

From Uni of Newcastle's Wollotuka to the world: destined for success



At four years old Chris Sampson recalls taking notes in what must have been a tutorial while his mother, an early 20-year-old born and raised Wiradjuri woman, was studying to become a teacher.

"I think somehow I was always destined to study some sort of university degree," Chris said.

Fast-forward to adulthood, Chris is not only a university graduate but he is the co-founder and chief technology officer of Tilter – an AI technology company that has raised over \$10 million in funding, and has offices around the world.

Born in Narrandera, Chris is a descendant of the Wiradjuri mob near the Murrumbidgee River in the Riverina. His parents, both teachers, and grandmother were among the first in family to graduate from university.

"Whatever success I've had so far and will have in the future, is owed to my family.

"They've poured in blood, sweat and tears to give me, my brother and my sister a stable and financially viable platform to begin our lives," Chris said.

Eager to follow in their footsteps, Chris finished high school and enrolled in Bachelor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Newcastle. Chris was set to live off-campus at



Left to right: AI tech-company Tilter's Marcel Herz (CEO), Martin Karafilis (COO), Chris Sampson (CTO).

Durungaling Hostel and be supported on-campus by the university's Wollotuka Institute – a culturally safe space for Indigenous students.

Wide-eyed with big dreams, Chris said he had no hesitations.

"While it was only a two-hour drive from our home in Muswellbrook, my parents still felt

tentative so before making the final decision, we visited Wollotuka at the university.

"Knowing that I would be looked after gave them the peace of mind to send me on my way.

"The thing about both Durungaling and Wollotuka was no matter how much time you spent there, where you are from,

or who you are, you're welcomed like family. Still true to this day.

"I probably didn't realise it at the time but the stable home-cooked meals at Durungaling and quiet study spaces at Wollotuka were just what a kid needed to succeed," Chris said.

And he sure did succeed. Chris graduated with honours

then landed career opportunities in Sydney and completed further study.

Tilter was then born, from humble beginnings – simply a few mates with big dreams working together from a garage.

"We had to hustle hard in the beginning, working our real jobs by day and trying to build a company by night. Our first round of funding totalled about \$40,000, \$10,000 of which was from my parents.

"Anyone who has grown up in a working-class Indigenous family knows that is not pocket change."

From moving to Germany to help the business launch into new markets across the world, to landing second place and US\$500,000 funding for his pitch at Grow NY – a business competition in New York, Chris has helped his company grow to more than 50 employees in Australia, Europe and the US.

In 2021, Tilter was named one of Australia's best places to work.

"We employ a multi-cultural team, with a number of Indigenous members including my younger brother, which as a company we are very proud of.

"I hope to continue breaking trail, breaking barriers and showing the way forward, just like my family did.

"This is how we break the cycle," Chris said.

Re-awakening almost-lost songs and languages of Indigenous ancestors



For Ngiyampaa and Wiradjuri man Jesse Hodgetts, music is in his blood. And knowing the love his nanna and Nanna's father shared for singing makes him feel even more connected to his culture and ancestors.

Born and raised on Darkinjung country on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Jesse recalls dancing in the lounge room to Michael Jackson and James Brown as a kid. It was no surprise when he chose to study music at university.

Realising how much he enjoyed teaching music, Jesse decided to pursue further study and enrol in a Master of Teaching degree. After mulling over his options, Jesse chose the University of Newcastle because of its recognised commitment to Aboriginal students at the Wollotuka Institute.

"I knew there were people at Wollotuka who were culturally strong.

"And that I wouldn't have to compromise my cultural identity to go to uni," Jesse said.

After successfully completing his Masters degree and becoming a fully fledged music teacher, Jesse continued to maintain strong ties with the university.

"Because I made so many lifelong connections and kinship

at Wollotuka, I kept going back there to visit.

"I was particularly inspired by the work of Dr Ray Kelly to revive Indigenous languages," Jesse said.

Jesse recalls it was a conversation by the campfire at a Wollotuka yarnning circle with Ray – drawing comparisons of their traditional language word for 'fire', which ignited a burning desire to learn more about the sleeping language – and songs – of his ancestors.

"My nanna's father was a really good singer, but during his time language and culture was being outlawed so unfortunately he wasn't able to pass any songs on.

"But we know he used to sing when it was safe to do so – when there were no Whitefellas around," Jesse said.

It was Dr Kelly, a trusted mentor, who encouraged Jesse to consider applying for an upcoming scholarship and return to uni to study a PhD in language revitalisation.

Wanting to follow the path carved by his ancestors, Jesse decided to focus his PhD research on the revitalisation of songs and languages of Ngiyampaa and Wiradjuri speakers.

"I'm studying songs that were recorded in the 1950s-'70s and archived, but not passed on to

next generations.

"It's really important to understand what these songs are about and how they express our cultural identity to help recover our sleeping languages and knowledge," Jesse said.

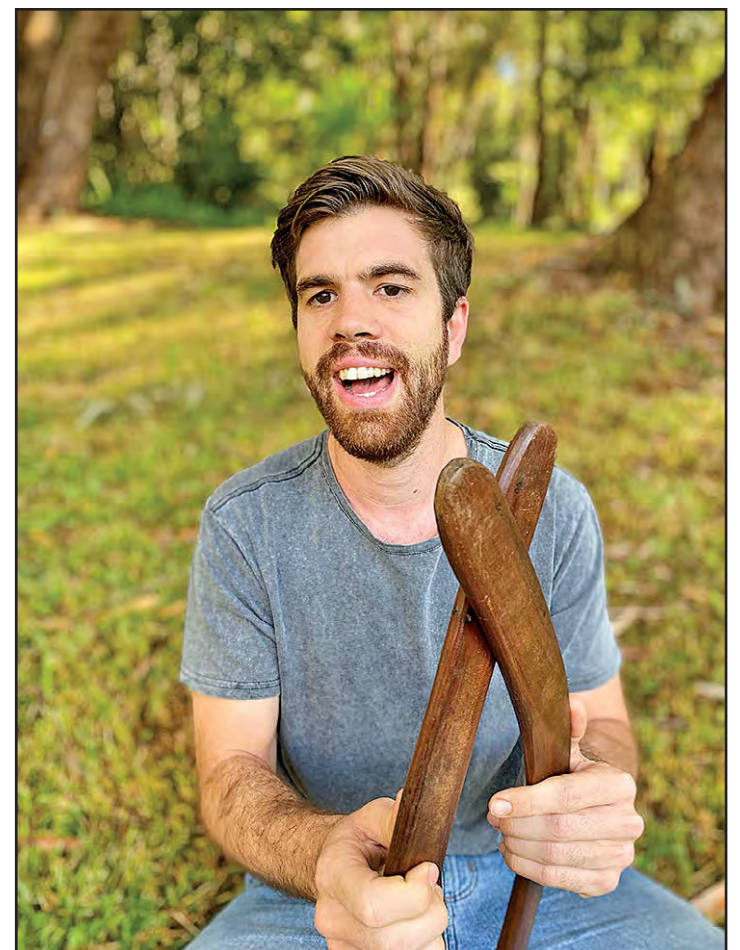
Jesse's grit and dedication to his research earned him third place in the university's Three Minute Thesis Competition where candidates have just three minutes to succinctly present their research, and why it matters.

Six months into his PhD, Jesse landed a job as an associate lecturer in Indigenous Studies at the University of Newcastle. He is now simultaneously studying and working as a lecturer in-training; guiding undergraduate teachers on how to embed Aboriginal perspectives into their curriculum.

For people considering a career or study at the University of Newcastle, Jesse offers some thoughtful advice:

"Think about what you want to do to support your mob. Think about the path you want to walk down to achieve this. Does the University of Newcastle have a place on this path? If so, then it's where you need to be," Jesse said.

Interested in a career at the University of Newcastle? Go to newcastle.edu.au/jobs to find out more.



Jesse Hodgetts loves connecting with his culture and ancestors through song.