

High school to dentistry: A journey of perseverance, passion, and support

Life is full of surprises, and the journey is not always straight. For Latisha Sykora, a current student of the Bachelor of Dental Surgery at The University of Adelaide, her venture into the field of oral health began during her years in high school. Despite facing challenges, her determination and passion for healthcare led her to where she is now - a successful general dentist with a promising career ahead.

Latisha completed her high school journey with a Certificate III in Dental Assisting, gaining experience and further understanding of the importance of oral health. But she wanted more.

After working in rural and remote communities, gaining knowledge and a further understanding of the importance of oral health, Latisha decided to embark on her journey into oral health therapy. In 2019, she completed the Bachelor of Oral Health at The University of Adelaide. After graduation, her passion for paediatrics and oral health promotion led her to go even further, enrolling for the Bachelor of Dental Surgery. She will be graduating at the end of 2024.

Latisha's journey was not always easy, but she found support along the way. She



Latisha Sykora, final year student, Bachelor of Dental Surgery at The University of Adelaide.

learned about Wirltu Yarlū Aboriginal Education, the student success and support service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the University of Adelaide. "I had put through my application to attend the University of Adelaide when I received word of Wirltu Yarlū. I was supported from the very beginning, from the interviewing process to understanding how

the life of a university student was soon to be. I was adamant that this change would be refreshing and positive, so I knew with the help of the mob, I was going to be just fine."

The safe and supportive space provided by Wirltu Yarlū during Latisha's time at The University of Adelaide has been immeasurable. "They provided me a place where students can

genuinely feel acknowledged and visible, especially amid the bustling atmosphere of a university. I've received unwavering support from the staff and service during challenging times. In a world that differs vastly from ours, Wirltu Yarlū remains a haven where I can authentically exist, relieved of the burdens of university demands and societal norms."

As Latisha approaches graduation, she is pondering about the potential paths her education might lead toward. "My primary focus is evolving to be the best clinician I can become.

Indigenous education and oral healthcare hold dear to me, as I believe in effective positive change within our community." Her professional growth will remain an ongoing journey, and she is excited about the future.

In her spare time, Latisha mentors Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students thinking of applying to university. She is an Ambassador for the Karnkanthi Education Program, coordinated and led by Wirltu Yarlū at the University of Adelaide.

"To those who are debating the prospect of attending university, I encourage you to take the chance. University can seem a little overwhelming and slightly daunting, but I assure you that you can navigate it successfully", says Latisha.

"The University of Adelaide is well equipped to guide you throughout your journey, and Wirltu Yarlū is a friendly and open environment with many who were once in your shoes. I challenge you to bet on yourself because it is truly the best decision I ever made."

Lifting up your career

The prospect of pursuing higher education can be overwhelming. Fortunately, the Karnkanthi Education Program is here to offer a helping hand and make the journey less challenging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Translating to 'lifting up' in the Kaurna language, the Program, run by Wirltu Yarlū Aboriginal Education at The University of Adelaide, provides a range of services that assist High school students from year 10 to year 12/13 in navigating the complexities of tertiary education, and prepares them by building on their unique personal, academic, and cultural strengths.

Avah Topp, a current first year student in the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, believes the Karnkanthi Program was fundamental to help her cement her chances of accessing University Education. "I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for the Karnkanthi Program. Without their support, I wouldn't be studying Medicine or at Uni. It provided me with an endless number of opportunities. I met my best friend in the program and succeeded in the academic tutoring provided. They helped me with my estimated ATAR and everything I needed to apply and enter University. I would have been lost without the program. It's a great community", says Avah.

Through mentorship, academic support, and cultural connection, the Karnkanthi Education Program is breaking down barriers and providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander High school students with the opportunity to pursue higher education, helping them to achieve their goals and seize their dreams.

For the Program Coordinator, Bianca Bettley, a Yuin and Dughutti woman, the initiative allows participants to be a part of an ever-growing community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who aspire to develop their resilience and leadership skills to help them succeed in life.

"We work closely with students to ensure sustainable academic growth and success. Ultimately, we aim to build their confidence to pursue a higher education that will empower the students for life."

Students in years 10 and 11 can apply to join the program any time of the year. Year 12 students must apply by June 30. Applicants can participate in academic, cultural, social and career development activities, access private tutoring for school subjects, financial support for educational costs, travel and accommodation, and student development scholarships.

For more information, contact Bianca at bianca.bettley@adelaide.edu.au.



Avah Topp, first-year student, Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery at The University of Adelaide