

'I knew uni was there ... but not how I could get there'



AIEF scholars Nikita Kearney, left, and Bailey Widders were among 90 high-school graduates this year



SOFIA GRONBECH WRIGHT

In 2008 only one indigenous high-school student had the chance of a tertiary scholarship from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

Nine years later the AIEF has provided scholarships and support for more than 500 children.

Students last week attended the Year 12 AIEF graduation ceremony from communities across Australia — from Gapuwiyak in the Northern Territory to Bairnsdale, Victoria, and Port Hedland in Western Australia. Among them were Nikita Kearney, 17, and Bailey Widders, 19, two of more than 90 Year 12 graduates this year.

Ms Kearney moved from Darwin to Sydney in Year 10 to board at St Catherine's School in Waverley, and down a different life path.

"Life back home was completely different," she said. "I was exposed to domestic violence, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, criminal activity — the list goes on.

"I had no appreciation for school or education."

Ms Kearney is now a school prefect and hopes to study a double degree at university in social work and criminology and criminal justice, something she had thought impossible.

"I never thought I would have

the opportunity to go to uni," she said. "I always knew it was there, but I never knew how I would get there and what I needed to do to get there. Through the support of the AIEF, my path is more clear."

Mr Widders was in Year 7 when he began boarding at The Armidale School in northern NSW on an AIEF scholarship. The chance to attend an elite school in his hometown was exciting, he said.

Initially staying busy to dull his homesickness and getting into a bit of trouble with friends, Mr Widders soon realised his opportunity and "grabbed it with both hands".

He believes the school and the guidance of AIEF helped shape him: "Boarding has made me independent and much more sociable."

More recently, he attended the Australian Defence Force Exercise First Look with AIEF — igniting a passion for a military career.

"My brother made it to the NRL professionally, so I was kind of always in the shadow there," Mr Widders said. "It was something different, to separate me from my brother — something I could do independently."

The AIEF aims to increase opportunities for indigenous people to be active members in the mainstream community.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show only 60.3 per cent of indigenous students completed Year 12 last year, compared with 85.6 per cent of non-indigenous students. However, 94 per cent of AIEF alumni were reported to be engaged in career paths, including full-time employment and university studies last year.

BRITTA CAMPION