

Scholarships empower 4000 Indigenous boarders

Applications for the highly popular life-changing programs far outstrip supply, writes **Melinda Ham**.

Growing up in a northern Brisbane suburb and attending a Murri Indigenous school, Wongarah Fogarty knew that going to boarding school would be a gateway to more opportunity. Inspired by her cousin Florence, who went to Ipswich Girls' Grammar School and then played soccer for Queensland, Wongarah hoped to follow in her footsteps.

"My cousin spoke very highly about the school, so I really argued with my dad and told him I wanted to go too," Wongarah says. Now in year 12 at Ipswich Girls' Grammar School, she has thrown herself into sports, playing touch football, volleyball and netball. She is also the Dahdi captain for 2026, leading the school's Indigenous student group and organising events.

Wongarah is one of 4000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools across Australia.

Almost all students are supported by scholarships, a combination of the Commonwealth's ABSTUDY and significant contributions from non-profit organisations such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), the Smith Family's Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP) and other programs.

"We definitely see what we call a ripple effect", says AIEF deputy chief executive Kira Spucys-Tahar. "One student from one



The Geelong College's Levi McClelland (above). Wongarah Fogarty (above, far right) is a boarder and scholar at Ipswich Girls' Grammar School

community might attend a school and then the success of that particular student leads to siblings, cousins and other wider family members wanting to attend."

Every year, AIEF supports about 500 Indigenous students at 34 schools and two tertiary residential colleges, with backing from philanthropists and companies including Qantas, HSBC Australia and BHP.

The retention rate for students on AIEF scholarships is much higher than the national average, with 94 per cent of students finishing year 12 in 2025.

AIEF follows a parent and student-led model, where each student applies to the school of their choice. The school is



responsible for student selection and enrolment and then AIEF will step in to cover the gap between the parents' contribution and what ABSTUDY provides, to cover the rest of the cost of the student's tuition, boarding, school excursions and uniforms.

In Victoria, Levi McClelland is a year 11 student at The Geelong College studying on a Smith Family IYLP scholarship.

It's one of 250 scholarships offered to Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students from remote and very remote communities in Australia to board at high-performing high schools, and supports them until they finish year 12.

Levi arrived at The Geelong College last year from his home in Mildura, 640 kilometres north. He says it has opened up doors for him to pursue his dual passions of Aussie rules and cricket and play on the school teams for both sports. He also hopes to get a place at university to study a sports-related degree.

Academically, Levi says he initially found his new subjects challenging: "The learning here is a big step up, but the support I have received through my struggles is amazing."

While he talks with his parents a lot on the phone and loves visiting them back home, he has felt embraced as a boarder.

"In the boarding house, I love the culture and it never feels like you are alone," Levi says. "You're basically living in a big house with a bunch of your mates."

Back at Ipswich Girls' Grammar School, as the leader of the 30 Indigenous students, Wongarah has a lot of responsibility. "I make sure the other girls feel welcomed and supported. We do cultural dancing for assemblies and we work with the junior students, sometimes doing face painting and making animals out of Play-Doh."

"The success of these scholarship programs, empowering young Indigenous students to reach their potential, is spreading like wildfire as applications far outstrip supply," Spucys-Tahar says.

"Many of our partnering schools say they have more than 50 Indigenous students applying for each place they offer." As a result, she adds, more government, corporate and philanthropic funding is needed so more students can experience the same life-changing opportunities.