

Funding programs narrow the education gap for young Indigenous Australians

Several organisations help overcome financial barriers to a better future.

Bernard Kelly, 22, has come a long way since Year 9, when he left his family and friends in Darwin, where he was born and raised, to attend a private boarding school in Melbourne.

“It was a whole new world for me,” says Kelly, a graduate of Melbourne Grammar School (MGS). “I got to put on a button-up shirt and tie, and dress up to go to school, which was very different from Darwin life.”

Kelly grew to love the experience, though he found it difficult at first to be so far from home.

“As I was going through all of this so were many of the other boarders [and] we were able to stick together and get through it,” he says. “I look back at MGS and am quite proud. I’m glad I stuck to it and made it through as I have made some lifelong friends.”

Kelly’s last year at Melbourne Grammar School was funded through a scholarship from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), a non-profit organisation providing financial support and mentorship to more than 500 Indigenous students across the country.

It is one of several similar scholarship programs enabling Indigenous students, particularly those from remote or regional communities, to attend well regarded private schools.



Bernard Kelly at Melbourne Grammar School: “It was a whole new world for me.”

Andrew Penfold, the executive director of AIEF, says such programs “facilitate choice for Indigenous young people and their families by removing financial barriers to enrolment”.

“Believing that Indigenous students should not be denied the opportunity to attend the school of their choice, we are determined to raise funds to provide more scholarships,” he says.

The hope is that access to high-quality education will help Indigenous Australians overcome systemic inequalities.

Indigenous students, especially those in

remote communities, have lower rates of school attendance and Year 12 completion than non-Indigenous students, according to the Australian Government’s 2017 Closing the Gap report. But there are signs of progress. Since 2008, the rate of Indigenous young people aged 20 to 24 who completed Year 12 has increased by 16 per cent.

AIEF, which is funded through the Australian Government in collaboration with private sector partners, such as Qantas and the AFL, continued to support Kelly at university through tertiary scholarships and mentorship. He just completed his third

year as a Bachelor of Science student at the University of Melbourne and is currently taking part in a year-long IT cadetship at law firm Allens, an AIEF corporate partner.

“My life has been affected in ways that I couldn’t have imagined,” Kelly says. “I have been given opportunities that I may never have been privileged to experience. One day, I hope to be in a position to able to give back.”

AIEF funds scholarships through 32 partner schools, including MGS and Scotch College in Melbourne.

Penfold says 94 per cent of AIEF alumni have completed Year 12, compared with about 60 per cent of Indigenous students nationwide.

Yalari, another non-profit organisation based in Queensland, supported 163 students through scholarships in 2017.

One of those students was 17-year-old Koby Sellings, of Lakes Entrance, who will soon start his final year at Geelong Grammar School. He says Yalari checked in regularly with his progress and invited him to camps, leadership programs and other events with fellow Yalari students from around the country.

“I was open to the idea that it would give me better opportunities and just a better education than what was offered in Lakes [Entrance],” says Sellings, who hopes to achieve a high ATAR score and become a physiotherapist.

“Scholarships are important because not many Indigenous people from remote communities get the opportunity to go to a big boarding school and get the opportunities that others do,” he says.