critical relevance of community engagement in making a difference in peoples' lives.

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