Indonesia is among the world’s five largest countries by population with more than 260 million individuals—and millions of these people are over 64-years-old. With such a large number of elderly people, there is a real need for comprehensive and quality geriatric care in Indonesia.

Such is the case in Tarakan, North Kalimantan, where Dr Rina Kurniasri Kusumaratna, a lecturer and researcher at Universitas Triakti, often conducts research. “One rukun warga, the administrative unit of a neighbourhood, could have up to 20 elderly among its population,” she said.

Tarakan District Health Office has been sending doctors, midwives, and nurses to study health management at the University of Adelaide since 2009. The first two years were funded by scholarships from both the Australian and Indonesian governments, and the following years by the Health Office itself. Recently, the Health Office funded two doctors and the head of two pilot public health centres to study geriatric care at the Royal Adelaide Hospital for 12 and 16 weeks.

Dr Rina, an Australia Awards Fellowship alumnus in Health Services Management Training from the University of Adelaide, said the Health Office saw the need to disseminate the knowledge gained while in Australia.

With the support of the Health District and Secretary Mayor of Tarakan, and utilising funds from the Australian Government’s Alumni Grant Scheme—which allows individuals or groups of Australian alumni to access funding to boost Indonesia’s development and build strong and positive relationships with Australia—Dr Rina helped organise follow-up workshops and training when staff return to Indonesia. Dr Bruno Franchi from the Royal Adelaide Hospital and Dr M. Afzal Mahmood from the University of Adelaide joined the effort to train the primary care staff, community volunteers, and the elderly themselves.

Prior to the training, the team conducted field visits to better understand the local context. “The knowledge on geriatric healthcare in Australia must be seen through the Indonesian context to ensure efficient and beneficial implementation on the field,” Dr Rina elaborated. “It was very heartening to see that the volunteers are made up of not only the elderly, but also the younger generation, and at quite a large number.”

The field visits provided information on what training was needed the most. Those aged 65 and older are prone to sudden weight loss and risk of falling. They also may be neglected by the family—not due to lack of love, but rather due to lack of knowledge on how to properly care for them.

In areas with a shortage of primary care staff, the team trained volunteers and family members to do fall and malnutrition risk assessments, and to monitor blood pressure as an indicator of hypertension. Based on the data gathered, Dr Rina wrote a guide book on how to conduct health promotion activities.

Unexpectedly, while conducting interviews on geriatric care, the team heard concerns regarding maternity healthcare as well. This prompted separate training for midwives on community maternity health service management, data recording, and patient safety for expectant mothers.

The benefits were also at the administrative level. Prior to the field visits, there were overlaps in data collected by various Health Office divisions, making it difficult to efficiently conduct evaluation and plan field programmes. A recommendation was made and there is a move to streamline data collection.

The continued support of the Health Office, the community, and the Australian Government through the Alumni Grant Scheme has made all this possible. It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. The same can also be said regarding caring for the elderly.
The largest city in eastern Indonesia, Makassar, has been a hub of international trade dating back to the 17th century. Its use as a gateway to Indonesia continues to this day, with many foreign companies and organisations conducting their matters in Makassar. The need for qualified and trained interpreters to bridge the language barrier are immediate, but most of the time, these groups have trouble finding local interpreters and resort to outsourcing interpreters based in Jakarta.

Professional interpreters Marlisa Wahyuningsih Soepeno and Saifuddin Suaib proactively worked to shorten this gap by increasing the capacity of local interpreters. Marlisa is a diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the official interpreter for President Joko Widodo and the First Lady, Iriana Joko Widodo. Saifuddin, or Cipu, is a climate change specialist with extensive experience as a professional interpreter. Together, these Australia Awards alumni established the Makassar Interpreter Training Initiative, or MINT, in their hometown, creating a training module for 17 shortlisted interpreters.

MINT opened up the rare opportunity for participants to enhance their skills in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, memory retention, note taking and the whispering method under the guidance of experienced professionals as well as the official interpreters from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The participants were ecstatic to have had the opportunity to practice with the simultaneous interpretation system.

MINT was funded under the Alumni Grant Scheme (AGS), which allows individuals or groups of alumni to access grant funding to boost Indonesia’s development and build strong and positive relationships with Australia. It was supported by BaKTI (Bursa Pengembangan Kawasan Timur Indonesia, or Eastern Indonesia Knowledge Exchange) and the Universitas Hasanuddin Language Center.

“MINT was able to boost the confidence of the local interpreters, some who went on to interpret at high-profile events such as the Makassar International Writers Festival and the Ubud International Writers Festival,” said Marlisa, an Australian National University Masters of International Public Policy and Diplomacy graduate. She added that MINT has led to various other work opportunities for the interpreters.

The increased capacity of local interpreters not only benefits the interpreters themselves. BaKTI now has a pool of qualified local interpreters they can refer to when other organisations come to them seeking locally-based interpreters. And the local and international businesses and groups that utilise their services can cut the costs of flying interpreters from outside of eastern Indonesia.

“One MINT participant, a lecturer at the Universitas Islam Negeri Makassar (Islamic State University), also mentioned how MINT has helped shape the newly-formed interpreting class lectures at the institution,” Marlisa continued.

MINT graduates continue to keep in touch and share their work experiences, as well as job opportunities, through a Facebook page. “We hope to sustain the efforts to bridge the gap of interpreters and enhance the quality of interpreters in the eastern part of Indonesia by conducting similar training in the region in the future,” Marlisa concluded.
A committed and experienced educator, Mokhamad Iksan, has dedicated his life to improving education in rural areas in Malang, East Java. He is an Australia Awards alumnus who graduated with a Master degree in Education Management from Melbourne's Monash University in 2009. Iksan believes that teachers play a crucial role to facilitate children to learn. When leaders of educational institutions lack a visionary outlook, efforts to improve teacher competencies will not succeed, and a key ingredient to maintain quality of education will be missing.

Iksan spent years living in Yogyakarta city in Central Java, where he studied English literature for his Bachelor degree at Universitas Gadjah Mada (Gadjah Mada University). In 2012, he joined an Australia’s Education Partnership with Indonesia program. He assisted in providing direct support to 1,500 Madrasah - private Islamic schools - to reach national accreditation. He is also the founder of the Education Quality Improvement Consortium (www.equic.org) in Malang, which supports schools to become self-sufficient and sustainable.

His latest achievement at the Education Quality Improvement Consortium found Iksan supporting targeted schools using the Alumni Grant Scheme (AGS) batch two funding in 2015. The one-year project aimed to strengthen the capacity for better education of the existing consortium, through training and mentoring activities for Islamic primary schools and junior high schools.

Iksan pointed out the glaringly obvious problem in education: lack of resources and training which are needed for today’s world and the willingness to embrace change for the better. “Many teachers have strong commitment, yet they don’t know how to equip themselves to improve,” said Iksan.

The AGS project targeted 15 schools - seven Islamic primary schools, six Islamic junior high schools and two private junior schools in Malang. The 301 participants, including 170 teachers, received training and mentoring activities that focused on developing school planning, improved quality of management and implementing active teaching and learning. Of the 170 teachers, 88 were women and 82 were men. The project also involved more than 30 students from school unions and community participants to help achieve sustainable capacity building.

“We heavily emphasised the mentoring activities to ensure the training was applicable for participants when they’re on the job and also to trigger a trickle-down effect within the schools,” Iksan said.

By working with school supervisors and involving the community, the project reached those responsible for managing education both inside and outside the school, with the aim of opening minds and exposing people to different views and ways of thinking.

“I have a personal commitment to share my knowledge and expertise after receiving a Master degree in Australia and this grant has helped me tremendously in enabling me to implement my plan to support the education sector, which evidently needs to improve its quality,” Iksan said. “During the project, I was even more challenged because such community development is like an exercise for your professional development and growth. It was a valuable experience.”