

Mentor offers a helping hand



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TORRES Strait Islander student Tim O'Connor was at a bit of a loose end in boarding school when an "awkward" opportunity to be mentored by a banker came along.

"Boarding school was a very different experience and it was incredibly rewarding for me," said the 18-year-old former student at St Gregory's College in Campbelltown, in Sydney's west. "It was also hard being away from home for such a long time."

In Year 11, O'Connor — a descendant of the Merian-Mer people of Murray Island — joined the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation pathway program, which pairs



SAM MOOY

Tim O'Connor, left, and Michael McKenzie

mentors with students to give them advice, experience and support in school and beyond.

"Every month Michael would visit me at school and at first, I'm not going to lie, it was pretty awkward," he told a Commonwealth Bank Australia and Centre for Volunteering breakfast yesterday in Sydney.

"Michael" is Michael McKenzie, who works in the risk management arm of the Commonwealth Bank. "Tim was uncomfortable at the start until I

just asked him 'What do you want out of this' and started talking about all those possibilities," Mr McKenzie said.

They played touch football, went kayaking and, more often than not, just talked about the possibilities for the future.

"One of the best things about having a mentor is having another adult to speak to who is not a parent or a teacher," O'Connor said.

O'Connor, the first in his family to be at university and studying a Bachelor of Exercise Science and a Bachelor of Business at the Australian Catholic University, said he wouldn't have "made it to this point without my mentor's support and encouragement".

AIEF founder Andrew Penfold told the audience corporate Australia had a compelling role in creating and changing social policy. "When you change the life of one student, you change the life of their family and ultimately you change Australia."