

UNTIL – a Timor triumph

Judy Blood, head librarian, ABC Reference Library

For most of the three months that I worked in Dili, the library project office was the only place in the University with a stapler and sticky tape. It is hard to imagine a situation where a university opening for classes has no library and is so totally under-resourced — but this is the reality of East Timor.

I worked with a team of four dedicated East Timorese librarians as the reconstruction of the old Polytechnic building continued around us, and the first of the 100 teaching and forty administration staff were appointed. We witnessed the new university struggle to start its first teaching year in November with 5000 students and a further 3500 extension students. We developed plans for a library with no building and only 2000 or so Indonesian language textbooks. Basic library services will not be accessible to students for at least another 6–8 months.

Background

Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA) has been working closely and in partnership with the National University of Timor Loro Sa'e (UNTIL), Dr Armindo Maia, the Rector of UNTIL, Father Filomeno Jacob, Cabinet Member for Social Services, and the librarians to develop a first-class university library. It will become the cornerstone of the developing National University of East Timor, which in itself is one of the single most important projects in the reconstruction of the country. The APHEDA project is the beginning of a long-term commitment to this process.

On the university's behalf, APHEDA is seeking funds for the renovation of a burned-out building. A recent offer depends on finding donations to fund the remaining costs — to cover such things as the rebuilding project and the furnishings, shelving, equipment and ongoing operational costs.

APHEDA is working towards developing a computer network and a multimedia and research centre for the library. They are in need of money to continue sending selected volunteers to support the team of Timorese librarians in developing computer literacy and skills in IT systems management and maintenance, electronic cataloguing and research, and in library management.

The University Library Project has been assisted by a number of aid workers, supporters and donors, including Jim Meilor of APHEDA, Patrick Lee of the IEU, the Victorian Education Department with a generous dona-



Stacks for sorting incoming book donations at UNTIL's library

tion of computer hardware and software, John Ridler of Skahe for Athena & ZMarc library software, the staff at the University of New South Wales, including Gai Smith, who spent a month providing training in East Timor, Kate Flood of Dymocks, and many others.

Timor time

Difficulties are faced at every level — besides the lack of essential infrastructure and basic facilities, critical shortages of interpreters, internet access and information technology support, and the risk of disease (the next project worker was flown out with Dengue fever), there is something called 'Timor time', where very simple tasks become complex, prolonged and time-consuming.

With only two classrooms to work in, the small team of librarians has been overwhelmed by the generosity of many Australians. However, we need to postpone the flow of valued and needed book donations until a later date when space, language skills and the capacity to deal with organising the collection are in place — the immediate need is funding to renovate the library building.

Efforts are underway to form a Friends of the UNTIL Library Group and Support Fund to co-ordinate Australian efforts and assure the long-term development and sustainability of the university library. The Friends will liaise with UNTIL and APHEDA, prioritise needs, seek financial contributions and donations of resources, establish a building and facilities fund, recruit volunteers as training and support staff, and support a counterpart group in East Timor.

A website will soon provide more information about the project in East Timor and efforts in Australia. Anyone wishing to contribute or to explore ways in which they can support the university library, the Friends of UNTIL Library and the APHEDA library development project can contact Alison Tate or Peter Jennings at the Sydney office of APHEDA. Cheques may be made payable to APHEDA and sent to Box 3, Trades Hall, 4 Goulburn Street, Sydney NSW 2000, ph 02 9264 9343, fax 02 9261 1118, apheda@labor.net.au ■



East Timorese librarians standing at the entrance to the future university library

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