



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.