



GLENN HUNT

'There were so many more options': AIEF graduate and apprentice landscaper Matthew Collins at a Brisbane work site

Foundation lights up new horizons



EMILY RITCHIE

Matthew Collins had never even heard of university before he started high school.

The indigenous teenager from Brisbane was awarded an Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarship when he was 13 years old and was dumbfounded to discover university was an achievable goal.

"I thought university was just an American thing, like college," said Mr Collins, a Gureng Gureng man. "But then I transferred from public school to St Peters Lutheran College and they helped me see my future differently. We started

talking about university, I started playing rugby union and got to be on representative teams and I began to realise there were so many more options for my future."

Mr Collins, now 18, was among 97 AIEF scholarship recipients to graduate from high school last year. "I feel so proud," he said.

The AIEF now boasts a 94 per cent retention and high school completion rate with indigenous students from over 250 communities across the country, according to its new annual report.

The program has supported 396 secondary and 31 university graduates since its inception in 2008 and monitors their progress beyond schooling into career pathways.

"We started with one student in 2008 and now we have over 500 students, with almost 100 graduating from Year 12 each year," said foundation executive director



INDIGENOUS BUSINESS SPECIAL

Andrew Penfold. "Through the program these kids' lives are changing, and the lives of their families and communities, and one-by-one they're changing the nation.

"I've often said that AIEF is not the only solution to indigenous education inequality, however it is one approach that is proven to work and we're really committed

to be able to deliver that to more and more kids."

Mr Penfold was inspired to start the scholarship program by reflecting on his own education more than a decade ago.

"My dad died when I was six and I was a disengaged teenager who was really struggling when I was sent to boarding school, so I know first-hand the power of education," he said. "It is a real circuit breaker that can help people break out of the cycle of disadvantage and despair."

Since graduation, Mr Collins has started a landscaping apprenticeship but, he says, university is certainly not off the cards.

"Once I finish my apprenticeship I would like to study youth work," he said. "I want to work with young kids, both indigenous and non-indigenous, to help them see what I didn't for so long, that you can really do anything you set your mind to."