

higher education 2026

YOUR GUIDE TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HIGHER EDUCATION

From cabin to campus: Simone trades high-flying life for studies



AFTER becoming a mother, Bundjalung and Wiradjuri woman Simone Roberts decided it was time to move on from her career as a flight attendant and focus on her passion for law.

Juggling her studies and single parenthood, Simone worried her dream of becoming a solicitor was slipping away because of the cost of living, including rent.

"I wanted to be a present parent for my child and not have to work to survive," Simone said.

"I was in class one day when someone asked me if I had heard of the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) Tertiary Accommodation Grant (TAG) – a grant which has literally changed my life."

TAG can help students with the cost of rent.

The AHO works with TAFE NSW and universities to provide eligible enrolled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with up to \$10,000 per year towards housing costs.

"This grant has helped alleviate my rental stress and get on top of my finances," Simone added.

"It's the best program available to Mob studying. It has improved my life and kept a roof over our heads."

"I now have a better work-life balance and can be present for my child's needs. We are eating better and I have noticed a massive improvement in both of our health and wellbeing."

With the pressure of rent eased, Simone can devote more time to her coursework and focus on progressing through her Juris Doctor degree at Macquarie University.

Growing up on the Block in Redfern, she has seen firsthand the mistreatment of her people and aspires to support Aboriginal families as a solicitor.

AHO Chief Executive Famey Williams said, "The cost of rent shouldn't stop our Mob from choosing to study, and these grants support students, like Simone, to achieve their educational goals."

"TAG is helping our future leaders succeed in studying a range of disciplines such as law, medicine, business, community services, education, science, tourism and engineering – just to name a few!"

"We have already helped more than 300 students, and we aren't stopping there. TAG applications remain open, and I encourage people to apply now for Semester 2."

Applications for Semester 2 2026 close Sunday 31 May 2026.

TAG provides funding of up to \$10,000 to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students studying a diploma or higher at NSW TAFE or university, to offset the cost of accommodation while they study. By helping overcome barriers that might get in the way of studying or applying to study, this grant aims to improve retention rates of existing students and increase enrolment of aspiring students.

TAG is a continuing initiative under the AHO's Strong Family, Strong Communities strategy, helping future leaders concentrate more on their studies and less on how they're going to pay rent.

If you're studying or thinking about studying, find out how TAG can help you by visiting aho.nsw.gov.au/TAG



Simone Roberts.

"My passion for science has led me to want to learn more about clean water, renewable energy and looking after our environment. It would be great to give back to country and community."

Sharni Morris is a proud Gamilaroi woman who is studying a Bachelor of Chemical Engineering at the University of Newcastle.

Thanks to a grant from the Aboriginal Housing Office, Sharni was able to safely relocate more than six hours from her family to pursue her studies.

Eligible Mob studying at uni or TAFE NSW are encouraged to apply for up to \$10,000 in rental assistance before 31 May 2026.



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Finding strength through study



FOR proud Meriam Mir woman and Townsville mum of three Aleshia Morris, studying at TAFE Queensland wasn't just about gaining a qualification – it was a turning point in her life.

After facing past trauma that once made study feel out of reach, Aleshia found the courage to take a first step into something new, enrolling in the Certificate III in Community Services (CHC3215). What followed was a journey marked by resilience, connection, and deep personal growth.

It all started when Aleshia joined Community Gro's women's group, a program that helps women and families find the right support and access services.

"That group gave me hope," Aleshia said. "It was a safe space to sit with other women, yarn, and realise we weren't alone."

That feeling of safety carried into the classroom, where she discovered TAFE Queensland wasn't just a place to learn new skills – but somewhere she could rebuild her confidence.

"I opened up to my classmates because I wanted to share my journey and firsthand experience with community services," she said.

"When other students opened up too, we realised how many of us had been through similar things. We supported each other, gave each other advice, and walked out proud of what we'd achieved."

Her teacher, Adi Hayden, said Aleshia's presence made a lasting impact.

"Aleshia brought so much heart to the classroom," Adi said. She reminded me that teaching isn't just about giving knowledge, it's about learning from students too. That's what

two-way learning is all about."

Throughout her study journey, Aleshia's children remained her biggest motivation.

"They saw me stressed, tired, and sometimes ready to give up – but they also saw me keep going. Now they know that if mum can do it, they can too," Aleshia said. "I wanted them to see that if you want something, you go for it. Don't wait for it to come to you."

Aleshia's commitment to achieving her goals has already opened life-changing doors. After graduating, she stepped into full-time work as a Connector with Community Gro – the same organisation where she once sought support herself.

In this role, Aleshia combines her training with the lessons life has taught her – transforming her challenges into a source of strength for others.

"I know what it's like to feel like there's nowhere to turn, and I don't want anyone else to feel that way," she said. "I can walk alongside families and show them that change is possible."

Aleshia defines her greatness by lifting others, and her story shows what's possible when someone is given the right support, the right environment, and the belief that they already have what it takes.

Whatever greatness looks like for you, TAFE Queensland is here to help you find it. With more than 400 courses across health, trades, creative industries, business, community services, and more, there's a pathway for every learner – whether you're just starting out, returning to study, or looking to upskill.

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TAFE Queensland graduate Aleshia Morris is using her lived experience to help others in need.

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"I think sometimes that we've forgotten how fun it can be to learn - to tap into that thing that you're absolutely passionate about and that could lead you to a career you can't even imagine yet."

Stephanie Gilbert, proud Tubba-gah Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi woman, UQ Professor and Associate Dean (Indigenous Engagement)



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“I loved that at the end of a semester, having learnt new skills, I could take those skills into my workplace and apply them. It’s been rewarding for me to be in a role where I get to work across so many topics and projects.”

Kelly Rae, who hails from the Baranbinja tribe of northern NSW, UQ Master of Business Psychology graduate



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You can be what you can see



Stephanie (left) is a Tubba-gah Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi woman, and Cassandra (right) is a Torres Strait Islander woman who grew up in Millmerran on the Darling Downs.

A conversation with Stephanie Gilbert (and that's *Professor* Stephanie Gilbert to you, *thank you very much*) and Cassandra Diamond (Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at The University of Queensland)

Seeing Stephanie catch up with Cassandra over a coffee, you'd never guess they've only known each other for two years.

You might also wonder if they were a comedy duo in a former life. Every piece of advice Stephanie has for Cassandra, who is considering starting her own PhD, seems to come with a shared joke.

"How long does a PhD take anyway – three years?" asks Cassandra.

"It was eight for me," says Stephanie. "Eight!" Cassandra's eyebrows shoot up.

"Oi, I was also writing a book, and I had four daughters at home at the same time," Stephanie protests, then breaks into a large grin.

Stephanie's PhD on the Stolen Generation

When the laughter subsides, Stephanie begins talking about her own PhD research.

"I'm an interdisciplinary scholar – I think the nature of Aboriginal studies tends to do that," she says.

Stephanie's thesis topic, *Women and Constructing Re-membering: Identity Formation in the Stolen Generations*, combines her passion for history with her experience in Indigenous studies. It's also partly informed by her professional background as a social worker, which included teaching in jails for five years.

Her research focused particularly on self-definition: how a person's identity can be what they define it to be.

"Some people will have a particular experience and define themselves as not Aboriginal, whereas other people with the same experience could define themselves as Aboriginal," she says.

"Many people speak about how they read their own body as indicators – the colour of their skin, the curliness of their hair, etcetera. I always think of this young man who lives in Townsville. He was very dark-skinned, and yet he had been adopted into a family and never identified as Aboriginal, didn't see himself as that."

"And so I went down the epigenetics path and even did a Fulbright scholarship to explore

whether this is a phenomenon that appears in testimonies of people in New Zealand, Canada and the USA."

Many PhD alumni will tell you their research was intense, absorptive, even gruelling. But for Stephanie, an even more potent word comes up: torturous. Because while many PhD candidates work with data, genetics, numbers and graphs, much of Stephanie's research entailed reading stories from women who were forcibly taken from their homes as children – a deeply personal and emotional topic.

"Honestly, there were some days when the stuff I had written, read or was attempting to construct was so tortuous, that if I did five minutes, that was enough," she says.

From humble beginnings to academic acclaim

When Stephanie went straight from care into university at not-even-quite-18 years old, she had no idea it was her first step on the path to becoming a professor at The University of Queensland.

She didn't have big plans or grand ambitions yet; she was a bit more concerned with stretching her \$30 study allowance to cover her expenses, getting through her degree one class at a time.

"I wasn't going *'I'm going to be an academic and conquer the world!'*, you know," she says.

"I was flat-out, going *'How do I even pass this stuff?'* and *'What even is this?'*"

Looking back now, having recently overcome the final hurdle in becoming a full-fledged professor, Stephanie hopes her achievements might make the road a little easier for the next generation of Indigenous scholars.

She feels a responsibility to be a visible representation and role model for younger people, proving that it's possible for Indigenous people to become professors.

"I remember when I finished my PhD, and my nephews would go *'Well, what do we call you now? Dr Auntie Steph? Auntie Dr Steph?'*" she smiles.

It's obvious this is a passionate topic for Cassandra as well.

"I think we need to make a big deal out of things like Stephanie being made a professor," she says.

"Because the landscapes of universities are changing. There are more of us – and more of us in a whole range of roles and positions. We're student support workers and finance people, yes, but now we're professors and deputy vice-chancellors too."

"For young people and students, it's important for them to see that there are people like Stephanie who are here and thriving. And because of that work, this is going to be a better place for them."

Making higher education a more welcoming space

Along her academic journey across multiple institutions, Stephanie has encountered her fair share of racial insensitivities, as well as seeing how routinely male bias and homophobia occur. While things are improving over time, she's excited to now be in a position where she can actively push for inclusive practices across higher education.

For example, making space for Acknowledgements of Country is essential, but it's also important that presenters have the time and freedom to personalise these acknowledgements. Stephanie and Cassandra share a quiet chuckle about how many times they've been asked to deliver one with no notice. "If I do the acknowledgement, I have to think about what I want to say in it," explains Stephanie.

"So, for one day, it might be that I talk about my relationship with trees, because I want to get a point across about ethics. We know that trees feed each other, share nutrients, and acknowledge the presence of each other. They're beings. So why do we worry about the ethics of humans and animals, but not about chopping down all the trees?"

"Another day, I might talk about Indigenous data sovereignty, like when a person interacts with the booth at a careers market. If you're going to collect data, do it knowingly. What's the purpose of this data and where is it going?"

Stephanie also believes obsessing over the 'criteria' of Aboriginality is a waste of time at best and problematic at worst.

"We shouldn't be investing in deciding who's in the category and who's not," she says.

"Because that actually is part of the colonising project – and if we do it, are we acting like colonisers too?"

What she does believe in, however, is making a concerted effort to get around to and engage with all the different pockets of Aboriginal people at universities, building real connections.

"It's good for them to have someone asking what they're doing, because I'm genuinely interested, and the stuff they're doing is amazing," she says.

Stephanie's advice for PhD candidates and aspiring academics

"Run! Don't do it!" jokes Stephanie. After another round of hearty laughter, she offers these five pieces of advice:

1. Write. A lot.

"They reckon if you write every day for two hours, you'll have written enough for the PhD. But it doesn't have to be that strict – you need to be kind to yourself."

2. Be flexible with your thesis.

"You have to allow a shift to happen. At the beginning, articulate as best you can what you think your question is and what you think you're going to find. And then do the same at the end. They might be exactly the same, but they might not – and that's fine."

3. Attend workshops.

"As soon as I start feeling lost, I would attend workshops – even the same workshop a few times, just so I wasn't alone. And I still have a Shut Up and Write group. We do two lots of 20 minutes, with a little bit of chat."

4. Create a contract with your supervisor.

"When you're down the well doing your data collection, you won't want to meet your supervisors every week – it might be monthly instead. That's what the contract is about. It's also about expectations: their expectations of you, and your expectations of them."

5. Don't lose your spark. Keep your mind open to the possibilities.

"I think that sometimes we've forgotten how fun it can be to learn. Tap into that thing that you're absolutely passionate about. You can't imagine what your career is going to be, because you haven't started that journey yet. Like, if someone had said to me back then that I was going to spend the rest of my life in academia, I would've told them to get stuffed!"

Ready to embark on your own research journey?

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Upgrading her career with postgrad study

A chat with Kelly Rae, who hails from the Baranbinja tribe of northern NSW, about going back to study to advance her career and enhance her practice.

Kelly completed her Master of Business Psychology at the end of 2025. And she's already seeing the impact of her learnings in her day-to-day work as a transformation specialist – a role she stepped into right after graduating.

With new strategies and boosted confidence, she's helping people in her organisation and community more effectively.

Plus, by branching out from pure psychology into business psychology, she's discovering career opportunities beyond the classic clinical settings.

We asked Kelly to shed some light on what it's like to return to study, including why she chose The University of Queensland (UQ) and her advice for future postgrads.

"There were quite a few subjects that had great a-ha moments during the semester because they filled a gap in something I had already applied. I felt like this was exactly the finesse I'd been looking for."

What inspired you to become a business psychology postgraduate?

Kelly: I enrolled in psychology with an interest to better understand people – and myself. I hadn't intended for it to be a career choice, but psychology content is applicable in so many ways that it permeated the lens I was using in the workplace without me even realising it until years later.

I was motivated to continue to postgrad study because I was working in organisational development and wanted to be 'technically' better at what I was delivering to really make impactful change.

What was your path to studying the Master of Business Psychology?

Kelly: Partway through my dual Bachelor of Arts / Bachelor of Science, I found I was really good at the psychology subjects over the science subjects. So, I wrapped up an extended major in psychology. I did this part time over a number of years around work and life. I continued on to complete an honours degree in psychology, as I worked in change management and organisational development.

"It was then a natural progression to complete a master's degree. As I'm already working in the field, I was pleased that choosing the Master of Business Psychology meant I could reduce my studies by a semester (no thesis) and obtain the technical knowledge I was seeking."



Kelly is a Master of Business Psychology graduate who hails from the Baranbinja tribe of northern NSW.

Why did you choose UQ for your master's degree?

Kelly: I completed my undergrad studies at UQ, it's a great campus, there are great lecturers who are really specialist in what they do, and UQ has a great reputation in the field of psychology.

How has the Master of Business Psychology helped you achieve your career goals and find success in your field?

Kelly: I loved that at the end of a semester, having learnt new skills, I could take those skills into my workplace and apply them. I feel this really helped embed some of the learning. It's been rewarding for me to be in a role where I get to work across a breadth of organisational development topics and projects.

What did your average day look like as a business psychology postgraduate student?

Kelly: I worked full time, so a day at the office, readings or group meetings, assignments on the weekends. Thankfully, this program offered some subjects in condensed form (i.e. a whole

For many students like Kelly, postgraduate study means thriving and advancing further in their current career. For others, it leads to transitioning into a new line of work.

Either way, UQ postgraduates experience an average pay rise of 33% within 3 years of graduating.

*Based on median salaries reported by domestic postgraduate coursework graduates employed full time and surveyed between 2023 and 2025 in the Graduate Outcomes Survey-Longitudinal by Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT).

day of lectures every 3 weeks), so some semesters were spaced out like that rather than a weekly evening lecture. It changed every semester depending on subject choice and class availability time.

And what does your average workday look like now?

Kelly: Gosh, I'm not sure there's such a thing as an average day! Teamwork, bouncing ideas, stakeholder engagement, research and design, balancing risks and cost...

"I'm a really curious person, so what I find most interesting is working on each new challenge like a puzzle that has pieces that go together and we work to get a good fit."

What advice would you give someone considering postgraduate study in business psychology?

Kelly: Know enough about yourself so you know what you need to balance life, work, study and social commitments – then put the things in place that you need to support yourself. I see many students over-commit and do themselves a disservice trying to keep everything going. Otherwise, just do it! If it's in your heart, the reward is already there.



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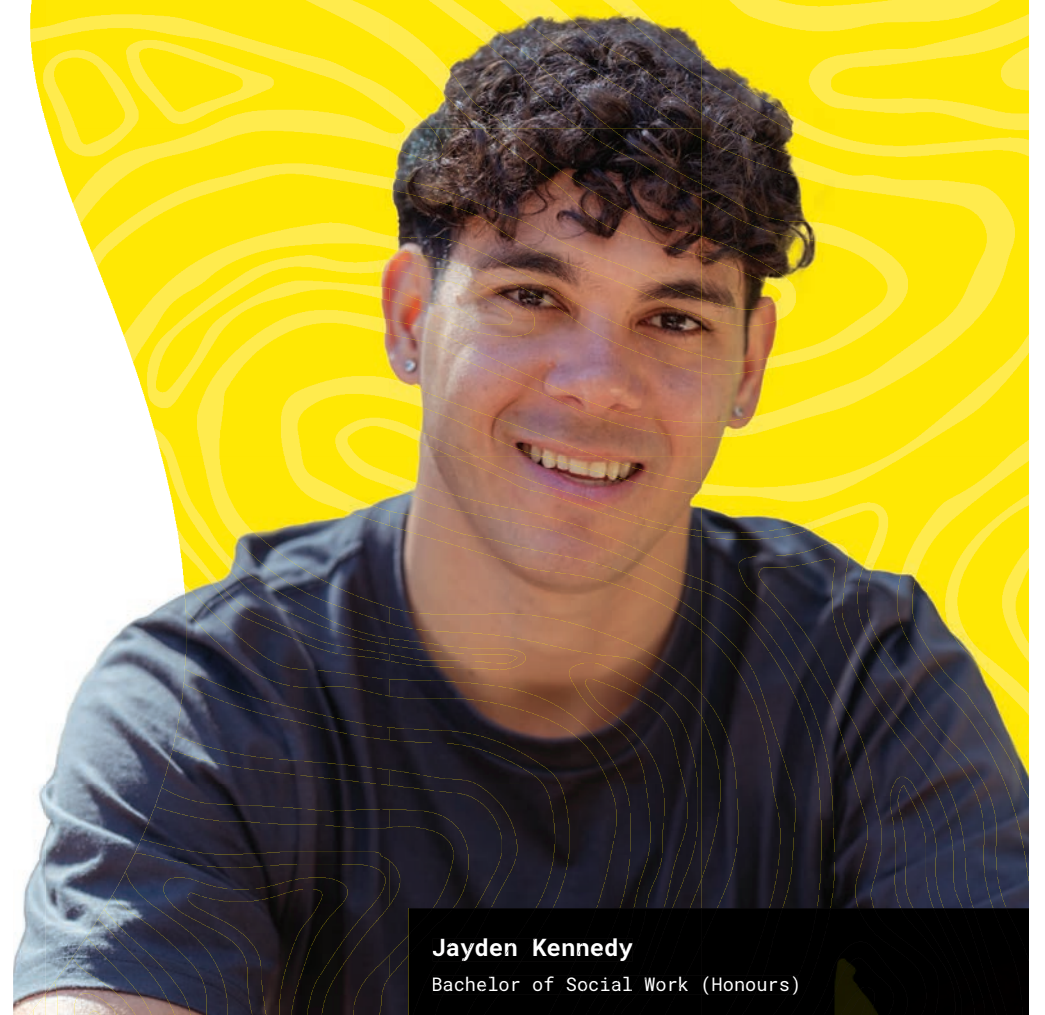
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Held at UNSW Sydney, Kensington, NSW



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Jayden Kennedy
Bachelor of Social Work (Honours)



Finding confidence, community and a place in law



FOR Kamilaroi and Maltese woman Taylor Fitzgerald, stepping into a university

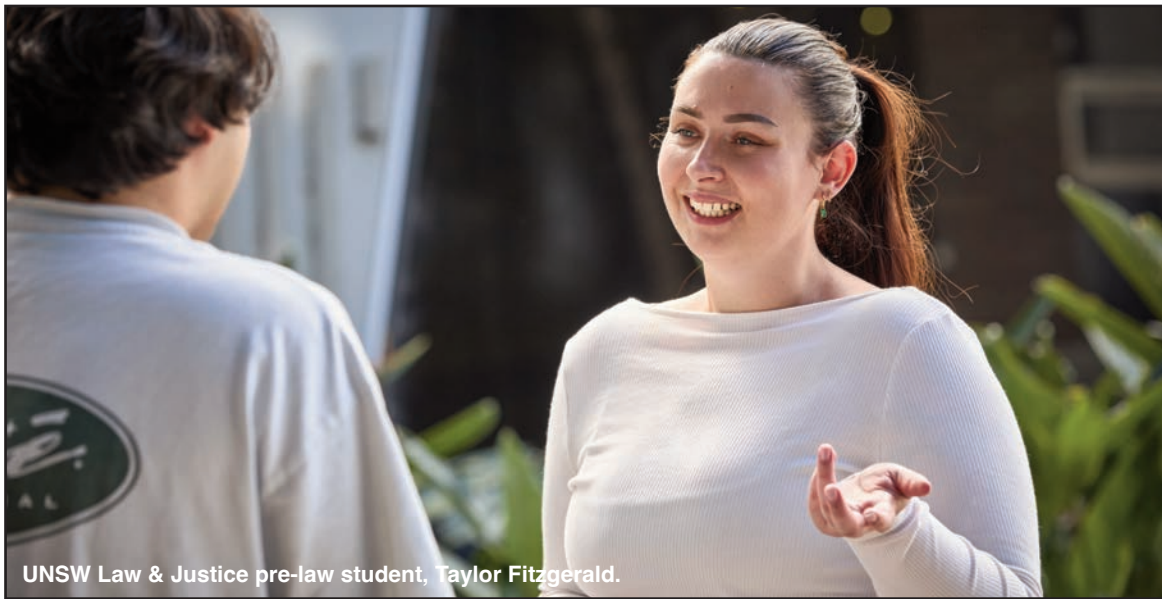
classroom was once unimaginable. Raised on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country, she is now preparing to commence a double degree in Law and Social Sciences at UNSW Sydney after completing the UNSW Indigenous Pre-Law Program as a scholarship recipient. Her path to law has been shaped by lived experience, resilience and a strong commitment to advocating for her community.

"I spent many years in survival mode," Taylor says. "Because of my life circumstances, I never thought doing a law degree was an option."

Now 27, Taylor is one of the recipients of the UNSW Law & Justice Indigenous Pre-Law Scholarship, a program designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in legal administrative and field officer roles students who are considering a future in law.

Taylor grew up knowing she wanted to make change, particularly in policy and law. Working full-time and supporting herself financially, she had long set aside further study to prioritise stability.

"I've always been staunch in the way that I think, and I'm often the first to advocate for my people," she says. "I really believe lived experience is crucial



UNSW Law & Justice pre-law student, Taylor Fitzgerald.

when it comes to driving change."

The Pre-Law Scholarship enabled Taylor to attend the intensive three-week pre-law program, giving her the opportunity to take leave from work and focus fully on study without the usual financial pressure. It also gave her the space to rebuild her confidence after time away from formal education.

"That support made a huge difference," Taylor explains. "Taking time off work when you pay rent and look after family is stressful. The scholarship really offloaded that stress so I could focus on learning and being present."

"It allowed me to step into a university and realise that I

belonged there," she says. "Not only did they want to see me succeed, they wanted me there. That was really powerful."

Already working in the legal sector as an Aboriginal Field Officer, Taylor had been exposed to law through community engagement and advocacy. The pre-law program deepened her understanding of what studying law would involve and reinforced her belief that she could succeed.

"It gave me the guidance and confidence to pursue this properly," she says. "Now I'm genuinely excited to start my law degree and I can see myself being successful in this space."

A standout aspect of the program for Taylor was the strong sense of community fostered

among participants.

"Being in a space with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from different places and backgrounds was really special," she says. "We could think freely, feel safe and learn together."

She describes the experience contrasted the isolation that can sometimes exist in educational spaces, particularly in law, helping participants build networks and connections that will carry through into their degrees.

"When you know your people are there, you stay" Taylor says. That sense of community is powerful."

Taylor is now encouraging others working in legal

administration, community roles and field officer positions to consider studying law, even if it feels intimidating.

"It is scary and it does take courage," she says. "But we have survived so much as a community. That resilience is already there."

She believes programs like pre-law are critical in opening doors and creating pathways into the profession.

"They give you a chance to make mistakes, ask questions and grow," Taylor says. "We deserve to be in law and at university. We've already survived and are so resilient, so why not keep pushing forward?"

Reflecting on the impact of the scholarship, Taylor says it has reshaped how she sees herself and her future.

"It's given me the courage and confidence to see myself making change in law," she says. "I always felt I might end up here one day. Now I know I can truly succeed on this journey."

The 2026 Indigenous Pre-Law program runs from 16 November to 4 December 2026, with applications opening soon.

To register your interest for the Indigenous Pre-Law Program, or to find out more about the scholarship for legal administrative workers and field officers, please reach out to Charmaine Mumbulla, Director of Indigenous Legal Education at c.mumbulla@unsw.edu.au

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How Conor is using his voice for change



Proud Tagalaka and Gumatj man, and Darwin schoolteacher, Conor Bowden's first and main priority is always to take care of his students in a way that is culturally safe.

Conor, who studied a Bachelor of Art and Secondary Education at Swinburne says the care and respect he shows others was ingrained in him growing up, and is what drives his leadership style.

"First Nations culture has always had an emphasis on taking care of each other, especially our young ones and elders. I encourage my students to be authentically themselves instead of fitting the mould to be successful. This means having pride in their heritage and using it as their superpower," he says.

Social media as a tool for good

Conor first gained national recognition during the Voice to Parliament referendum. Working alongside First Nations advocate Jaiden McGregor, he created TikTok videos to explain complex constitutional ideas. These videos used humour, cultural references and accessible language. They reached over 1.1 million views and became a trusted source of information, especially for a new generation of Indigenous youth.

"Social media has been a great conduit for sharing First Nations stories and perspectives. We are not lying when we say we are not equal and the statistics and research are conclusive evidence. Social media has provided a platform for many people to see us and begin to understand our shared history and how it has moulded our present. While there is still horrible, racist, vitriol being spewed from many accounts, the truthful and honest accounts outshine them," he says.

"I tried my best to make things digestible and easily understood. Throughout my life, things were more easily understood through showing, rather than telling. I coupled this with principles I learned at Swinburne to make sure I was actually teaching something, not just commentating."

During his time at Swinburne, Conor was closely supported by the Moondani Toombadool Centre.

The Moondani Toombadool Centre supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Swinburne by providing access to vital cultural and engagement programs and opportunities, academic support, scholarships and career support.

Looking ahead, Conor hopes to see more interest, investment and opportunities for First Nation communities and families.

"I would love to see more people being interested in the truth of our communities, I think there is a massive opportunity for all of Australia to begin to understand our lives, our shared history and how it affects our present day," he says.

A home away from home

Conor credits his time at Swinburne as being impactful in helping him build a great foundation for his career as a teacher.

"I was not one of the most over-achieving students at Swinburne. However, I was able to learn that sometimes, all you need to do is show up and get the work done. This has helped me influence the students I teach now, to instil in them lessons of resilience."

Universities can be an overwhelming experience for many First Nations students, the Moondani Toombadool Centre can help create a support network that helps them navigate these challenges and find their place.

"It was always comforting to know you had a team of like-minded people in your corner to support you. Universities can be an intimidating place for young First Nations people, and the Moondani Toombadool Centre was by my side the whole way. I owe a lot of my success to their constant encouragement and support."

The Moondani Toombadool Centre supported Conor, especially as he faced challenges with being away from home. The staff at the centre worked closely with him to ensure he had the right support to help him excel.

"From a young age, I was told to be resilient and proud of my heritage. Swinburne, in particular the Moondani Toombadool Centre, provided me with opportunities to showcase the knowledge that I have learned growing up. Through many hard times studying and being away from home, I continued to build my resilience, and this was aided by the work of the mob at the Moondani Toombadool Centre. I was able to practice leadership, public speaking and I learned a depth of knowledge that reinforced the values instilled in me growing up," he says.

"Without the Moondani Toombadool Centre, I may not have finished tertiary study. Often during the middle of winter, I would be falling behind and miss the warmth of home and my family deeply. The pressures of uni, work and growing up would sometimes drag my spirit down. During this time, I was battling with mental health issues and homesickness. Through it all, the Moondani Toombadool Centre was always there to support me through these challenges."

"When it got too much for me, they helped me access my first ever counsellor for mental health support – a huge step in the right direction for every young man. When my assignments fell by the wayside, they helped Swinburne understand the emotional stress

that I was going through and contextualise this for them. I will always be grateful for the work that the Moondani Toombadool Centre does to support young First Nations students trying to access a better life."

A push to keep going

Conor was recently nominated for the 2026 Australian of the Year awards, in the NT Young Australian of the Year category. This nomination is a validation of the work he has done and encourages him to keep going.

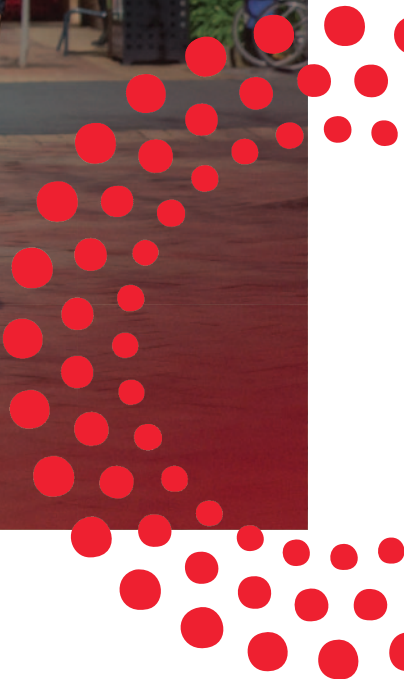
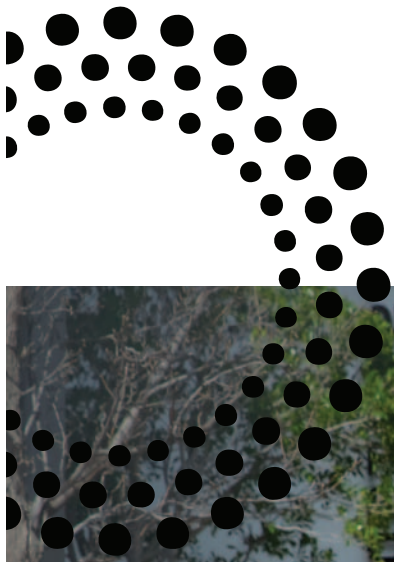
"Being nominated was incredibly humbling. Throughout my journey of creating and educating through social media, there was a lot of racism and negative interactions that I was faced with. To be nominated for an award among other brilliant First Nations men and women from the Northern

Territory makes me proud of the work I have done," he says.

"It encourages me to continue educating, fighting for the truth and staying strong for all the families and people out there who need it".



Conor Bowden.



Study with support, connection and community

The Moondani Toombadool Centre [MTC] supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout their educational journey at Swinburne University of Technology.

MTC's Indigenous Student Services team will help ensure that you have a positive, inclusive and successful experience at Swinburne.

Explore your study options

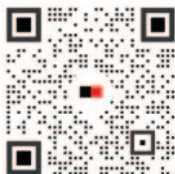
Get tailored advice on courses across vocational and higher education to find the right pathway into your chosen area of study.

Strengthen your academic skills

Connect with a qualified tutor to receive personalised study assistance through the Indigenous Academic Success Program.

Prepare for your future career

Access additional guidance and employability resources to help transition from study into fulfilling employment and career opportunities.



Find out more about the welcoming and supportive community at Swinburne.

CRICOS 00111D RTO 3059
TEQSA PRV12148 Australian University

Join us at Open Day in 2026

Sunday 26 July | Swinburne Hawthorn campus

Swinburne's Open Day is a valuable opportunity to explore what Swinburne has to offer. Plus, meet the team at MTC to discover the support available and how you can achieve your study goals.

From the sandpit to systems change: Floyd Leedie's lifelong mission to give back



UniSQ alumnus Floyd Leedie was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2026 Australia Day Honours for his contribution to Indigenous health.



FOR University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) alumnus Floyd Leedie AM, the moment that shaped his life didn't happen in a boardroom or a lecture theatre. It happened in a school sandpit as a young child.

"I experienced having to ask my little non-Indigenous classmates if I could borrow their toy cars to play in the sandpit with them," he recalls. "This is when I told myself, 'When I grow up, I'll never let my kids have to ask for toy cars.'"

It's a simple story. But it carries the weight of a childhood shaped by systemic disadvantage. It set the direction for a career focused on changing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Leedie's early years were defined by movement and resilience. After his family gained exemption from the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act in 1953, his father's work on Queensland's railway lines took them across regional towns.

One of those stops, near Kilkivan, is where Leedie completed his early schooling and where that defining sandpit moment occurred.

Raised in a large family on a

fettler's income, he speaks with deep respect for his parents' efforts. "For a family of 10 surviving on a small fettler's income, my parents did an unbelievable job raising me and my seven siblings."

What stayed with him was not a fixed career ambition, but a clear understanding of what education could unlock. "I didn't know what it was I wanted to be when I grew up, but I did know that I needed to give myself at least a half a chance with my education if I had any chance of succeeding."

That belief would eventually lead him to UniSQ, where he found not just academic support, but a community that reinforced the value of persistence and care.

"Most of the UniSQ staff that assisted and influenced me were those from the Indigenous Support Unit," he says.

"They showed me they cared that I understood the material and passed. The most important thing I learnt from them all was that you don't just throw in the towel. If you kept thinking about the questions long enough, the right answers would eventually come."

It's a lesson he has carried into leadership. Leedie was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2026 Australia Day Honours, having

built his career around improving outcomes for his community, particularly through his work with Goondir Health Services.

His approach is grounded in a philosophy that rejects narrow definitions of health.

"To me, a 'holistic' Model of Care not only addresses the physical wellbeing of the individual, but also the spiritual and cultural wellbeing, social and emotional wellbeing, family wellbeing and community wellbeing," he says.

"It requires having services, programs, and activities that address the social determinants of health, such as education and training, housing, government systems, environmental health and so on."

He is blunt about where the system continues to fall short. "In my opinion, there are three key issues," he says. "Measurement of success, policy, and holistic health care."

"Governments tend to emphasise quantitative outcomes, but qualitative outcomes are just as important. There's also not enough emphasis on programs that actually work. And if you take a piecemeal approach to addressing issues, you'll only ever get a piecemeal outcome."

It's the kind of critique that comes from lived experience as

much as professional insight. Leedie has spent decades navigating the gap between policy intent and on-the-ground reality.

One of the most persistent challenges, he says, is the complexity of health needs in Indigenous communities, particularly in regional and remote areas.

"The majority of our clients have at least one or multiple chronic conditions, and rural and remote communities have a bigger problem getting our clients to the care they need. Both these issues need to be considered by policymakers when it comes to how we are funded to allow us to be efficient and effective."

Despite these challenges, Leedie points to tangible progress and innovation within his organisation. Two initiatives stand out as defining achievements.

The first is the implementation of virtual health services, developed during the COVID-19 pandemic but now embedded as a long-term solution.

"This system allows us to monitor our clients with chronic conditions, assist them with health literacy, and teach them how to better manage their conditions from the comfort of their own homes using technology."

The second is the Big Buddy Program, a youth initiative

focused on shaping future generations.

"Our Big Buddy Program is designed to empower our youth through four key pillars – social inclusion, mentoring, providing life skills, and education, or SIMPLE."

The link between these programs is intentional. "In 2022, I told two Federal Ministers that there were two strategies that would help close the gap – innovation and intergenerational change by changing the mindsets and mentality of our youth. Both of these programs relate to those points."

That long-term view is central to how Leedie defines leadership.

"I keep it simple," he says. "Being able to give our communities of interest everything they need so they can live a good quality of life. Learn from others as well as teach others. And understand that you will never please everybody."

It's a grounded, pragmatic philosophy – one shaped by experience rather than theory. While his career has evolved, his definition of success has not.

For Leedie, success isn't measured in titles or recognition. It's measured in whether the next generation has to ask for the things he once did.

The boy in the sandpit never left. He grew up and decided to change the system around him.



Built on culture. Driven by community.

At UniSQ, education is grounded in connection to culture, community and future opportunity. With dedicated support from application through to graduation, and programs shaped by Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander community leaders and academics, you'll be empowered to achieve your education and career goals, while staying connected to what matters most.

You'll lead
from here



Learn more about our ongoing
commitment to supporting First Nations
students and the broader community.



UniSQ First Nations



**VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY**

UNIQUELY
YOU

Connect with other strong, deadly mob at VU.

Moondani Balluk, the Indigenous Academic Unit at Victoria University (VU), is here to welcome and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

We provide the tools to help you succeed from day one – including how to apply for a course, scholarships, tutoring, housing support and career advice.

Contact us 03 9919 4914

moondani.balluk@vu.edu.au

Eeron Bevan-Woodley (Bonez)
Kija

For more information



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RTO 3113, TEQSA No. PRV12152, Provider Category: Australian University
MH-1288



YOU'RE INVITED TO

OPEN DAY

SATURDAY 13 JUNE

nida.edu.au

REGISTER NOW



Explore Your Pathways into Acting with NIDA



Storytelling has always been at the heart of culture, carrying knowledge, connection and identity across generations. NIDA's Pathways Program recognises the strength and importance of these stories, creating space for First Nations voices to be seen, heard and celebrated within Australia's performing arts industry.

This program invites First Nations peoples and People of Colour aged 18-25 to step into the world of acting and live storytelling. It's a chance to explore performance as both craft and cultural expression, where voice, body and story come together.

Across the program, participants engage in hands-on training in acting, voice and movement, building confidence in their own presence and perspective.

Importantly, the program removes barriers that can prevent access to arts training. Offered free of charge, with travel, accommodation, meals and materials covered, the Performance Intensive ensures that participants from across Australia, whether from remote communities, regional areas or cities, can take part and feel fully supported.

The Performer Intensive runs from July 13-17, 2026 at NIDA in Sydney and entry is via application with applications closing Friday 22 May.

If you have questions about your next steps, get in touch with our First Nations team at firstnations@nida.edu.au, or if you're curious about other creative career opportunities, come along to our annual Open Day on Saturday 13 June at NIDA with select sessions online.

We look forward to meeting you.

Travis Cardona Director of First Nations and Outreach



© NIDA 2026. Picture: Brett Boardman.

WAAPA delivers strong pathways



WAAPA at ECU continues to open doors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers through its nationally recognised **10908NAT Certificate IV in Aboriginal Performance**.

Delivered at ECU City in Yagan Square, the one-year, full-time program builds confidence, cultural grounding and professional skills for roles in theatre, film and television. With no ATAR required, the course offers intensive, hands-on training in acting and improvisation, dance and stage movement, voice and singing, script analysis and audition technique. Workshops feed into rehearsals, and rehearsals feed into performance, placing storytelling and lived experience at the heart of learning.

The strength of the course is reflected in

its alumni, many of whom are shaping Australia's creative industries. One recent success is **Lila McGuire**, a proud Whadjuk and Ballardong Noongar woman and WAAPA graduate, who stars as Evonne Goolagong Cawley in the ABC mini-series Goolagong. Her journey from training at WAAPA to leading a major national production highlights the power of culturally grounded performance training.

Other notable alumni include **Mark Coles Smith, Shari Sebbens, Meyne Wyatt** and **Megan Wilding**, all continuing to build strong careers across stage and screen.

For young people looking to step into the arts, the Certificate IV in Aboriginal Performance offers a culturally safe, skills-based pathway grounded in community, creativity and self-determination.



ECU
EDITH COWAN
UNIVERSITY

WAAPA
Western Australian
Academy of
Performing Arts

WAAPA

Join a legacy of incredible performers

10908NAT Certificate IV in Aboriginal Performance

WAAPA's 10908NAT Certificate IV in Aboriginal Performance is a 1-year full-time course at ECU City, designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creatives. Grounded in First Nations cultural perspectives, it draws on the rich traditions of storytelling, songlines, and oral history to build powerful, authentic performers.

Train in acting, movement, voice, and audition skills – all through a lens that honours the world's oldest living culture.

Applications are now open for 2027.

Head to the WAAPA website for more information.

waapa.ecu.edu.au



Creative thinkers
made here.

CRICOS Provider No. 00279B | TEQSA ID PRV12160, Australian University | RTO Code 4756



Local Student Breaks Barriers in Carpentry Trade

Year 13 Tagai State College graduate Sherkoda Uta is making history as the first Torres Strait Islander female carpentry apprentice with Matt Birney Builders on Thursday Island.

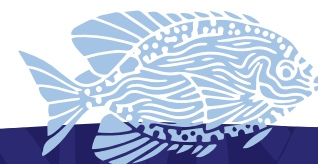
A proud Torres Strait Islander woman, Sherkoda recently completed her Certificate II in Infrastructure and Resources through the TagaiTECH program. She has already gained experience in framing, concreting, and guttering, earning praise from her foreman for being punctual, reliable, and hardworking.

Despite working in a male-dominated trade, Sherkoda says she feels respected and treated equally. "I get treated the same as everyone else—they let me get on with the job," she said.

Inspired by helping her father growing up and her love of hands-on work at school, she is committed to finishing her trade and using these skills, experience and qualifications in her future.

Sherkoda encourages other young women to follow their interests. "Don't feel shame or think you can't do it because it's a man's job," she said.

She hopes to continue working in her community and use her skills to give back, proving her achievement is just the beginning.



TAGAI STATE COLLEGE

WAYBENI KOEY NGURPAY MUDH



Beka-Lily Dorante, Mother and Grandmother at her school-based traineeship Cert III Health Services Assistant graduation with Queensland Health Deadly Start program.

Beka Lily Dorante from Kirriri (Hammond Island) is a 2025 graduate at Tagai State College, Thursday Island. Beka-Lily was supported by the TagaiTECH program for the duration of her senior schooling and school-based traineeship in Cert III Health Services Assistant.

During this time Beka-Lily participated in numerous industry work placements in the childcare and tourism industries.

After graduating, Beka progressed to the Deadly Start Cadetship program which allows her to work with Cairns, Hinterland Health Services whilst studying her degree in Nursing at James Cook university in Cairns.



Rina Manuel is employed as an administration support officer in the maritime industry with Torres Pilots Pty Ltd.

Rina Manuel has strong family connections with the Badugal, Muagal and Kaurareg communities in the Torres Strait.

She is the recipient of the 2025 VET Student of the Year Award, which recognised her achievements completing qualifications in Cert II Engineering, Cert II Automotive Vocational Preparation and a school-based traineeship in Cert III Business Administration.

After graduating Year 12 with these achievements, Rina immediately started work as an Administration Support Officer in the maritime industry with Torres Pilots Pty Ltd.



TAGAI STATE COLLEGE

WAYBENI KOEY NGURPAY MUDH

Australia's Field Epidemiology Training Program



Australian National University

National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health
ANU College of Law, Governance and Policy



DO YOU want to be on the frontline of public health challenges, putting your epidemiology knowledge into practice? Then the Master of Philosophy in Applied Epidemiology (MAE) is the right program for you.

The Master of Philosophy in Applied Epidemiology (MAE) Program is Australia's only Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP), joining a global community of 22,000 graduates from over 90 programs.

The program is TEPHINET-accredited, (the international network of field epidemiology programs globally) and part of a global network of FETPs strengthening public health systems.

The MAE partners with and complements health department initiatives to enhance workforce skills, health system performance and evidence-based policies, programs and practice.

The program was established in 1991, modelled on the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Successfully producing graduates who have made significant contributions to public health, communicable disease control and health leadership both in Australia and overseas. Over time the program evolved and became a unique FETP to support Australia's and the region's public health. In 2024 the program was reaccredited by TEPHINET with distinction and merit, which showed the high quality of the MAE program.

We are proud that fifteen percent of the MAE graduates identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We celebrate and encourage diversity among scholars as we believe a diverse workforce can improve public health.

The MAE is a 22-month research degree that emphasises work-integrated learning –

learning at work, from work, and for work. For the duration of the program, MAE scholars undertake a field placement such as in a health department, public health unit, research institute, reference laboratory, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, or other suitable organisation.

The curriculum consists of five coursework subjects delivered as 2 two-week intensives, followed by 2 one-week intensives of on-campus teaching throughout the 22-month program, along with self-directed learning and applied field projects. To demonstrate understanding and application of teaching, field projects are completed.

These projects are developed in consultation with field supervisors to meet learning competencies based on their potential contribution to public health actions, programs, policies and practice.

Typical field placements are within a government health department or a research institute. While in their placements, scholars complete useful and important research projects based on the priority of the field placements and under the supervision of field and academic

supervisors to meet the following competencies:

- Investigate an acute public health problem or threat (typically a disease outbreak);
- Analyse public health datasets (such as surveillance data);
- Establish or evaluate a public health surveillance or other health information system; and
- Design and conduct an epidemiological study.

Experienced ANU staff and field supervisors oversee the work of MAE scholars while they are in the field placement.

The MAE program has a commitment to contributing to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars have completed the program and are strongly encouraged to apply.

Applications for the 2027-28 cohort open on June 1. Visit *Master of Philosophy in Applied Epidemiology (MAE)* | ANU National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health for more details.



Dr Mark Jones, a Karajarri and Yawuru man and Associate Dean (Indigenous).

Indigenous Business Leadership



THE Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership represents a transformative shift in Australian business education, born from over a decade of conversations and a shared vision for economic self-determination. Its name, meaning "everlasting flow" in the Woi Wurrung language of the Wurundjeri people, signifies the convergence of its three core activity streams into a centre of impact: **Programs, Research, and Community.**

Launched in 2021 as a partnership between the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Business and Economics and Melbourne Business School, the Centre builds on the success of the MURRA Masterclass. It serves as a dedicated, Indigenous-led space where culture and commerce intersect to empower First Nations entrepreneurs.

Dr Mark Jones, a Karajarri and Yawuru man and Associate Dean (Indigenous),

highlights the deep impact of these educational pathways:

"The Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Business Leadership is unique in Australian university business program offerings in that its student cohort, academics, course delivery and content exemplify being for, with and by Mob," he said.

Through programs like the **Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Business Leadership** and the more recent vital offer of **Master of Indigenous Business Leadership**, Dilin Duwa continues to foster a new generation of leaders who advocate for their communities' economic independence.

Scholarships are available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians for both the GCIBL and the MCIBL.

"This scholarship demonstrates the University's commitment to supporting First Peoples' leadership and creating pathways for Indigenous students to thrive in enterprise disciplines."

Dilin Duwa
CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

“
Our voice must inform the future of Australian business. This program ensures that Indigenous values are heard and creates the confidence to lead.”

Nicole Copley

Larrakia and Torres Strait Islander,
MC-IBL 2026 class



Enrol in the Master of Indigenous Business Leadership today.

A first-of-its-kind educational program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander managers and business owners:

- Developed by the Dilin Duwa Centre, this program is all-Indigenous led
- Decolonised curriculum with subjects that ensure you have the skills to lead and be the voice for your community
- Global Indigenous faculty
- Fully online allows you to study on Country
- **FEE-FREE** for all successful applicants

We invest in you so you can invest in our collective future.

Yarn with Program Manager Chris Riley (Noongar) to find out more: dilin-duwa@unimelb.edu.au



Here We Belong: CQUniversity Strengthens Support for First Nations Students



CQUniversity has officially opened a new First Nations Precinct at its Rockhampton North Campus.

The new space is a purpose-built cultural and learning hub designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and strengthen connection with community.

It provides First Nations students with a culturally safe environment where they can access support and feel a sense of belonging that supports their success at university.

Spanning multiple buildings, the precinct brings together spaces for cultural practice, learning, teaching, research and gathering.

CQUniversity Vice-President of Indigenous Engagement, Professor Adrian Miller, said the precinct marked an important step in creating a university environment where First Nations students feel supported to succeed.

With more than 20 locations across Australia, CQU welcomes First Nations students from regional, remote and national locations across vocational education, undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

"A culturally safe space allows students to express and share their identity, culture and language while feeling respected and valued," Prof

Miller said.

"When students feel they belong, their wellbeing and academic success naturally follow."

Prof Miller said the precinct will also play a vital role in strengthening relationships between students, community and the University.

"While this space has been designed primarily to support First Nations students, it also provides opportunities for all students to learn, connect and engage respectfully with culture," Prof Miller said.

"By embedding and elevating First Nations knowledges, cultures and leadership, we are creating a place where genuine reconciliation and shared learning can flourish," Prof Miller said.

The precinct carries the traditional name *Yirragu Nulu Nhugul*, meaning "Here We Belong," reflecting its role as a place of connection, belonging and shared responsibility between the University and First Nations communities.

Developed in consultation with the Darumbal People, the Traditional Owners of the land, the naming and design were guided by community representatives to ensure the space reflects local knowledge, language and culture.

Traditional language, artwork, design elements and outdoor spaces throughout the precinct

honour Country and create a welcoming environment for students, families, staff and visitors.

The project was developed in response to growing First Nations student enrolments and the need for visible, culturally grounded support spaces on campus.

CQU has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students currently studying across all study levels at the Rockhampton campus, with the precinct expected to host cultural activities, community events and student support programs year-round.

"We want First Nations students considering university to know they belong here and that we are committed to supporting them to not only begin their studies but thrive and succeed," Prof Miller said.

The opening acknowledged the cultural significance of the space and the contributions of community. Going forward, the precinct will support First Nations students through culturally safe programs, services and opportunities to connect and thrive at university.

First Nations students at CQU are supported across vocational education and training (VET), undergraduate and postgraduate study pathways, with tailored support available throughout their education journey. To learn more about studying at CQU, visit cqu.edu.au/firstnations.



CQUniversity Vice-President of Indigenous Engagement, Professor Adrian Miller.



CQUniversity unveils First Nations Precinct in Rockhampton.

Create the success that means more to you.

WITH SPECIALISED SUPPORT FOR FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS.

Feel welcomed and supported by dedicated Indigenous student advisers who walk with you every step of the way. Study close to home or online, with flexible study options, real choices and culturally-safe support to help you thrive.

Find out more at cqu.edu.au/firstnations



TAFE + UNI



INDIGENOUS
ENGAGEMENT
DIVISION



Professional capability and cultural insight



MURAWARI man Aiden Pearson accepted a Pat Turner Scholarship in 2023, backing himself to further his career and make a bigger contribution.

"For me, undertaking a masters was about investing in myself and building the skills I knew I'd need to grow in the Australian Public Service (APS)," Aiden says.

Aiden's former employer, Department of Finance, supported him to study full-time for two years to complete a Master of Project Management at The Australian National University (ANU).

"I wanted to move beyond just doing the work, to really understanding how to lead it – how to think strategically, manage complexity, deliver better outcomes and contribute more effectively to policy and program delivery, particularly in complex and high-impact areas."

As part of his studies, Aiden undertook a research project to explore Indigenous economic empowerment. He mapped the financial mechanisms, policies, and governance structures that shape Indigenous economic empowerment, identifying critical gaps and proposing strategic reforms.

Aiden's research provided the Department of Finance with options to enhance Indigenous economic resilience, self-determination and long-term



Aiden Pearson. Picture: Adam McGrath/HCreations.

financial sustainability.

Aiden says learning alongside other Indigenous public servants created a sense of community and a supportive learning environment, which made a huge difference while he was studying.

"We could share experiences and apply what we were learning directly to real workplace challenges. It didn't feel like study in isolation; it felt connected to real work and real impact and elevated my overall experience."

Aiden is now applying his studies in a new role at National Emergency Management Agency, where he is working to support Indigenous communities impacted and displaced from Country by natural disasters.

Aiden says the Pat Turner Scholarship Program brings something really unique to the Australian Public Service.

"It's not just about building qualifications – it's about building capability, confidence, and connection."

"Graduates of the program are now working across the APS, contributing their expertise while also bringing lived experience to the development of policies and programs – including those that directly impact First Nations people."

"This combination of professional capability and cultural insight is incredibly powerful."

The Pat Turner Scholarship is a one-to-three year, full-pay scholarship for any level of postgraduate study at ANU or Charles Darwin University for high performing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS 4 to SES Band 1 Australian public servants or eligible PGPA entity employees.

Find out more at srwfoundation.anu.edu.au



Dr Pat Turner AM



Australian
National
University

Sir Roland
Wilson
Foundation

Pat Turner Scholarships

Full-pay scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian Public Servants and eligible PGPA entity employees to do full-time postgraduate study or research at The Australian National University or Charles Darwin University.

Our scholarships develop research, analytical and leadership skills, and support scholars to study topics of national significance and strategic importance to the Australian Public Service.

Find out more at srwfoundation.anu.edu.au or email srw.foundation@anu.edu.au