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Indigenous graduates take studies back to country



JANE DEMPSTER

Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarship students Gideon Prior, from Bowen, and Yanche-Ka Neal, from Yarrabah, plan to give back to their communities after their studies

JAMES DOWLING

School finisher Gideon Prior can tell how far he has come from his upbringing in Bowen just by his sleep schedule.

Enrolled at Rockhampton's prestigious Cathedral College, the school's boarding routine has turned Gideon, 17, into an early riser – a habit that sticks out among his family.

"When I go back home I feel a bit out of place, because this schedule boarding has pulled me through has me waking up early," he told The Australian ahead of his speech to the graduating cohort of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

"When I wake up, no one's awake. I don't think I feel too out of place, it's just those little things."

Gideon arrived in Sydney on Monday alongside 60 AIEF scholars to mark his year 12 graduation. It is a broad cohort, featuring students from each corner of the country – as far west as Broome, and as far north as Badu Island.

The young Juru man from the Biruguba Nation gave an address at the graduation – held in the Museum of Contemporary Art on Monday – channelling a confidence that was often scarce after his move from Bowen in north Queensland to boarding school.

"When my mum asked me if I wanted to go to [Cathedral College] I was hesitant, I didn't want to go. Just being away from family and friends scared me," Gideon said. "I was a bit homesick. I found myself crying because I was away

Closing the Gap metrics need to be expanded: Liddle

The opposition wants data on school attendance, alcohol use and substance misuse to be included in the Closing the Gap national agreement on Indigenous disadvantage.

After a revolt by state and NT attorneys-general over Closing the Gap strategies last week, Coalition Indigenous affairs spokeswoman Kerryne Liddle told The Australian the agreement was missing key metrics that could help give a fuller picture of the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Senator Liddle said the Albanese government must explain why so many Closing the Gap targets were going backwards under its watch – just four of 19 targets were on track in July, compared to five out of 19 a year earlier.

However, she did not call for

the national agreement to be reviewed or abandoned.

"Discussions of reviews into and removal of the Closing the Gap framework distract at this time from the fact that since Labor were elected in 2022, youth detention is up 11 per cent, suicide is up 9.4 per cent, adult incarceration is up 3.5 per cent, preschool attendance is down 2.6 per cent and 1.2 per cent fewer children are commencing school developmentally on track," Senator Liddle said.

"Recently, we have seen the government talk up its economic development agenda but it appears to be consulting mostly with those in the not-for-profit sector rather than for-profit business. It distracts from its failures in compliance with the Indigenous procurement policy."

Senator Liddle called for more data to illustrate Closing the Gap – an agreement in its second incarnation since 2020, when Scott Morrison

relaunched it – after states and the NT last Friday asserted their right to pursue law and order agendas that could send more Indigenous Australians to jail.

The revolt was led by Queensland at a meeting of the Standing Council of Attorneys-General in Sydney.

Queensland Attorney-General Deb Frecklington pushed back against recommendations to reform bail laws.

The recommendations – prepared over the past year at the request of the attorneys-general in June 2024 – aim to keep more people out of jail if they have not been found guilty and are awaiting trial, or if they are awaiting sentencing that may not include a term of imprisonment. Nationwide, Indigenous adults and children are heavily over-represented among unsentenced prisoners on remand. The recommendations do not align with crackdowns on crime under way in the NT and

Queensland. They are also likely to clash with reforms in Victoria that make it more difficult for children to get bail.

The attorneys-general asserted their right to make legislation as they saw fit after law professor Eddie Cubillo, one of Closing the Gap's most experienced advisers on justice issues, resigned from his role as an independent member of the Justice Policy Partnership.

Dr Cubillo told colleagues in a letter that Indigenous people were exhausted by a process in which governments around Australia signed up to the Closing the Gap agreement but showed little genuine intention to fulfil their commitments.

"We cannot keep pretending this is working," he wrote.

On Monday, Senator Liddle said the federal government "must also ensure data is available on all of its Closing the Gap targets, not be missing in four areas, including family violence".

PAIGE TAYLOR



studies. The median weekly household income is \$1254, according to the 2016 Census, with a 37 per cent unemployment rate – seven times the national average.

"I was 12 years old when I started at Cathedral. I'd been at Yarrabah my whole life before that," she said. "The education there was not really good for me. Ever since I came here, all these opportunities came at me all at once. There was so much to choose from."

Despite the wide choice before her, Yanche knew since she was in year 7 that she wanted to be a nurse, and is now preparing to study at James Cook University with a plan of returning to Yarrabah and working in pediatrics.

"I feel sorry for the other kids there, because they don't get that many opportunities compared to what I've gotten," she said.

"So when I do take this career pathway into nursing, I want to give back to my community."

"It's kind of scary leaving boarding, I've been there for so long that it's now my second home. I'm not sure what the outside world is going to be like."

"But if I can move, as a 12-year-old, away from home, I feel like it'll be good now. It won't be as frightening again."

The Australian is a corporate partner of the AIEF.

from home. But this scholarship actually has done wonders.

"The advice I wish I had was calm down. It's going to be over soon, so take your time with it. Don't be so stressed."

With the help of mentoring, he found a path for himself and plans to spend a year back on country honing his craft as an electrician before going on to university.

"I want to become an engineer so I can come back home and work

on the railways," he said. "I've already moved to Rocky before, so I don't think I'll be as nervous when I want to go find a job someplace else. I already have that experience that I can back myself."

AIEF has provided secondary and tertiary education scholarships to Indigenous students since its foundation in 2008, under a joint public-private funding model. It boasted a 94 per cent student retention and year 12 com-

pletion rate in its 2024 annual report, representing 380 students from 173 communities.

The figure is double the 2016 Census rate recorded for school completion among Indigenous 20-24-year-olds.

Among its cohort of scholars, 43 per cent come from remote and very remote communities, while another 34 per cent are from rural areas. Scholarships help secondary students through their edu-

cation and into employment or further studies.

Cathedral School Townsville graduate and Kuku Djungan woman Yanche-Ka Neal pursued her studies with the knowledge it was the best chance she would likely be offered.

Yanche, 17, grew up in Yarrabah, a predominantly Indigenous town in far north Queensland where more than half the population never completed year 12