

SAP's \$1m boost to indigenous scholarships



HOLLIE ADAMS

SAP Australia and NZ chief operating officer Greg Miller, left, and chief executive of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation Andrew Penfold

BRIDGET CARTER PHILANTHROPY

THE Australian Indigenous Education Foundation can already name Australia's largest corporations, such as BHP Billiton, Commonwealth Bank and Qantas, as among its backers, but the latest coup for the organisation is a funding deal with global software company SAP.

The business has just pledged \$1 million to the AIEF, founded by Andrew Penfold, and matches the investment of the global logistics group John Swire & Sons made in March.

While the scholarships are for students to attend boarding schools with a high standard of education, more broadly the motivating factor for SAP is the hope more Aboriginal students

would enter science and maths-related university courses, where there is a skill shortage, with an opportunity for a career in the field of information technology.

"Basically, they are going more upstream, educating more kids earlier," Mr Penfold said.

It is a commitment that will contribute to Mr Penfold's aspirations of building a \$140m fund that could assist as many as 7000 young Australians and comes as giving by major corporations for scholarship programs starts to gain momentum, with Westpac's chief executive Gail Kelly recently committing \$100m for scholarships.

The area is one close to Mr Penfold's heart. Despite rising up the ranks of the business world, the former lawyer and investment banker says as a teenager he came close to slipping through society's



cracks. His widowed mother lobbied for his acceptance into an exclusive Sydney private boarding school, for which he had financial assistance, and if it wasn't for that, he believes, it is unlikely he would have distanced himself from the wrong crowd he was running with in inner-city Glebe.

Confidence instilled in him from the school's leaders propelled his achievement in sports and his school work, and he went on to top his class in various subjects in the last year after previously failing his exams.

The result was a successful career as a lawyer and investment

banker in London and Hong Kong.

Mr Penfold says he got involved in fundraising for students after members of his rugby team were killed in the 2002 Bali bombings and he started fundraising ventures to support the families of those victims.

After several years, the initiatives expanded and gained momentum, and he founded the AIEF.

In operation since 2008, the AIEF supports about 500 secondary students in 35 schools and a further 50 at university.

Particularly, Mr Penfold is proud of the fact that, nationally, 80 per cent of school students completed Year 12 and among those were 93 per cent of the participants in his federally funded program.

It compared with a national

average for Aboriginal teenagers of about 50 per cent.

Already, the AIEF has raised \$85m, mostly from the corporate sector in the hope of closing the gap in society between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. "Business does it by doing what they do best, employing people and giving them productive careers," he says.

"There is a lack of diversity in the workplace so employers are very keen to increase that."

Mr Penfold says there were 40 per cent of the students in the program working or studying in law, engineering, medicine and science.

The commonwealth government provides 38 per cent of the funding and students' parents are also contributors, although the amounts depend on their circumstances.