

600 graduation days, and counting



JOHN FEDER

Ella Rigney and Joe Franciscus in Sydney yesterday. 'I'm going to miss so much about school,' says Joe

ELIAS VISONTAY

For Ella Rigney, being “nerdy” is a source of pride.

The 18-year-old deputy head girl at Adelaide's Seymour College plans to study medicine at university next year and is yet to decide between staying in South Australia or moving to Sydney. She hopes to specialise in indigenous youth health.

“I'm just really excited to go to university ... and learn,” she says. “Whenever I hear general knowledge questions, I'm excited. I know a bunch of random stuff because I like to read.”

A proud Ngarrindjeri and Kaurna woman, Ella is also a tal-



ented athlete, singer and performer. She is a recipient of an Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarship, an initiative that funds boarding school fees for indigenous children to go through high school.

Joe Franciscus will also graduate from high school this year. He moved to Brisbane to study at St Joseph's Nudgee College in Year 10, originally from Winton in central-west Queensland.

Joe plans to complete an elec-

trical apprenticeship next year and take his skills back to help his small town. “It's a funny feeling. I really do want to graduate but I'm going to miss so much about school,” he says.

Joe, 17, plays cricket, football and rugby for the college.

He says the friends he has made at boarding school have become “like family”.

The pair spoke at a Year 12 graduation ceremony where 70 AIEF recipients from around the country met in Sydney for the organisation's 10th anniversary.

It was not the first time they had met fellow recipients of the scholarship. As part of the Pathways component of the AIEF program, staff would or-

ganise events and mentors for students, and meet with them to discuss post-school plans.

When it launched in 2008, the program funded just one student.

This year, its 600th student will graduate, with a further 400 students already in schools set to graduate in the coming years.

“It's quite a surreal feeling, to be honest,” said AIEF executive director Andrew Penfold, who started the foundation in his living room. “To be here 10 years later and see 70 names get read out is fantastic.”

Growth in his organisation's funding has meant a dramatic increase in scholarships.

EDITORIAL P15