

# A yearning to support Indigenous learning

By DARREN COYNE



WIRADJURI woman Leila Smith knows there are no set pathways to a good education.

What works for some students, doesn't necessarily work for others.

The trick is opening your eyes to the options available.

As the chief executive of the Aurora Education Foundation, Ms Smith oversees a range of programs helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential.

Leila is a Wiradjuri woman whose family is from central NSW.

Raised in Canberra, she holds a Masters of Public Policy from the University of Cambridge and a Bachelor's degree with first class honours in Sociology from the Australian National University.

She also received the Charlie Perkins scholarship to go to Cambridge in 2013.

Now she administers those scholarships.

"At Aurora we really use the lever of education to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve success on their own terms," she told the *Koori Mail*.

"The way we do that is by a bunch of programs that change the conversation about Indigenous education and employment. It's about high expectations and possibilities, and all kinds of pathways to success.

"That can be a real circuit breaker for people in understanding what might be possible for Aboriginal students."

Leila said Aurora encouraged students to dream beyond the borders of their homeland.

"We are most well known for our work in the postgraduate scholarship space internationally," she said.

"Before 2010 no Indigenous student had studied full time at Oxford or Cambridge. Now, through Aurora's work, and together with the Charlie Perkins Scholarship Trust and the Roberta Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation, 48 Indigenous students have been accepted into these two universities and so far, 33 of 33 have graduated. In total, over 50 Indigenous scholars have completed overseas postgraduate study to date.

"That success has really changed people's idea of what's possible. We also have a program where we take 20 Aboriginal students each year on an international study tour of universities in the US and the UK.

"We've had 170 students participate in that study tour and it's very competitive. You need a distinction average or a first class honours mark at university to get



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into that tour, and at least half of those students actually got into university through an alternative entry scheme, myself included.

"My Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score was not high enough for direct entry. I came through university via an alternative route, and then went on to nail it with a first class honours degree.

"There is a lot of weight put on the ATAR score and I wonder how many Aboriginal students didn't even go for an ATAR score, because they didn't think they'd get a great score and that really concerns me.

"University is not for everyone and nor should it be but I wonder how many students have had that option taken off the table because somebody else thinks they're not good enough.

"I think about 20% of NSW high school students get an ATAR over 75. That's across the board.

"It's not a lot, but the narrative is that if you don't get this ATAR score, it's going to define you for life, yet so many Aboriginal students have stories where they've cast their own path and went on to achieve amazing things in all kinds of spaces."

For Leila, her own educational journey began with a stroke of luck.

"I was sitting at a meeting of Aboriginal parents and students

and I happened to sit next to the father of a school mate of mine.

"He asked me what I wanted to do after Year 12, and when I told him I wanted to go to university, but I wasn't sure if it was right for me, he said, 'Well, I happen to be the head of the Indigenous Centre at ANU ... would you like to come into the campus and I'll show you around and we'll talk about alternative entry schemes?'"

"So it was a complete coincidence that I happened to sit next to him. I'm not saying it wouldn't have happened without him, but I know that I don't want students 10 to 15 years from now saying they ended up there at that time just because of who they happened to sit next to."

Aurora begins early with its involvement in students' lives.

"We have 17 Indigenous scholars in the postgraduate space who are studying overseas right now, but in our high school space we have around 250 students," Leila said.

"The high school program gives Aboriginal students scholarships each year to spend on things like tutoring. We take them on academic enrichment camps providing 200 hours of support every year from Year 7 through to one year out of Year 12. We also have an internship program as well, which has

around 300 interns each year."

For the past year during the global pandemic, Leila said everyone involved with Aurora had worked hard to stay connected.

"Internationally it's been huge. A lot of overseas scholars are fairly isolated at the best of times.

"To be in lockdown in the UK and the US during this time is testament to their resilience and what they've shown has been absolutely amazing.

"One of them said to me recently 'I was thinking about pulling the pin, and the only reason I'm still here is because of the privilege that I'm in right now in this position and what it means to my community for me to stay here.'"

"I can't even imagine how hard it must be for them, and to know that they're doing it with the end goal in sight is just amazing.

"One of our scholars, Tui Nolan, has just gone over to Cambridge on a global talent visa to work on understanding the genetic basis of COVID-19 to develop a vaccine.

"So we've got an Aboriginal bloke right now at Cambridge working on the COVID 19 vaccine, which just blows my mind.

"We're not just going over there as students, we're going over there as staff and colleagues

and teachers and researchers."

Leila said that the Aurora high school program had an incredibly high engagement rate last year.

"We went virtual instead of doing face-to-face academic enrichment camps. We run didge workshops, we do weaving workshops. We do online tutoring, and not only engaged the student, but because the family was at home with them, families would jump online and learn about culture.

"Our engagement has never been stronger than it was during COVID-19, which is a great place for us to be because now we're starting back with face to face things again.

"There would have been a time pre-COVID when we would have thought there was no way some of the Aunties and Uncles would be able to jump online and run a lesson using technology, but they were fantastic at it.

"So it's not going to be the only delivery mode, but knowing that the potential is there for us has opened up a whole new delivery model of education."

So, where to post COVID?

"What we want to focus on in the future is stronger partnerships with Aboriginal mentors," Leila said. "There are a whole bunch of Aboriginal mentors we work with who have experience of higher education, and we want to connect them to the students in the high school space.

"We already work with around 50 Aboriginal mentors. They're doing it not for themselves but for the benefit of the students.

"We also want to launch an alumni network with our scholars. This is about getting much more structure in the way that we bring them together.

"We ran a survey with our scholars recently and asked them what they wanted to do with their network and resoundingly, overwhelmingly, the scholars would like to find ways to deliver benefits back to Aboriginal communities with what they've learnt. So we need to start up a network to help them do that.

"Finally, we will really be focusing on data with all of the high school students that we work with. We have an incredibly rich data set that we can use not only with traditional methods of data, like around attendance and NAPLAN, but also what communities and families want to know about their children's education.

"That is what I see as our legacy ... actually showing what works through data and sharing that with the education space.

"It's so exciting. We've got the best team around, Alumni saying we want to give back, and then we've got this emerging pool of inspiring mentors.

"It's actually incredibly complementary the way that it all comes together.

"It just makes sense."