



Lonnie Naawi is completing a bachelor of arts at the University of Queensland

LYNDON MECHIESEN

Home where the heart is when living is learning

SIAN POWELL

After graduating from high school in 2016, moving to Melbourne to begin a bachelor of arts degree at Melbourne University, and finally moving back to Brisbane to complete the course at the University of Queensland, indigenous student Lonnie Naawi would like a career helping indigenous children with their schooling.

Originally from Cairns, with an Aboriginal mother and a Torres Strait Islander father, Ms Naawi moved to Brisbane with her parents when she was a little girl. Now living in Wynnum, on the south side of Brisbane, with her mother

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and brother, she was supported in her move back to Queensland by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation charity, which also paid for her to board at Clayfield College in Brisbane, where she spent her final three years at school.

"It was really great," she said. "I loved boarding school, I loved everything about it."

"I liked the fact that Clayfield College was a pretty small school, and you got to know everyone. I didn't experience homesickness as much as the other students did, especially the indigenous kids who came from really rural communities."

Ms Naawi's family lived on the other side of Brisbane from the

school, so she could get home for weekends.

Although she enjoyed her first year of university in Melbourne, homesickness finally got the better of her, and she decided to head back to Brisbane.

"It was my first time moving away from home," she explained.

"I finally understood what my fellow boarders at Clayfield were going through when they were homesick and missing family. It was very tough."

Last year, Universities Australia said indigenous people comprised 2.7 per cent of Australia's working-age population but only 1.6 per cent of university domestic student enrolments — up from 1.2 per cent a decade ago.

AIEF executive director Andrew Penfold said the organisation had a Year 12 completion rate of 94 per cent, according to the latest report issued a few weeks ago, and worked with 32 schools around Australia and children from more than 200 communities.

"We've had about 500 Year 12 graduates to date, and about half of them have gone into further education at university," he said.

The AIEF "pathways program" helped graduating high school students make the transition to university or to employment. AIEF also funded about 80 university scholarships each year.

The pathways team is based in Brisbane, in offices provided by the giant European software firm SAP.

"SAP has invested well over \$1 million in terms of actual cash investment to provide scholarships for the students, and a lot of its staff volunteer for us and act as mentors for the students as they come out of school and transition into university or employment, whatever they want to do," he said.