



Submission No 42

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

Name: Associate Professor Michael Leach

Organisation: Timor-Leste Studies Association, Swinburne University of Technology

Submission from the Timor-Leste Studies Association (TLSA) to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste

The TLSA welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste at a critical time in Timor-Leste's institutional consolidation, following the departure of international state-building forces.

Founded in Melbourne in 2005, the Timor-Leste Studies Association is an international research network with members in many parts of the world, including Timor-Leste. It is focused on all aspects of research into East Timorese society, including politics and history, economics, communications, health, language, agriculture, education and science.

The TLSA holds a biennial international research conference in Dili, hosted by the National University of Timor-Lorosa'e (UNTL) and supported by Swinburne University of Technology and the Technical University of Lisbon. It is usually held in conjunction with the joint UNTL-Victoria University conferences on contemporary development policy issues. Research papers cover all aspects of research on Timor-Leste, and may be presented in Tetun, Portuguese, English or Indonesian. The proceedings of the conference are distributed free to East Timorese universities and libraries. The TLSA has active chapters in Australia, Timor-Leste and Portugal. The conference is an important forum for people-to-people contacts in tertiary education, and contributes to fostering good relations between East Timorese, Australian, Portuguese and other academics.¹

Recommendations re Australia's Aid Program

With nearly two-thirds of the population under 25 years of age, and a full 45% under 15, Timor-Leste's resources in providing for compulsory and post-compulsory education will be stretched to the limit over coming years. We urge the inquiry to prioritise Australian development assistance to the education sector in Timor-Leste. It is notable that according to some estimates, the youngest cohort of this demographic 'bulge' will reach the job market at the same time currently assessed oil and gas revenues are running out².

In particular, we make the following recommendations for consideration:

Compulsory Education (Years 1-9)

- 1. Support for schools building program.** Timor-Leste's primary school cohort is expected to increase to over 300,000 by 2020. This means the number of primary schools (approximately 1000) needs to increase by 30% within seven years. It is likewise notable that some 83% of existing classrooms are considered substandard³. This is an urgent priority for international development assistance.

¹ See <http://tlstudies.org/Publications.html> for the proceedings of the last two conferences.

² La'o Hamutuk, "Timor-Leste Is Going for Broke," March 19, 2012, <http://laohamutuk.blogspot.com.au/2012/03/timor-leste-is-going-for-broke.html>, accessed August 14, 2012.

³ See UNESCO (2009) Timor-Leste-UNESCO country programming document 2009–2013, UNESCO Indonesia, Jakarta.

2. **Support for teacher training:** To maintain the current ratio of 35:1 the numbers of teachers presently trained in Timor-Leste will need to increase by 36% within the next 7 years.⁴

Post-Compulsory Education (Senior Secondary School - years 10-12)

1. **Sector Development** This level of schooling has suffered comparatively in terms of funding as a result of being outside the Millennium Development Goals priority area. It is nevertheless critical for teacher training and a wide range of other needed occupations, particularly those based on the sciences. Unfortunately many students are arriving at university inadequately prepared in writing and researching skills to complete their degrees in the expected time. Senior High schools need to be well managed by highly qualified and respected Principals and it will be a long term task to prepare such institutions. As an interim measure UNTL could be encouraged and supported to establish a *Foundation Year*, similar to that introduced by the University of the South Pacific in the 1970s where students who lacked access to high quality high schools could complete a year of preparatory study in languages, mathematics, computer usage, study skills and participatory research methods prior to beginning their degree studies. Such a program was highly successful at USP and eventually pays for itself in reducing the amount of repetition within higher education itself. It would also encourage more adults to return to study who had missed out on formal schooling due to their participation in the independence movement.

Post-Compulsory Education (Vocational)

1. **Sector development.** Timor-Leste continues to suffer from a shortage of adequate skills development programs and on-the-job training in fields such as farming, transport, book-keeping, office administration, hospitality and catering and information management (librarianship), particularly in the districts outside Dili.

Post-Compulsory Education (Tertiary)

1. **Academic Exchanges.** Australia is in a strong position to build upon strong University to University contacts with increased support for *academic exchanges* at an undergraduate and postgraduate level, and fellowships for academics. The existing scholarship program may be augmented with *semester exchange programs* for suitable East Timorese students, facilitating meaningful contact between East Timorese and Australian students on Australian campuses.
2. **Undergraduate Exchanges.** At an Undergraduate level, we recommend one and two semester exchange schemes for East Timorese students, similar those in operation for developed world universities, to build people-to-people contacts among future professionals in neighbouring countries.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001852/185239e.pdf>. See also Clinton Fernandes, Presentation to the Victorian Local Government Association, 2 February 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

3. **Non-AusAID scholarships support.** At a postgraduate level, we recommend a loan scheme be developed as a priority for the upfront cost of compulsory health insurance and other settlement costs for East Timorese and other students from regional developing nations studying on (non-AusAID) university scholarships in Australia. Health insurance premiums cost in the area of \$3000 for a three-year programs, and are unaffordable for most non-AusAID scholarship recipients (AusAID scholarships include a one-off establishment allowance, and annual health insurance costs). Most universities will not accept enrolment without this payment. Such loans could be paid back progressively from scholarships.
2. **Tertiary teachers and researcher exchanges.** We recommended a program of single semester academic exchanges with East Timorese universities. These can be two-way, and will facilitate joint work on improved curriculum development at East Timorese universities, as well as offering skills development and professional development for East Timorese academics.
3. **In-country education programs.** We also note that the AusAID scholarships program, while an excellent and well-funded program, remains a high-cost alternative to funding a high quality tertiary education institution in Timor-Leste itself. The average cost for East Timorese scholars commencing study in Australia in 2012 under the Australia Award scholarship scheme as \$196,612 per Australia Award, covering scholarship, tuition fees, and other costs. In 2011, there were a total of 87 East Timorese students studying full time in Australia at a cost of \$3.3 million for that year. Over a five year period, that equates to 435 students at a cost of \$16.5 million⁵. While this is a valuable program that must be maintained, consideration should also be given to *funding a high quality tertiary education institution* in Timor-Leste itself, in consultation and cooperation with the East Timorese government. This would be an excellent opportunity for a three-way cooperation agreement with Timor-Leste, Australia, and Portugal. Such a program could attract visiting lecturers for 13-week semesters, as well as well-qualified local staff, and educate a much larger number of students at a substantially lower cost than the scholarships programs. This program could potentially be housed within the existing structures of the National University (UNTL), or be integrated as a final undergraduate year program across all East Timorese universities. Australia's support for the University of the South Pacific could provide a good model for this.
4. **Support for regional tertiary sector development.** It is well-documented that social tensions within Dili have been amplified by increased internal migration since independence. The development of post-secondary educational opportunities in the regional centres of Baucau and Maliana is therefore a priority for development assistance in the education sector.

Recommendations for Australian Universities

1. **Timor-Leste and Melanesia Studies.** We note with concern the dire lack of teaching units in Australian universities on Timor-Leste and Melanesia. The detailed report prepared by the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies

⁵ AusAID response to Question No. 42 (on notice) by Senator Nick Xenophon, Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee Budget Estimates, May 2012.

in 2009⁶ noted that there are very few units dealing with Timor-Leste and Melanesian in Australian universities. In some ways, the relationship between Australia and its close neighbouring countries in Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia was stronger thirty years ago than it is today, and in part has become an inadvertent casualty of the otherwise welcome 'turn to Asia'. Most of the countries still within the aid program are in or bordering the Pacific region, including Timor-Leste (Laos and Cambodia being among the few Asian countries still in the aid program). With the obvious exception of ANU, these essential regional relationships are relatively neglected in Australian universities. We recommend special funding be allocated for the development of Timor-Leste and Melanesian studies in Australian universities at undergraduate and post-graduate coursework level, to match Australian long-term commitments to the region, and the type of effort strategic effort placed on relationships with the fast developing countries of Asia.

Dr Michael Leach (Associate Professor, Politics and Public Policy, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, mleach@swin.edu.au) and Dr Helen Hill (Honorary Fellow, College of Arts, Victoria University: helen.hill@vu.edu.au) for the Timor-Leste Studies Association

⁶<http://www.aaaps.edu.au/?q=node/2>