NCSEHE | National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

Curtin University

MY STORY — STUDENT VOICE

Make tomorrow better.

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Preface

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The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) provides national leadership in student equity in higher education. The Centre connects research, policy and practice to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people. An emphasis on the "student voice" and evaluation and communication of best practice equity initiatives contextualises research and data analysis.

Since 2017, the NCSEHE has published the online *My Story — Student Voice* series. Over three years, 21 inspirational students have shared their accounts of overcoming significant challenges to achieve academic, personal and career successes.

Hosted on the NCSEHE website, the features have had widespread recognition, amassing more than 15,000 page views from 2017-19, being republished internationally, and being a central element of the 2018 World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) Conference.

Through this series, we have challenged the notion of deficit and collectively celebrated these students' outstanding personal and academic qualities and achievements. This group—and so many others from "non-traditional" backgrounds—have the potential to better the world in their own unique ways.

The narratives offer unique insights into the motivations, barriers, and support needs of individuals facing complex—and often compounding—disadvantage. These student stories encompass the full spectrum of the student journey — from school, into university, and on to post-graduation and employment.

This *My Story — Student Voice* publication is the fourth in the NCSEHE case studies series, following *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program: Seven Years On* (2017), *Access and Participation in Higher Education: Outreach–Access–Support* (2013) and *Partnerships in Higher Education* (2014).

Each of these compilations has presented good practice in widening participation in higher education, with a particular focus on programs funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP).

KNOWING OUR STUDENTS: AN INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

Disadvantage comes in many forms, and barriers to further education can be multifaceted, complex and compounding. This collection of student stories is a reminder that intervention and support strategies must be flexible, targeted, responsive and timely, recognising students' unique circumstances.

"Partaking in the breadth of programs run by [the University of Sydney Widening Participation and Outreach] showed me how diverse and talented the students of metropolitan and regional NSW are, and how we, as university students and staff, can help make meaningful connections that will last a lifetime."
— Mitchell Ha

Evident from the early stages of developing the *Student Voice* series was that, commonly, these students did not consider themselves representatives of discrete equity groups. Rather, they were individuals in unique circumstances, doing whatever they needed to do to realise the best lives for themselves, their families, communities and peers.

In this respect, *My Story — Student Voice* recognises the nuances of student circumstances that may not entirely fit into the traditional equity student moulds of low socioeconomic status (low SES), students with disability, regional and remote students, Women in Non-Traditional Areas (WINTA), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Broader categories considered in this publication include online students; students who have disengaged and subsequently re-engaged with further education; mature age students; First-in-Family students; and care leavers, as well as those who have come full circle as mentors, ambassadors and tutors.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Student success is a complex concept, with many facets that cannot be captured by data alone. The life-changing effects of further education are well-documented on an individual level, including increased employment and earning potential; improved lifestyle and social mobility; and mental health and wellbeing.

Less measurable are personal triumphs which may sit outside traditional notions of academic success, and the benefits that spill over to family, friends, community and other students. For one *Student Voice* student, a fundamental achievement was having the courage to walk into an information session having been disconnected from education for many years.

Others felt their greatest successes were in personal development — finding resilience in the face of challenging circumstances (both personally and academically); self-confidence; and reinforcing strong beliefs, values and morals.

"I know I haven't reached my full potential as yet, and strive in my everyday life and studies to see what my real potential is. That is true success in my eyes."
— Jed Fraser

Many of these students have received awards for their academic excellence, but often they were more proud of awards that recognised their contributions to community and student equity.

"I value the recognition I have received from Griffith University and my employment as a mentor as one of most significant successes ..."
— Cassio Da Silva

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

These *Student Voice* stories also illustrate the "ripple effect" of higher education and the students' capacities to influence others as positive role models. Leading by example, these "pioneers" foster aspirations and provide guidance to those around them who may not otherwise have the information, experience or confidence to consider university as a viable option.

Many of these students are the first in their families (sometimes even schools) to pursue higher education. They are navigating unknown paths and breaking new ground for their families, peers and communities, and setting new benchmarks so that access to higher education starts to become the expectation rather than the exception.

"I think the community in Karratha is becoming more aware of university pathways, and I am seeing more and more students from the Pilbara continuing into tertiary education after high school. So, I wonder if stories like mine and my peers' have had a positive impact on the school students there."
— Arshya Pankaj

As the adage says, "You can't be what you can't see" — these individuals are modelling career and education success, giving form to the unfamiliar for those who follow in their footsteps.

"Knowing that my actions are helping our future generations motivates me ... My sisters are all talking about being teachers and it is nice to think that I have inspired them to better themselves. By working hard and gaining different promotions, I have shown my family that anything is possible."
— Ethan McIntosh

CHALLENGING THE DEFICIT DISCOURSE

An overwhelming sentiment expressed by these students is that of empowerment. Often coming from environments where their confidence, self-belief and perceived capabilities were diminished, they have had instilled in them a firm belief in their own potential.

"I no longer saw my disability as a disability. My unique way of thinking helped my writing in my creative writing courses and lab write-ups; my lack of filter put me on many panel discussions and in other speaking roles because of my honesty; and my bravery to tell people about my Autism drew people towards me."
— Jacinta Reynolds

University, family and peer supports have helped these students identify and embrace their unique strengths and attributes, while determination, resilience and perseverance—often borne from a struggle against adversity—has seen many of them exceed the achievements of their more advantaged peers.

This next "generation" of university students now see only potential in themselves and others, rather than deficit — an approach that could redefine the notion of disadvantage in the long term.

"My advice for others who come from backgrounds similar to my own is, don't be so hard on yourself, know you're not alone, and don't give up! If there's something you really want to do and you're passionate and you're invested, then think positively because you can achieve anything you want to."
— Joseph Farren

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

Increasingly, schools and universities are recognising the mutual benefits of engaging students as partners in the design and development of institution-wide policy and practice.

Preface (cont.)

This publication illustrates the value of listening to the "quiet" voice — recognising the diversity of the student body, identifying those perspectives that may be less prominent, and empowering a broad scope of individuals to provide input.

"I also realised after a semester with the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program that my skills in communication were far better than I thought, which gave me the confidence to speak up at the groups and talk to [the Program founders] about how we could improve the Program."
— Jacinta Reynolds

There may be the potential for equity students to be underestimated in their capabilities, both on an individual level, and in their ability to see a clear "world view". But this group of individuals articulate not only a high-level understanding of the educational and political landscape, but they apply their informed perspectives to visualise a more equitable system and proffer practical and insightful direction to achieve that vision.

"Even from the outside, it's obvious that widening participation and equity is continuing to grow to become part of the strategic objectives of Australian universities, encouraging us to exist not just as education providers, but as institutions for public good."
— Tahlia Danks

While it is important to quantify student outcomes, we must also recognise the gravity of student narratives.

It is on an individual level that we can learn more about the nuances of disadvantage, and the ways in which we can support students in realising their goals, whatever they may be.

INDIVIDUALS INFORMING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Keeping the "student voice" at the forefront of the student equity discussion is an important reminder that we are advocating for individuals with unique attributes, challenges and support requirements.

We have much to learn from individual narratives — insights that can inform and influence practitioners, policymakers and researchers. Beyond data collection and analysis, opportunities such as the NCSEHE WAHED Conference foster connections at the coalface of student equity. Immersing oneself in the personal circumstances of a student can create an indelible and enduring impression which may be more powerful than statistics alone.

Ultimately, there is no substitute for the lived experiences of students to inform policy, research and practice.

"From a policy perspective, I believe we need positive leaders to be voices for student opportunity. Support for flexible learning schools … and programs that introduce students to university, is crucial for wider community benefit; many students from disadvantaged backgrounds have skills and desires to help others who have come from similar backgrounds."
— Hannah Gandy

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Widening Participation programs have a practical role in providing guidance and support, but it is apparent that they also touch students profoundly in the long term. Students' emotional investments in these programs have led to sustained involvement through mentoring and roles as ambassadors, through to pursuing careers in student equity, widening participation, social justice and community engagement.

This student group commonly expressed a sense of ongoing reciprocity with the programs that supported them and, through these ongoing connections, they have found personal and professional fulfilment.

"I realised my In2Uni journey had come full circle when I returned to my former high school to deliver a three-hour session to Year 11 students … If even one student in that classroom I sat in five years ago decided to investigate further education after the session, I feel I've done my job."
— Damon Stevens

Looking beyond university, of particular note was regional and remote students' commitment to return to the country, which is encouraging in the face of concerns about "regional brain drain".

"I want to continue to work in regional Australia and rural communities in the hope that one day growing up in a regional area will not be considered a disadvantage and that there will be equal opportunities in both regional and metro areas."
— Ruby Walsh

PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

Sustained, targeted university outreach with multiple touch-points is demonstrably effective in fostering aspirations and promoting university enrolments among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of these students have preconceptions about university, and their capacity to "fit in," both academically and socially.

"To us, university was something that seemed only accessible to the wealthy or to those who lived within proximity to the Sydney CBD … almost all students, including myself, lacked guidance in our homes about university, being the first in our families to even have the opportunity to attend."
— Tahlia Danks

This publication is a reminder that Widening Participation programs not only encourage students into higher education, they also encourage them *back in*. A significant number of these students embarked on, or returned to, university as mature age students. In some cases, they credit the supports that weren't available the first time around for their subsequent success.

"I think being a mature age student, and having exposure to the workforce for so long, left me in a position of knowing what I wanted and staying very focused. I think people (women) like myself need so much encouragement to even take the plunge into uni."
— Karlie James

It is important, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, that the various options for university admission are clarified, and every opportunity is offered to facilitate their participation in higher education.

"Through telling my story to students, and collecting data at schools in Kalgoorlie and the Peel region, it became apparent that they were often overwhelmed by the pressure to achieve a high ATAR. They were inspired to learn that there are other pathways to achieving your goals if you persevere and are willing to put in the hard work, despite the obstacles you may face."
— Jonathan Sae Koew

Several of these students spoke positively about transitioning to university through enabling programs and alternative entry pathways.

"The best aspect of the University Connections Program was getting a head start on university learning and study skills. By the time I started my degree at the University of Tasmania, I already knew of the online learning platforms and the means of communication with lecturers and tutors. My involvement in the program certainly made the transition from college to university easier."
— Amber Scott

"I think that having TAFE and other pathways to university is really important for students like me because they provide a bridge between school and uni … At TAFE I learnt to become more independent in my studies and gained confidence in my own abilities."
— Joseph Farren

Beyond providing pathways into university, HEPPP-funded programs can benefit students throughout their educational journeys, and equip them with transferable skills and experience to take them forward into successful careers and further study.

"Through OnTrack, I discovered skills for learning and tailoring my education around my interests, building my confidence and teaching me the critical thinking and research skills that would be the foundations on which to build my knowledge. I'm learning so much and developing new skills which provide continued opportunities for personal growth, both mentally and academically."
— Jonathan Sae Koew

ABOUT THE HEPPP

While grit and determination has seen these individuals achieve their goals, many have also received valuable support from university-led HEPPP initiatives.

Since 2010, the Australian Government Department of Education has provided funding under the HEPPP with the aim of providing higher education opportunities to students from low SES and other disadvantaged backgrounds. Two principal areas of focus for the HEPPP are Participation and Partnerships.

The Participation component of the HEPPP provides funding to universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that support university participation, retention and success.

The Partnerships component supports university programs that raise aspirations and build student capacity to participate in higher education in collaboration with schools, vocational education and training (VET) providers, other universities, state and territory governments, community groups and other stakeholders.

In response to these objectives, 37 Australian universities have tailored equity programs to the needs of diverse communities and student cohorts, opening doors for so many who would not otherwise have had the means to pursue higher education.

"I would like to take some credit for my success; however, my achievements and overall enjoyment of the environment as a result of participating in HEPPP-funded programs has made a huge difference to my time at university. For this, I am grateful."
— Joseph Dawson

Tahlia Danks

Tahlia Danks grew up in a low socioeconomic area and was the first in her family to consider attending university. The University of Technology Sydney (UTS)'s U@Uni program provided the inspiration and opportunity for Tahlia to pursue her higher education dreams. Tahlia was inspired to support Widening Participation programs and went on to become an Equity Ambassador.

Now a graduate, Tahlia continues to realise her professional and personal goals, originally working in school outreach before moving into marketing at Charles Sturt University (CSU).

"I love learning, and as far back as I can remember, have always wanted to go to university. Of course, my love for learning was a huge motivator in me wanting to pursue higher education, but I'd be lying if I didn't mention that the main reason I wanted to go was to make my parents proud — to make the most of the opportunities they were never fortunate enough to receive. But it wasn't an easy road to get there.

I grew up in a troubled suburb in Sydney's south west, where I attended my local high school — a low socioeconomic status public school where almost 80 per cent of students came from non-English speaking backgrounds; many were refugees.

The school simply didn't have the resources to adequately invest in students who may have wished to pursue higher education, nor the capacity to run the Higher School Certificate (HSC) subjects required to meet basic university prerequisite or assumed knowledge entry requirements. Straight off the bat, and without any fault of our own, we were already at a disadvantage.

Students at my school were all deemed at-risk, yet had very little support. The lack of resources, coupled with the absence of an informative careers advisor, greatly affected the way we viewed higher education. To us, university was something that seemed only accessible to the wealthy or to those who lived within proximity to the Sydney CBD. This view was also exemplified by the fact that almost all students, including myself, lacked guidance in our homes about university, being the first in our families to even have the opportunity to attend.

I would like to note that many of us had a desire to pursue higher education, but a combination of the aforementioned reasons saw students who were more than capable of entering university and pursuing their dream jobs, fall through the cracks. As much as I would like to think it was my love for learning and determination to succeed that prevented me giving up on my dream to go to university, I actually owe my journey into university to the UTS U@Uni Schools Outreach Program.

To provide some background, U@Uni is a key component of the UTS Widening Participation Strategy (WPS) which, funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), is run by the Equity and Diversity Unit and is comprised of two main programs — the flagship Summer School program and the HSC Tutorial Scheme. At a basic level, these initiatives aim to build aspiration for tertiary study, support academic attainment, and widen the participation of underrepresented communities in higher education.

Attending the U@Uni Summer School changed my life. It provided me with the opportunity to experience life on campus for two weeks, attending intensive classes in a chosen faculty with students in similar situations to myself.

ABOUT U@UNI

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Widening Participation Strategy delivers a whole-of-university approach to increasing the number of students from underrepresented groups accessing and completing university study, in particular, students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students. The UTS U@Uni program is a key component of the strategy, focusing on outreach to schools and communities.

The program includes two-week summer schools and shorter workshops on campus; school-based tutorials delivered by UTS students; and teacher professional learning and networking. This integrated set of evidence-based activities aims to holistically and responsively address the needs of target students in their secondary school years. U@Uni aims to encourage student aspiration for university study and support academic achievement well before the point of enrolment.

The program works with, and through, its partners to improve students' academic preparedness and outcomes; increase awareness, confidence and motivation toward higher education; build teacher, school and community capacity; broaden students' family knowledge about higher education; and develop and sustain effective community and stakeholder partnerships.

More information on U@Uni is available here: https://www.uts.edu.au/partners-and-community/initiatives/social-justice-uts/centre-social-justice-and-inclusion

MENTOR/AMBASSADOR
LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS
FIRST-IN-FAMILY

It also allowed me to return for a range of follow-up workshops and events. Continuing throughout the rest of my schooling, these provided me with the information about higher education that I simply couldn't receive at school or home.

It was through these multiple touch points with the university that I saw higher education as a feasible part of my future, all the way from the end of Year 10 until university offers were released post-graduating Year 12. At that point, I was accepted into the Bachelor of Communication at UTS and engaged by the Equity and Diversity Unit as an Equity Ambassador.

My role as an Equity Ambassador provided me with the opportunity to network with other staff at the university, leading to employment opportunities within my chosen field, and ensured I had an income during my degree. More importantly, it gave me a chance to work on the very same programs that I had benefitted from, while maintaining my role in marketing.

I remember walking to my office a couple of years ago when a young man came up to me, gave me an all-encompassing hug, and exclaimed, 'I'm here — I made it! Thank you for everything, Miss! See you around!' Taken aback, I realised it was one of the students I had been tutoring via the HSC Tutorial Scheme throughout his senior schooling. I still remember the pained look in his eyes in our first session when I asked him what he wanted to do after school, and he answered, 'economics at university. But I'll never get in, so I'll work for Dad as a carpenter'. Yet here he was at Orientation Week.

Fast forward a few years and I have made the leap back into my area of training and expertise—marketing—after working in school outreach for CSU's HEPPP-funded program, Future Moves.

Although I have moved out of the HEPPP space, I am certainly proud to be a part of the CSU community, which has been making significant progress in lessening the location-based educational disadvantage that exists in regional and rural Australian communities for over 30 years.

Even from the outside, it's obvious that widening participation and equity is continuing to grow to become part of the strategic objectives of Australian universities, encouraging us to exist not just as education providers, but as institutions for public good."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-revisited-tahlia-danks/

Cassio Da Silva

MENTOR/AMBASSADOR
MATURE AGE

Cassio Da Silva is driven by a desire to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds and has become involved as a Griffith University tutor, mentor and ambassador.

Cassio was able to draw from his own life experiences to connect with a diverse group of individuals, from school students to mature learners.

"I kind of always thought I would go to university, but it was a matter of finding the right time and the right direction. There were no university outreach activities available when I was at high school in 2004. I had applied for some degrees and been accepted, but my heart wasn't in it; I think the only reason I applied was because I was getting pressure from my teachers.

I took on an apprenticeship in jewellery manufacture, but found myself thinking about university more as time went on. I guess I was after a challenge and I was missing math! Once I'd finished my apprenticeship, I worked for two years before travelling to America and Brazil. During this time, I saw a lot of poor people who probably would have liked to have gone to uni, but couldn't. Being an Australian, university is kind of a choice. I guess that was one of the big things that made me think I would be silly not to do so.

I wanted a career that would challenge me and I was always interested in how things work. I grew up on solar electricity and tank water, so had to be conscious of the power and water I was using. The idea of self-sufficiency and sustainability has been an interest of mine for a long time. Plus, the world is going through an energy crisis and I want to be part of the solution, or at least try to be. I also feel it's an industry with future job security. With a clear goal in mind, I undertook a Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) in Electronic and Energy at Griffith University, which would prepare me for a career in the field of manufacture, transport and storage of electricity, from a sustainable viewpoint. It was a four-year degree that I ultimately completed in less than five years, alongside part-time work.

By the time I returned to study, it had been over 10 years since I left school, and support through peer mentoring was a foundation for my academic success.

I found PASS incredibly helpful especially in first year with the transition into tertiary study. Having an environment where you could talk to past students helped with course content and understanding what was required to excel at university. We would talk about things they found hard, stuff to look out for, even tips on how certain lectures were assessed. The PASS Leaders also offered insights into life stuff related to uni, like accommodation and work and how they balanced all that along with study, it was really good.

When I first stumbled upon the Uni-Key program, I thought it would be a great way to get involved — helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially refugee and non-English speaking students. I have moved to other countries and travelled a fair bit and I know how hard it can be, and what a difference a single person can make. I wanted to make some more meaningful connections in my life and become part of the solution, giving back to the community.

> *"From my perspectives as a student and mentor, I feel it is important to make a conscious decision about what you want to do, then follow it through."*

> *"By the time I returned to study, it had been over 10 years since I left school and support through peer mentoring was a foundation for my academic success. I found PASS incredibly helpful especially in first year with the transition into tertiary study."*

Being older and more travelled than most of the other students means I see things differently and can use my life experiences to help others. I have worked as a tutor, mentor and Griffith ambassador, through programs including Uni-Reach; Adult Learner Outreach; Uni-Key; Griffith Mates; STEM Squad; and Launch into Life. I have also been working with the Griffith careers outreach team — my favourite program to date. School children from Years 8 to 10 take part in three different workshops, centred around future careers, job clusters and transferable skills.

Some of my favourite aspects have been those little moments when you can help someone realise, or even think about, something they can achieve which they hadn't before; engaging with students, staff and other mentors — we all have amazing stories; building my own confidence when dealing with groups of people; and making me more aware of the problems people face and how they can be helped, or like to be treated.

When I enrolled in uni, I didn't expect to get such high grades, so I was shocked to be awarded a place in Griffith Honours College for academic achievement, as well as a place in the Golden Key International Honour Society. I also value the recognition I have received from Griffith University and my employment as a mentor as one of most significant successes, along with making my first ever joke in Portuguese when I was learning the language!

At the end of 2018, I secured a part-time position with a company called SmartConsult and have recently signed a contract for a graduate role with UGL. After just under five years of university study, I plan to graduate in January 2020 and will start my new job three days later!

From my perspectives as a student and mentor, I feel it is important to make a conscious decision about what you want to do, then follow it through. Be persistent and don't doubt yourself; if you put in your best effort, you can achieve anything. My advice to other students is to keep in mind that academic staff aren't asking you to do things to make your life difficult, they are doing it so you can learn the skills you need for your subsequent profession. The more you do, the more you will know how to do, and the more choices you will have.

My life philosophy is, 'I want to have an interesting life, not necessarily a rich one'. Since my childhood days in Mullumbimby, I have been fortunate to have been given opportunities that will allow me to realise my personal goals."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/story-student-voice-cassio-da-silva/

Joseph Dawson

Joseph Dawson is in his second year of medicine at Deakin University, Waurn Ponds. He returned to successful study as a mature age student with the support of HEPPP-funded initiatives, to which he has given back his own skills and experience.

Joseph reflects back on his first enrolment into university, at which point, compounding barriers proved too much to overcome. Returning as a mature student, he was provided additional support through the FedReady program to find confidence and build networks which have seen him achieve great success.

"I was the first in my family to attend university. At first it went okay, but after the first semester my grades started to suffer. This wasn't through lack of trying, ability, or perseverance; I had no friends there and there wasn't an opportunity to meet people from my course. Without a social network or any skills to transition to higher education, my grades declined and I left. After working in various jobs until I was 32, I returned to study at Federation University. This required moving from Darwin, where I was living at the time, back to Gippsland where I grew up. Being a mature age student, I was worried about fitting in, making friends, and doing well. After all, I hadn't been to university for more than 10 years.

> *"FedReady was the first major turning point for me. It provided me with the study skills, time management, and computer skills I needed to do well at university.*

The FedReady program was the first major turning point for me. It provided me with the study skills, time management, and computer skills I needed to do well at university. Initially, I didn't feel it was necessary for me and, since I was driving from Darwin to Victoria, I tried to wriggle out of it. My tutor advised me it would be beneficial to complete, and I reluctantly wrote the essay which was a program requirement.

It might seem like a small thing; however, like making your bed in the morning, it set the standard for the rest of my course.

I vividly remember orientation day at university. I felt out of place, at least until I met my mentor. They reassured me that I would be okay, and they were there to answer any questions. I also had the opportunity to meet some students from my course and make valuable friends, which was a huge benefit on many levels. For example, if there were instructions I missed, or wasn't sure of, I could check with them, and vice versa. The mentor provided a contact point, and often simply someone to say 'Hi' to each day. This created a smooth transition and a sense of belonging that I had lacked the first time around.

The availability of learning skills advisors (LSAs) at university has helped me. I found that, when I began to procrastinate, just 10 minutes with an LSA gave me the tools and motivation to click into gear and keep on the track to completion. The maths and statistics drop-in centre has also been of assistance to me during my third year research project. Having that guidance is valuable in providing simple advice or a point in the right direction.

ABOUT FEDREADY

Federation University's FedReady program is a short, non-award course to help students develop the academic skills they need to get started at university.

FedReady covers a range of topics, from time management to writing and submitting assessment tasks. While not formally assessed, students have the opportunity to get individual feedback on their current skills and be given strategies for how to improve academic skills based on their specific needs.

FedReady is also a great way for continuing students to brush up on or polish their academic skills, get organised, and get back into studying before the semester officially commences. FedReady is a completely free course, open to all students enrolled in a higher education degree at Federation University.

The FedReady program is delivered both online and through face-to-face delivery. Topics covered include:

- preparing and writing assignments
- using and citing references
- understanding the University library
- using the University computers and Moodle (the Learning Management System)
- managing your study load and other commitments
- how to think critically.

More information on FedReady is available here: https://federation.edu.au/current-students/learning-and-study/get-help-on-campus/fedready

I participated in the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program during weeks that I had difficulty with content.

During the first semester, I utilised the CheckMate service provided by YourTutor which offered general feedback on assignments and essay structure, allowing me to move forward with confidence and focus on the finer details.

I was also fortunate to receive a book bursary for the textbooks I required which would have otherwise caused financial strain. The bursary also showed me that the university cares about the welfare of students and their outcomes.

During my third year, I worked in some of the HEPPP-funded initiatives, such as mentoring, PASS, and the Academic Skills and Knowledge (ASK) service. This employment allowed me to continue at university with the funds to succeed, and to see first-hand the difference the programs make to students' outcomes.

In my time at Federation University, I was lucky enough to be awarded membership to Golden Key, Academic Excellence 1st Year Biomedical Science, W&D Finance Biomedical Science Prize (Albert Coates Award) and the Clarence Claude Fisher Scholarship. I maintained a high Grade Point Average and scored in the top 10 per cent of the Graduate Medical Schools Admission Test.

I would like to take some credit for my success; however, my achievements and overall enjoyment of the environment as a result of participating in HEPPP-funded programs has made a huge difference to my time at university.

For this, I am grateful."

REGIONAL/REMOTE
FIRST-IN-FAMILY
MATURE AGE
RE-ENGAGING WITH HIGHER EDUCATION
MENTOR/AMBASSADOR

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/story-student-voice-joseph-dawson/

Donna Douvartzidis

The pathway through higher education for Donna Douvartzidis has been challenging, but has delivered personal rewards beyond her wildest dreams. The mother-of-three embarked on a journey of academic and personal growth at the University of South Australia (UniSA) as a mature student, with the support of UniSA College.

"I grew up in the Barossa Valley which, upon reflection, was the soil that grounded me for all of my future experiences. No one in my entire extended family had been to university; it was not even discussed as an option in my home. I aspired to be a legal secretary as this seemed so prestigious to me. I loved legal studies in Year 12 and I also chose accounting, typing and stenography (yes, that was a final year subject back in the late 80s) combined with home economics as my final year subjects.

I gained employment straight after Year 12 as a legal secretary and worked in various legal establishments in Adelaide over the following 10 years. I married and had three children. By the time the last of them had settled into primary school, I felt ready to return to the workforce, but didn't know where to start.

After spotting an advertisement for Foundation Studies with UniSA, I hesitantly and excitedly attended the information session. I clearly recall walking into my first ever lecture theatre. The excitement rising within me was intense. Afterwards, I left that theatre knowing that, although I had not studied in over 20 years, I was going to give this a go. I enrolled as a mature age student and, nearly 12 months later, my mid 90s TER was published in the newspaper alongside my stepdaughter's. I was accepted into the program and I excelled, receiving an average of High Distinctions. I had never been so proud of myself.

I went in to UniSA College thinking it was psychology I needed to study. However, after being exposed to political and sociological subjects, the concept of globalisation and everything that flowed from that, and with amazing guidance from a lecturer, I realised that I would much prefer to be effecting change, rather than listening to the effects of societal issues from a counselling perspective. I was accepted into a double degree in international relations and journalism in the Education, Arts and Social Sciences Division. I have always loved writing, so learning about global politics, while gaining knowledge on how to share that information, seemed like the most logical choice.

I honourably graduated in 2016 with two bachelor degrees, having majored in peace and security, studied Spanish as my language choice and completed a year of psychology as my elective.

The opportunities that university presented to me were beyond my wildest dreams. As an international relations student, I was both offered—and expected to undertake—overseas placements, whether that be to study or to volunteer. I have been blessed with scholarships, study grants, and the support of my husband who looked after our children while I was away. First I went to Prague, capital of the Czech Republic to undertake a foreign correspondent course with Transitions Online (TOL), where I researched human trafficking of women. I worked alongside BBC reporters and other highly respected journalists from various genres, and carried out my first recorded interviews.

Not long after I returned from that life-changing month in Europe, I headed to Java, Indonesia where I studied intercultural communication at the University of Islam in Yogyakarta with a Global Experience UniSA group.

ABOUT UNISA COLLEGE

UniSA College offers alternative pathways to accessing undergraduate study at UniSA. In doing so, the College provides opportunities to students from all walks of life who may not have completed high school, been away from formal education for extended periods of time, or have previously had poor experiences with formal education. The programs at the College have little to no entry requirements and successful completion gives students access to over 200 degrees offered at UniSA.

The College is proud of its inclusive and equitable approach to learning, in a supportive environment. During their time at the College, students acquire the academic skills and prerequisite knowledge they will use as they transition into undergraduate study. Importantly, students experience life as a UniSA student; studying on campus in lectures and tutorials and accessing the full range of support services and extracurricular experiences.

The Foundation Studies and Diploma programs share a common first year designed to prepare students for university. Diploma students experience additional support from the College in their first year of the degree. Additionally, the Aboriginal Pathway Program (APP) is open to all students who identify as Aboriginal. Furthermore, the APP is offered in regional and remote centres of South Australia and offers accommodation and travel support for those commuting larger distances.

More information on UniSA College is available here: https://study.unisa.edu.au/unisa-college/

FIRST-IN-FAMILY
MATURE AGE
MENTOR/AMBASSADOR

A year later, I headed to Nepal for a month, working on a health and hygiene program, in the Chitwan District, alongside a group of Adelaide University medical students. As if these experiences weren't enough, I was still to undertake the longest trip yet — four months in South America, representing the university internationally through the Hawke Ambassador Program! I had seen this program in one of the early information sessions at UniSA College, and had said to myself that I too would be a Hawke Ambassador... and so it was.

Although leaving my children with their father for over three months was a difficult decision, I believe what they have seen me achieve and experience far outweighs the times I needed to be away, and the times I wasn't as available as I had been.

I signed up for Projects Abroad's 12-week Law and Human Rights program, working with the homeless, including a project where I collaborated with businesses in Cordoba to create job opportunities for those unable to find work unassisted.

I worked with girls in a correctional facility, and girls in a home where they had been removed from their families due to sexual violence. I dabbled in radio and on a project re-integrating boys who had been incarcerated, back into society. I began initial research on a human rights monitoring project and prepared a precedent presentation for those with academic background to continue my work.

Whilst at UniSA College, I was elected student representative on the Academic Board. I was a UniLife Student Voice representative and I remained a Student Mentor at the College during my undergraduate years. I also sat on a panel as a high-achieving student, giving advice to newcomers to the College.

In 2019, I launched The Ethical Road — immersive international travel for women! This business draws upon my journalism and international relations degrees, bringing together women from diverse cultures to share and learn from one another. Participants engage with locals, including women in politics; women at university; and those with limited access to education. We explore each country looking at faith, culture and language, food and environmental sustainability, and human rights.

I believe intercultural communication is a key to positive global change and I am so proud to have designed immersions that facilitate a space for this process to take place organically."

Image © Andrew Beveridge

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-donna-douvartzidis/

Image © Erin Hartwig

Joseph Farren

Joseph Farren is building upon his personal experiences in the child protection system to improve the lives of other young people. After transitioning from TAFE to La Trobe University, Joseph is now studying a Bachelor of Human Services and Masters of Social Work, in the hopes of becoming a qualified youth/social worker.

"I left home and went into care at the age of 13. At first, I was placed with extended family members, but this broke down and I was forced to live in residential care. Nine years on, I am now studying a Bachelor of Human Services and Masters of Social Work at La Trobe University, and hope to become a qualified youth/social worker.

Looking back, I can see that my time in out-of-home care had a significant impact on my schooling. Some of the places I lived were out of town, so I had to organise transport, including buses or lifts. This was stressful and overwhelming and affected the amount of time I was at school and able to study. I was also rebellious and often caused trouble by riling up teachers — my way of getting attention because of my living situation. So, I didn't learn as much at school as I should have.

I've had people throughout my time in care supporting me and making a difference in my life in many ways. The case managers I had during my time in care, and the effort and commitment they made to ensure I had all the essentials I needed, were important. In saying this, I often felt as though I was on my own in learning how to deal with situations that were happening, especially once I had transitioned out of care and didn't have support or anyone to lean on — by that stage, I was considered an 'adult'. In retrospect, I think that child protection workers could do more during the initial stages, when a young person is first taken into care to make sure they understand what's happening, and at every step of the way to ensure that they are making the best decisions that are going to help them for when they leave care, once they turn 18.

The case workers, case managers, as well as other support workers (disability support workers, occupational therapists, etc.) helped me in many ways, but one of the things they did was encourage me to go on to further study. I had many people tell me I had the potential to go on and study youth work or social work, and that working within the system I could potentially change someone's life. I have a lot of compassion and empathy for others and a drive to improve the lives of young people. I thought, 'this is something that I'm really passionate about, it's my life story, so why not pursue it?'

During Year 12, I completed a Certificate II in Community Services, then went on to Certificate III, Certificate IV and a Diploma of Community Services at TAFE. The more I studied and the more I learnt, the more invested I became, so I applied to La Trobe University and was offered a place in the second year of a Bachelor of Human Services and Master of Social Work.

When I turned 18, I was officially considered an adult. I transitioned into independent accommodation and all support from my case worker ceased immediately. I didn't have the basic skills to live fully independently at this time, but I had no choice in the matter. I had to suck it up and deal with it.

I'm now living on campus at La Trobe and the manager of the residential accommodation services helps me a lot with ensuring I pay my rent on time and also assists me when I'm struggling to make the payments.

ABOUT RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Care leavers are people who spent time in formal out-of-home care before the age of 18 and have subsequently transitioned out of the system. La Trobe University encourages care leavers and young people still in out-of-home care to apply for university.

Since 2015, La Trobe University has been part of the Raising Expectations project. Originally funded by a Sidney Myer Fund Grant (2015–18), the Raising Expectations project is funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training until December 2022. The project aims to increase the number of young people in care and care leavers accessing higher education and succeeding. Led by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW), partner universities on the project include La Trobe University, Federation University Australia and Swinburne University.

La Trobe University's efforts on the project are led by Associate Professor Andrew Harvey, Director of CHEEDR, and include improving data capture on care leavers at the point of application and enrolment; increasing outreach to flexible learning schools and care(r) organisations; improving support for enrolled care leavers through the provision of bursaries and scholarships; raising awareness of the specific needs of care leavers as an equity group through the development and distribution of guidelines for university staff; and influencing institutional, state and national research and policy agendas.

More information on Raising Expectations is available here: https://www.latrobe.edu.au/cheedr/care-leavers

CARE LEAVER
LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

During my time at La Trobe University, I have received a $500 Care Leaver Bursary which has really helped me with purchasing some of the equipment I need to study. I have access to a support worker on campus who helps me to organise my work and study. Other university services I've accessed include the counselling service; I know that I can go and speak to the counsellor and leave there with a clear mind and several strategies for managing my self-doubt, stress and issues with confrontation. There are also peer support learning advisers who I can go and see outside of class who can give me guidance with my studies and completing assessments. There is lots of support available at university but it is up to you to access it.

I think that having TAFE and other pathways to university is really important for students like me because they provide a bridge between school and uni. At TAFE I learnt to become more independent in my studies and gained confidence in my own abilities. At school you are quite supported, and someone will follow up with you if you are falling behind or not doing the work. This happens less at TAFE, whereas at uni you need to be very self-motivated. If you don't show up to a class, that's on you. If you don't do the readings, that's on you.

The main quality I think I have gained from my time in the child protection system is resilience. Lots of resilience. I'm also learning to deal with conflict, which has been a challenge for me in the past. I don't like being told what to do, which sometimes happens in life and at TAFE and at uni. I've been lucky in that I have had many case workers and support workers model ways of managing conflict. I've learnt that it's often best to take a step back and realise that what is happening has very little to do with me, that it's not my issue but their issue, and that I don't need to take their issues on board.

My advice for others who come from backgrounds similar to my own is, don't be so hard on yourself, know you're not alone, and don't give up! If there's something you really want to do and you're passionate and you're invested then think positively because you can achieve anything you want to. And if there is an issue and you are struggling or have concerns then raise them early. It might seem hard to talk to people about your problems, but you need to find people you can trust, who can help you talk through your concerns. This might be a counsellor or a friend, a teacher or a housemate. Talking to people will help you clear your head and get a fresh perspective so that you're able to go and do what needs to be done."

Image © Erin Hartwig

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-joseph-farren/

Image © Aaron S. Veryard

Jed Fraser

Jed Fraser is a proud Bidjara and Mandandanji man. He is currently studying a Masters of Public Health at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) while working as a research officer at Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC).

Jed is passionate about supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to reach their potential, with a particular focus on career pathways and Indigenous health.

"I am a proud Aboriginal man coming from the Bidjara and Mandandanji clans from South West Queensland. I am very passionate about supporting Indigenous education and health, and as an Indigenous person who was lucky to go to a good school and that had a different pathway into university, I feel I am obligated to do my part for my people. If I can help one kid get to tertiary education and inspire, then I can live happy.

I am currently studying a Masters of Public Health at QUT after graduating from a Bachelor of Exercise and Movement Science and I work as a research officer at Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC). I have been fortunate to have previously been a Student Representative Committee (SRC) member for Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA); Indigenous Officer for the QUT Student Guild; Explore Uni Ambassador; Oodgeroo Unit Ambassador; Indigiso (Indigenous student society) co-founder and former President; World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) presenter; Union of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students representative and Beyond the Broncos mentor. These opportunities were extremely rewarding for me, as I could grow as a leader and to give back to my community is extremely fulfilling.

> *"I want to continue helping my young people, as they are the future for our communities.*

I went to high school in Yatala, Queensland, studying prevocational maths, English communication, physical education, hospitality, and technology studies in my senior years, as well as doing a school-based apprenticeship as a chef. I enjoyed physical education and hospitality, as well as playing sports and the social aspect of seeing my friends, but really struggled with motivation. As I was undertaking an apprenticeship, I didn't feel I needed to go to school or complete my assessments. Luckily, I had two teachers and my parents who really helped me; plus, Mum and Dad made me stay at school.

After I graduated, I quit my chef apprenticeship as it wasn't the career path that I wanted to stay with. I went to Brisbane TAFE in 2014, studying a Certificate IV in Fitness and a Diploma in Sport Development, but midway through 2014, I started to aspire to go to university.

I remember talking to one of my old teachers from school (as I worked at the school as a sports coach) about what I would do once I finished my diploma. He was encouraging me to go to university. At the time, I didn't feel I was smart enough and that university wasn't realistic, but he told me that I could do it, and that I am smart. Having someone tell me this really motivated and reassured me. At the time, I wanted to be a secondary physical education teacher; therefore I needed to go to university. However, my career aspirations have, and continue to, change.

ABOUT EXPLORE UNI

Explore Uni (EU) is QUT's signature Widening Participation program. It is a scaffolded strengths-based program of residential camps and on-campus days immersing school students from low SES backgrounds in experiences that aim to build aspiration for post-school study; shatter myths about tertiary education; and boost students' confidence.

Key elements include tertiary student ambassadors, embedded career development, and dynamic discipline-related workshops which bring future opportunities to life. Student role models from low SES backgrounds use prevalent myths about tertiary education to frame their personal "success" stories.

Many students from low SES backgrounds face barriers to tertiary participation due to the effects of intergenerational poverty and racism. Developing awareness and interest in the opportunities provided by tertiary study is a journey, not a single revelatory experience, and involves issues of identity and imagination, not just information. This is why EU, offered to schools with low rates of progression to tertiary education, systematically addresses five conditions which must all be met before low SES students enter tertiary education: awareness; aspiration; achievement; affordability; and access. The program is designed so students experience gradual growth in awareness, aspiration and capability through multiple engagements over time.

More information on Explore Uni is available here: www.qut.edu.au/about/equity/widening-participation

I first became aware of the HEPPP-funded programs available to assist students through the Explore Uni program and through the Oodgeroo Unit at QUT. One of the main strengths of Explore Uni, in my view, is its holistic approach; the program gives students a well-rounded view of the importance of education. I also think having actual university students running the program who can connect with the younger students is another strength.

The most important personal skill, I believe, is being able to relate to students. If you cannot connect on a personal level, they can easily lose attention, but if you can make that connection, you can inspire them. I was fortunate enough to work as the Widening Participation Support Officer for six months where I got to see the other side of planning programs and being a role model for the student ambassadors.

My advice to other students in pursuit of success would be to get involved with extra activities whilst at school or in higher education. The opportunities out there are endless — you've just got to put your hand up and say 'yes'.

My most significant successes so far would have to be being an SRC for Indigenous Allied Health Australia; having the opportunity to present at the WIPCE in Toronto 2017; graduating my bachelor degree in 2018; and being the recipient of the 2018 QUT Alumni Special Excellence Leadership Award for my work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in education and health. However, real success in my eyes is reaching your potential.

In 2019, I was part of a new program that was launched called Pass the Yarn, QUT partnered with Brisbane Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service (ATSICHS) where we had 30 young Indigenous students. This program focused on career pathways and Indigenous health which meant a lot to me, particularly being the lead for the program. The students got so much out of the program and it was really inspiring seeing these students grow over the program. I want to continue helping my young people, as they are the future for our communities.

I know I haven't reached my potential as yet, and strive in my everyday life and studies to see what my real potential is. That is true success in my eyes."

Image © Erika Fish

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-jed-fraser/

Hannah Gandy

Arts/law student Hannah Gandy has been widely commended for academic and personal achievements unprecedented among her peers, and for her commitment to helping students who are facing challenging circumstances.

Despite having fallen a long way behind in high school, Hannah was supported by The Pavilion School and La Trobe University and is now inspiring others to engage with higher education and to strive for their goals.

"I was the first ever student to graduate from my high school with a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Now in my fourth year of Law/Arts at La Trobe University, it's so rewarding to see how my positive influence has inspired self-belief in other students from similar backgrounds to my own.

I'm committed to helping young people engage with higher education and showing them that it doesn't matter what background you come from, if you have suffered disadvantage or gone to a school that is not seen as prestigious. What matters is that you dedicate yourself in contributing to the things you are passionate about.

I grew up in Melbourne, attending three high schools before I was enrolled at The Pavilion School in Preston, which caters for students who have been disengaged or excluded from mainstream education. Whilst completing Years 11 and 12, I was attending both The Pavilion School and the Distance Education Centre Victoria.

I missed a lot of high school between Years 7 and 10. When I got to Year 11 (of my VCE), I had fallen so far behind and had to study a lot more than other students to catch up. But, with the guidance of my teachers, I completed a range of Year 11 and 12 subjects including mathematics, music style and composition, automotive, health and human development, and legal studies.

I was also given the opportunity to study two university-level law subjects at La Trobe University through the VCE PLUS program. I valued the supportive environment through VCE PLUS and really felt like I was working towards something. As a result, I realised I wanted to go to university and, due to my marks in the program, I obtained an offer for my chosen degree prior to completing Year 12.

I was made aware of the Aspire program by The Pavilion School's career's counsellor, Andrew Zarafa. He worked very closely with all of the students and knew about the positive things I was doing for my school, such as running peer support programs and taking the role of School Captain. He helped by explaining the program and the best pathways into university for me.

My ATAR did not meet the Clearly-in for La Trobe University's law program, but I have still maintained a High Distinction grade average and continued to benefit people through my work internal and external to the university. It's important to provide people who want to make a change the avenues to do so, and Aspire has really helped me to do that.

I also think programs like Aspire are extremely beneficial for the community as a whole. They recognise that although someone might fall below a specific number in obtaining their ATAR, they may have the drive to make a really big impact in their community.

ABOUT LA TROBE ASPIRE

La Trobe University's Aspire Early Admissions Program rewards community involvement, leadership and volunteering with an early conditional offer into their chosen course at the University.

The program is open to applicants from Year 12 onward.

Participants also receive exclusive benefits designed to nurture their skills and give them the support they need to succeed at La Trobe and beyond.

These benefits include:

- induction into the Enrichment Program to prepare students for university
- the chance to receive one of 40 scholarships for high-achieving Aspire students
- exclusive access to La Trobe events like Ideas and Society and Bold Thinking
- discounts to the National Gallery of Victoria
- leadership opportunities, career development, networking and industry mentoring
- a taste of university life at La Trobe with special on-campus events before the year begins
- the opportunity to co-design solutions to the world's wicked problems with peers and leading academics
- the chance to meet and connect with like-minded students who share similar goals and passions
- access to library and campus resources
- support for exams with VCE revision lectures.

More information on La Trobe Aspire is available here: https://www.latrobe.edu.au/study/aspire/about-aspire

I have also had support from the La Trobe Hallmark Program—through which I have conducted studies at local flexible learning schools on the re-engagement strategies and their impact on students from disadvantaged cohorts—and the Elite Athlete program. I am currently ranked second in Australian women's freestyle slalom and will be representing Australia at the World Roller Games in Barcelona.

Giving back to my community is important to me; I have worked with a range of schools and young people through La Trobe's School Partnership Program, worked with youth through Banyule Council, and a range of other programs.

Among my most significant achievements was receiving the Order of Australia Foundation Scholarship, which helped me to recognise I was having a positive impact on my community. It's also been important to me that I take time for myself to do other things such as sporting activities, involving young people by teaching classes, and further networking.

From a policy perspective, I believe we need positive leaders to be voices for student opportunity. Support for flexible learning schools such as The Pavilion School and programs that introduce students to university is crucial for wider community benefit; many students from disadvantaged backgrounds have skills and desires to help others who have come from similar backgrounds.

I also think more support and participation programs could be targeted towards flexible learning schools with disadvantaged cohorts. La Trobe's School Partnerships Program does so, but I would like to see extended programs running over a series of weeks that introduce students to different areas of study at university and TAFE.

It's so heart-warming to see that I have been a positive role model and have helped influence a lot of students. I remember being on a school camp with The Pavilion School and we were playing a word game with cards. A student was asked what inspired her in her career and life goals and she said me (and then I cried!). Another example was a student that I used to get the bus with. He would always tell me that he never wanted to do anything, and I could tell that he was struggling to believe in himself. Before I left the school, he was asked a question in a media interview and he said, 'I could do anything now, I could even be a lawyer'. He always thought I wanted to be a lawyer and I knew then that I had been a positive role model for him.

Right now, I'm not 100 per cent sure on what my 'job' will be; I'm really open to doing a range of things that help young people. I'm just continuing to focus on doing the most I can in the moment and taking opportunities that I think will have the best impact."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-hannah-gandy/

Mitchell Ha

Mitchell Ha is a Vietnamese-Australian graduate of the University of Sydney, and is now teaching English at Macarthur Girls High School in New South Wales.

Mitchell's family came to Australia as refugees, and was the primary translator for his family since his childhood. Despite the barriers to his further education, Mitchell found strength in his parents' determination and resilience. Through the financial, educational and social support of The Smith Family, Mitchell was able to overcome those barriers and achieve his goals.

"My parents came from Vietnam and arrived in Australia as refugees during the Vietnam War. They settled in South-Western Sydney in the suburb of Cabramatta, but due to pressures and problems within their early years in Australia, they separated. My mother was left to raise my two sisters and I by herself.

Growing up in a household where my mother was illiterate, I became the primary translator for my family at quite a young age, which was daunting.

I am grateful for the opportunities that were made available by educational charities such as The Smith Family. They made contact with my mother when I was in Year 3, at which time I began my educational journey as a Learning for Life student.

> *A defining point for me was a Smith Family university exploration trip. My eyes were opened to a whole new community ...*

Through the support of The Smith Family, I had access to reading programs such as student2student which fostered my engagement with literacy through a mentor reading system.

A defining point for me was participating in a Smith Family university exploration trip. My eyes were opened to a whole new community — people who carried themselves in a different way; people who were very confident. I wanted to become like that.

In my community, university was not something we were familiar with; it wasn't expected for us to pursue higher education. With no family networks to help navigate this new world, the journey to university was difficult. I had to trust myself and seek those who shared my passion for education.

My engagement with the Widening Participation and Outreach (WPO) team began in my first year at the University of Sydney (USYD) where I volunteered at schools, such as Fairfield High School, as a literacy mentor. I worked with students from refugee backgrounds to improve their reading through a tailor-made literacy remedial program.

This volunteering experience reinforced to me that my educational journey did not stop simply by reaching my goal of attending university. Through the ongoing support of people such as The Smith Family, as well as my community, I wanted to give back and spread the message of education as a pathway to reaching your goals.

Partaking in the breadth of programs run by WPO showed me how diverse and talented the students of metropolitan and regional NSW are and how we, as university students and staff, can help make meaningful connections that will last a lifetime.

ABOUT USYD WIDENING PARTICIPATION & OUTREACH

The University of Sydney (USYD) Widening Participation and Outreach (WPO) works with students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds to encourage participation in higher education.

USYD WPO offer an extensive pre-tertiary educational outreach program to build academic and cultural capacity, and advocate for more inclusive equity related policy, admissions pathways and inclusive practices that helpfully support increased higher education access for students, schools and communities.

WPO has established partnerships to extend and sustain reach and engagement with students, schools and their families. Partners include Western Sydney University; libraries; schools; educational programs and workshops; and three community groups — The Smith Family, Education and Training Out West, and the Country Education Foundation.

WPO also works with stakeholders to inform and promote equity research, and advocate for more inclusive policies, pathways and practices at USYD and through broader sector-wide engagement and collaboration. This has led to the development and direction of a Widening Participation Strategy and Access and Participation Plan for USYD.

More information on USYD WPO is available here: https://sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/diversity/widening-access-to-university.html

NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND
LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS
FIRST-IN-FAMILY
MENTOR/AMBASSADOR

> *I believe it's important that students understand it's alright not to know what you want to do and it's alright to make mistakes.*

Working as a student leader has been a privilege and an honour — meeting the most passionate, enthusiastic and engaged students who are driven to shape Australia's future for the better. Some highlights have included tutoring Advanced English for students doing their HSC exams in a one-day program called HSCram, and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at our annual week-long Wingara Mura — Bunga Barrabugu programs. I couldn't be happier to engage with these students, to share my personal experiences, and to show them they are not defined by their circumstances.

I am now teaching at Macarthur Girls High School in Parramatta. Each day is honestly better than the last, and I'm so happy to be doing something that I love and continuing my own personal mission to promote education.

I believe our past is important—what you go through in your life can affect you—but ultimately it comes down to you as a person. What do you want to become? What do you want to achieve in this world?

I realise now that the values my parents instilled in me—determination, working hard and being passionate about what you do—are the skills that guided me through university and beyond."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-mitchell-ha/

Karlie James

MATURE AGE
INDIGENOUS
WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL AREAS
ONLINE

Karlie James has had an enduring dream to study medicine; one that has not been shaken despite considerable setbacks.

When her young son fell ill, Karlie's career path took on a new significance, and she continues to strive for a future that will benefit herself and her family.

"My name is Karlie and I am a proud YortaYorta, GunaiKurnai and Kuku Djungan woman. I grew up in a small town called Katherine in the Northern Territory. My parents met there, but both my maternal and paternal origins are in Victoria, Queensland and the Torres Strait Islands.

I spent many years contemplating university study after leaving halfway through Year 12 to help my family. During high school, I enjoyed science subjects and chose these as my core electives including physics, chemistry and biology. I grew a passion for living science and considered studying health science or medicine. When I approached the school careers advisor to help with a pathway, I was instantly told to aim for something 'more achievable' and that I would not get into such a hard degree.

This was one of many experiences growing up and being told that, basically, I was never good enough. I remember feeling so upset. It was in an era with an emerging multicultural population in the Territory and students would interact, but some teachers made unfounded judgements about my capabilities, and their derogatory comments left an indelible mark.

After leaving school, I felt deflated and wished I had an opportunity to study; I felt my life plans were no longer aligned because I didn't finish high school. Instead of further education, I got a full-time job. I became a solo homeowner at 21, and a single mother at 22. My new focus was on my son and his future. I worked in various government positions gaining qualifications, but I still had a strong desire to go to university. I always kept my childhood dream of studying medicine in the back of my mind.

I met someone when my son turned two, and spent almost a decade being a full-time working mother and having three more children. Whilst on maternity leave after the birth of my third son Jacob, I decided to try and enrol into a degree. I used a Certificate IV qualification and was accepted into a Bachelor of Science, with a Major in Biomedicine through Charles Darwin University. I had just turned 30, and really wanted to study 'before it was too late', so I enrolled as a full-time external student.

> *I think people (women) like myself need so much encouragement to even take the plunge into uni.*

At that point, I was at home with a two-year-old and a newborn, with my seven-year-old at school. Money was tight, but I picked up second-hand furniture and set up a study space to use during the baby's nap times. I did around 85 per cent of my study at night. I would even study for exams at playgroup and use playtime with the kids to teach them about various anatomy, which I secretly did for my own learning. I incorporated study into the daily routine as much as I could with my children, and they enjoyed their mum teaching them new things. We even had a classroom-sized whiteboard in our dining area.

> *I feel compelled to share my story in the hope that it can inspire other people, especially Indigenous women, that anything is possible and to never give up on a dream.*

I received a cadetship from the Northern Territory Government Department of Health during my second year. Overall, it was an exciting, yet daunting, time and being an external student in a science degree was tough. Online resources and lab simulations were great, but attending block lab practicals meant I needed to travel to university with my family. Despite the challenges, I excelled and completed my first two years of university.

We had relocated to Katherine—my hometown—and it was with a newfound confidence that I applied through Flinders University to study medicine. Two months after applying, our whole lives took a different turn.

In February 2017, my youngest son who had turned two by then, fell ill. When I took him to the hospital, we found out that he had acute lymphoblastic leukemia. We were required to immediately relocate to Adelaide for life-saving cancer treatment.

The first few weeks were a blur whilst my son underwent diagnosis and intensive chemotherapy. He had the less common T-cell subtype which required longer treatment. We stayed at Ronald MacDonald house and met so many families going through serious childhood illness. It was life-changing and the most difficult time of our lives.

I continued to study to keep my mind busy and learn more about the body, especially blood cells and biological testing. The university were very supportive when I explained my situation.

We spent 15 months in Adelaide with my son while he went through the gruelling intensive treatment. During this period, I managed to successfully complete my degree and get accepted into the Doctor of Medicine.

We relocated back to Darwin in May 2018, and I graduated (heavily pregnant) with a Bachelor of Science. I deferred from study to relocate and give birth to my fourth child—another son—in June 2018.

Jacob is still in treatment, and has completed over two and a half years of a three and a half-year protocol. He is in long-term maintenance and requires regular chemotherapy, but is well enough to go to school, and we have tried to make his life as normal as possible. He still requires trips to Adelaide for treatment, and monthly IV treatment in Darwin.

In February 2019, I began the Doctor of Medicine. I am now halfway through my first year and enjoying the course.

I think being a mature age student, and having exposure to the workforce for so long, left me in a position of knowing what I wanted and staying very focused. I think people (women) like myself need so much encouragement to even take the plunge into uni.

I am a different person since tertiary education. It has been life-changing and has given me a new perspective on everything. Even more so when Jacob became sick while I was studying. I have so many pics of him on my laptop pretending to do assignments. He says to me (in his little voice) 'You're going to uni hey mum, so you can become a doctor and help people like the doctors help me?' The first time he said that to me, while I was driving, I burst into tears.

I reflect on the past three years and feel much gratitude — foremost that my son is responding well to treatment, and also that I am making my dreams to study a reality. I feel compelled to share my story in the hope that it can inspire other people, especially Indigenous women, that anything is possible and to never give up on a dream."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-karlie-james/

Ethan McIntosh

INDIGENOUS
REGIONAL/REMOTE
FIRST-IN-FAMILY
MENTOR/AMBASSADOR

Having worked tirelessly throughout Years 11 and 12 only to miss out on his dream of studying architecture, Ethan McIntosh embraced new opportunities and devoted his efforts to teaching. Since graduating from Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Ethan has found his calling in regional and remote education and working with Indigenous students.

"My life began in Toowoomba; however, I moved with my mother to Maryborough in Grade 2 after my parents separated. I know very little about my birth dad and his family. For a while it was just mum and I, this was until she was fortune enough to meet the man who has been a father to me. They married shortly after, and I now have three beautiful sisters.

At school, I enjoyed any class that I could use my hands or move — health and physical education, manual arts, graphics, and design technology were my favourites. I also enjoyed maths and science. I wasn't great at English because there was no formula to follow (I still don't enjoy English but find I am better at teaching it because it is the lesson I place the most effort on, because I know it is not my strongest area).

I worked almost full-time in Years 11 and 12, doing night fill for a supermarket. I would begin work around five and finish close to midnight, so I would often sleep a lot in class. I chose to do so in lessons like graphics and science, which I was good at and knew I could pass regardless.

I was lucky to have teachers who understood this. I used the money I earnt to buy a car, school supplies and lunches, to have financial independence and to help my parents cover school costs. I worked hard in Semester 2 of Year 12, but unfortunately it was too little too late to make a big difference on my Overall Position (OP) [equivalent to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) in other Australian states].

None of my immediate family had gone to university, but I had always aspired to study architecture. Unfortunately, my OP was nowhere near good enough, so I worked in a bottle shop for two years. At the same time, I was helping my younger sisters at school and, after a year of this, I decided I wanted to go to university and study teaching.

I found out about the Indigenous Alternative Entry Program when I went to the QUT open day. The biggest strength of this program is that they employ uni students. People that are, or were, in the same situation as you. I was lucky enough to work for Explore Uni and also the Oodgeroo Unit as a Student Ambassador and found that a lot of the people I spoke to were me before I began uni; the things I was worried about were the things they were worried about too. It's a good feeling being able to tell people it'll be fine; I was there once, and I am here now.

> *"I was lucky enough to work for Explore Uni and also the Oodgeroo Unit as a Student Ambassador and found that a lot of the people I spoke to were me before I began uni; the things I was worried about were the things they were worried about too. It's a good feeling being able to tell people it'll be fine. I was there once and I am here now."*

Moving to Brisbane to begin university, and from a full-time job to study, was very daunting. My now wife and I had to find somewhere to live and we had to find housemates as we couldn't afford the rent on our own. Our families were able to support us initially (furniture and money for groceries) but they could not continue to do so. I worked at a bottle shop for the first year of uni, but like high school, I was working too much and struggling to achieve the results I thought I could.

When I first began uni, I said that I wanted to work in the administration side of education. I am proud that I have worked hard to achieve that. I am also proud that I took the leap and taught in a small rural school. Moving 20 hours away from your family was something that I really struggled with.

After I graduated, I worked in Brisbane teaching at Kurwongbah State School in Petrie. I worked with a great team of Year 3 teachers who showed me the ropes. I then had an exciting opportunity to move to Mount Isa and, again, I have been lucky to work with a great team of teachers there. Just recently, I have had the opportunity to work as Acting Principal at Karumba State School and Julia Creek State School. I am currently employed as Deputy Principal of Morayfield State School.

We decided to work in a remote school as my wife and I wanted the challenge and a sea change. I am not a fan of large cities (growing up regionally). I liked the idea of working in a smaller school — my school in Brisbane had 1,000 students whereas my school in Mount Isa had just 140. I also have a passion to work with students from Indigenous backgrounds and the school I worked at in Mount Isa had a large Indigenous population. I had planned to stay for longer; however, I was offered the job at Morayfield State School and it was an amazing opportunity.

> *"My advice to others is, don't give up. Work hard and find likeminded people who want to see you succeed."*

Knowing that my actions are helping our future generations motivates me. There is nothing better than watching a student who could not read or write do this for the first time. I also find great joy in watching students show their personality — having conversations about what they like, are afraid of, their achievements, and hopes for the future.

My sisters are all talking about being teachers and it is nice to think that I have inspired them to better themselves. By working hard and gaining different promotions, I have shown my family that anything is possible.

My values really shape who I am. These values came from my parents (mum and step-dad) and they are the values that I try to make sure my students value also.

My advice to others is, don't give up. Work hard and find likeminded people who want to see you succeed. And if you're a teacher — a five-second conversation is more important than you realise."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/student-voice-ethan-mcintosh/

Image © Curtin University

Helen Miller

DISABILITY
REGIONAL/REMOTE
MATURE AGE
ONLINE

For Helen Miller, who lives in a remote area and is restricted by a mobility impairment and chronic pain, online study has made university accessible.

Helen's ambition and resilience saw her flourish professionally and personally, but she still struggled privately with the restrictions of her disability. When physical restrictions became unbearable, Helen embarked on a new chapter, studying with Open Universities Australia (OUA) through Curtin University.

"'My beautiful little baby girl was born with twisted feet.' This is the last line of a poem my mother wrote when I was born. It was the most determining factor in the person I became.

Growing up on a farm near Dalby, Queensland, I endured multiple operations throughout my childhood to correct talipes in both of my feet. At age nine, I was hospitalised for major surgery. Lonely and afraid in my private room, unable to run and play to fill my days, I began to think. My mind has not stopped since.

> *At age nine, I was hospitalised for major surgery … unable to run and play to fill my days, I began to think. My mind has not stopped since.*

My mother had always tried to protect me with lines like, 'there are things you won't be able to do in your life' or 'stop running; you'll hurt yourself'. This provoked my strong independent spirit, because I was determined to be like anybody else and to do whatever I wanted. That was when I started climbing mountains — figurative ones, of course.

Challenged by abuse, discrimination and struggles with my physical limitations, I flourished in the face of adversity. I married and bore three children, writing my first novel during their daily naps to relieve my mental boredom, then undertaking a Bachelor of Business (Accounting) degree.

When my children were older, I moved to Brisbane and enjoyed a highly successful career, working for the State Government in Financial Learning and Development. I even received a Certificate of Recognition in the Australia Day Awards in 2001 for my work with the implementation of GST, and completed a Graduate Certificate in Business Administration.

Through this period of my life, I developed an interest in self-growth and ways to deal with the emotional impact of mountain climbing. After several short courses in various alternative topics, I completed a Graduate Certificate in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, which taught me techniques I use when I'm overwhelmed.

I had successfully disguised my disability for enough years to be a player in the roles and environments where I worked, but my feet were not going to let me continue that path. Osteoarthritis had developed to the point where the bones in my feet collapsed. That was nine years ago. The consequences were devastating.

I lost my career and my income. Centrelink wanted me to work eight hours a week, telling me to 'dumb down' my resumé. At

> *The greatest benefit my disability has given me is strength against adversity. The second is my love of creating and learning.*

job interviews, my walking stick was noticed before anyone looked into my eyes; no work was offered. My world shrunk into a single recliner chair, mired in depression.

My husband and I sold our house and made a tree change to Stanthorpe in the Southern Queensland Granite Belt. It was then that I found new purpose in my life. I wrote my second novel, then a third — when I was creating, I was not depressed or bored, but happy and absorbed. I was determined to make the most of this, so I studied creative writing and wrote many short stories, including an anthology for my major research topic: practice-led research into multimodal metaphor. My first short story was published in the literary journal *Bukker Tillibul*, with the editor commending the accomplished work.

I went on to publish one of my novels, but on the disability pension I do not have the income or mobility to market it in the usual ways, so I plan to use what I learned about multimodality and take my stories online. Since I cannot pay for expert help, I must do it myself; hence, my return to university to study a bachelor degree in digital design.

My first degree was done by external study, i.e., piles of printed materials and limited interaction, tutoring and feedback. It did give me a foundation for future online studies in terms of discipline and time management.

Living in a remote area, and with a mobility impairment and chronic pain, online study is ideal because I do not have to travel to a campus or be constrained to a fixed timetable. It also gives me mental stimulation and interesting activity to fill my days and take my mind off the downsides of my daily experience. That said, one negative is the risk of using it as an excuse to avoid outings and mixing with people when I feel low.

You do need to ensure you have suitable equipment; for example, a computer with enough memory and up-to-date software. Sometimes a video may be slow to download, given the internet speed, but that is a great chance to practice patience. I will often download materials when internet access is good, which enables me to study offline when necessary.

I particularly enjoy online interaction through discussion boards. These seem to work best when they are a component of the overall mark, as students are given a reason to take part. Through group interaction I have made good friends, even though I have not physically met them. Another value of online study is regular feedback and guidance; I find the Curtin University tutors are good in this respect.

Access to online study has been easy via OUA. I think OUA is wonderful in that it not only provides access to courses in specific areas, but the website is user-friendly, and links between courses and units have opened up an undiscovered world of potential knowledge.

The greatest benefit my disability has given me is strength against adversity. The second is my love of creating and learning. My next mountain may be a PhD."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-helen-miller/

Image © Jason Matulatan

Arshya Pankaj

Originally from India, Arshya Pankaj grew up in remote Western Australia, relocating to Perth in order to study medicine at The University of Western Australia (UWA).

Aspire UWA helped Arshya through the challenging pathway to university, offering school outreach and ongoing support. Arshya graduated in 2019, and will commence work as an intern in January 2020 at Fiona Stanley Hospital.

"Having grown up in a remote area of Western Australia, I appreciate university can be a scary and unfamiliar concept to some, but it is important that students understand that their circumstances don't have to define what they can do. Outreach programs like Aspire UWA encourage students to think about their futures with open minds during crucial high school years, and can open doors that may not have been completely open to them before.

I was born in India and moved to Karratha, WA when I was 11, where I attended St. Luke's College. Aspire UWA visited our school a couple of times and I was fortunate enough to be selected to join one of their camps in Perth. On both occasions, we spoke with university students about the different pathways available to us, and that link to higher university education as early as Year 9 was definitely something that helped me keep university in the back of my mind during those early high school years.

I first started thinking of medicine as a career in Year 11 when I found a particular interest in human biology. Unfortunately, the lack of teachers available to teach high-level subjects—such as human biology and Year 12 maths—was a barrier, so I relied on online modes through SIDE (School for Isolated and Distance Education). This was a challenge, but, having said that, there was plenty of support from teachers and mentors.

In 2012, I was accepted into the Rural Assured Medical Pathway at UWA. I was lucky in that my mum worked in Perth during my last few high school years, so I was able to move in with her and my sister while my dad continued living and working in the Pilbara, flying in on weekends. Even though I had immediate family support, it was difficult initially adjusting to a new city environment and lifestyle. Learning to be self-sufficient in my learning also took some getting used to.

Some of my peers stayed in university accommodation or share houses and had some of the best years of their lives. I almost feel that living with other students during the first year of university is a better way to make friends and explore the social aspect of university. On the other hand, living in student accommodation, and living out of home in general, can be isolating and difficult. It's important to note that there are financial supports available, which is also something Aspire UWA helps students see as a resolvable barrier.

Aspire UWA had a massive positive impact on my perspective on university. I continued to stay in touch with the Aspire staff and ultimately joined the team as a Student Ambassador. I knew I wanted to be a part of a program that encourages students to consider options regarding university, despite coming from backgrounds and towns where higher education is not readily available, and resources may be limited.

The program breaks down some of the barriers that come with being in a school/community within regional or remote WA that may have limited resources to an extent.

ABOUT ASPIRE UWA

Aspire UWA works with more than 70 partner schools and communities in regional Western Australia and Perth to raise aspirations for tertiary education.

The program encourages students who would not normally consider university to see the benefits and opportunities that university study offers.

Target groups include students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds; Indigenous students; students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and First-in-Family students.

Researchers, teachers, student ambassadors and staff deliver innovative hands-on activities at high schools to showcase future study options. The program aims to build a culture where higher education is an expectation rather than the exception.

Activities are tailored to each school and to each year group. Younger students enjoy active exploration of different disciplinary areas, while older students learn advanced study skills, participate in revision workshops, and are exposed to some of WA's brightest minds.

University partners, the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences and the School of Indigenous Studies provide specialist support to students.

More information on Aspire UWA is available here: aspire.uwa.edu.au

REGIONAL/REMOTE
WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL AREAS
MENTOR/AMBASSADOR

> *"Even though I had immediate family support, it was difficult initially adjusting to a new city environment and lifestyle."*

I think it provides students with the opportunity to see what university is about, the pathways to continue higher education, and the many support systems on offer. The program is broad, with pathways for schools that are challenged by resources, some that are challenged by distance, or both. It is a focused program that offers opportunities to students from schools that have low transfer rates to tertiary education and, therefore, it promotes the culture of academic achievement as well as the desire to continue learning and make a difference to the community.

I successfully completed my bachelor degree with distinctions in 2015, and am currently in my third year of postgraduate medicine with the Rural Clinical School in Albany. Medical practice in a rural community is rather different than in the metropolitan areas, and I have been loving it so far. Once I graduate, I hope to work and train in rural towns as a doctor. That is another reason why I think Aspire UWA is a great program; by offering students in regional areas a view of university and making it an achievable goal, you often find that students end up heading back to their rural towns to be contributing community members. I have several friends who have graduated and returned to Karratha or other rural communities to pursue their careers.

I often run into people from my high school and previous teachers, and it is quite amazing to see how proud they are. There have been times when university studies and pressures were overwhelming, but working through it and sticking to my goals has been worth it, knowing I am going to hopefully make a difference and give back to the community one day. I hope to continue working through barriers and making my friends, family and myself proud. I also value the smaller successes. When a student in the Aspire UWA program tells me how my story helped them think about their own and consider their options, it's a good feeling knowing I'm part of a program that makes a difference.

I think the community in Karratha is becoming more aware of university pathways, and I am seeing more and more students from the Pilbara continuing into tertiary education after high school. So, I wonder if stories like mine and my peers' have had a positive impact on the school students there."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-arshya-pankaj/

Image © Arianne Chavez, Curtin University

Jacinta Reynolds

When Jacinta Reynolds was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome as a teenager, she began what would be a challenging and confronting journey of self-discovery.

Through a twist of fate, Jacinta became involved in the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program and found the self-confidence she needed to realise her ambitions.

"When I was 14, I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a condition on the Autism Spectrum.

At the time, I was at an all-girls boarding school in England and my family was still living in Chicago, where I was born, with my younger sister and brother.

Whilst it was a light bulb moment for me, it also marked the start of a very long journey towards self-acceptance and understanding of what living with Autism meant.

When Mum found out, a year before I did, she was told I would never have a normal life, go to university, or be independent. Constant bullying at school and my increasing anxiety over tests and exams, only increased her worry. But in our house, not going to university was not an option. So, in 2010 when we moved from the UK to Perth, Mum and I set out on a mission to get me into university.

In 2012 when I graduated year 12, I was accepted into Curtin University to do a multidisciplinary science degree, with a higher Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) than expected and a Headmaster's Recommendation Award. In 2014, I won the STAR scholarship, transferred to a physics degree, and joined the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program, or CSMP.

The CSMP was my saving grace at Curtin. During the first year of university, I was lonely, anxious, and didn't do much except study. I didn't have any friends, didn't talk or communicate with my peers, and freaked out if I couldn't sit at a desk on the second level at the library. The year only got worse when my sister moved back to the UK and I lost my first job which I only had for six months due to disclosure of my Autism. By a stroke of luck, Jasmine and Theresa—the founders of the CSMP —incorrectly dialled my number and, since I was registered with Curtin's disability program, invited me to join the CSMP when it started up in 2014.

I had always wanted to be a science communicator who specialised in astrophysics. I had many amazing teachers who inspired me to become a communicator, and I always had a passion for the stars and the great unknown. But, quiet and hidden amongst the great crowd of first year students, I wasn't making any headway in my dream. Joining the CSMP changed all of that.

The program at the start was a jumble of mentors (postgrad students in occupational therapy and psychology) and mentees who all had Autism, not knowing how to interact with each other or communicate. Ice breaker games were filled with silence and long pauses, and after three weeks no one was sure if we, the seven mentees, wanted to be there. That is, until one day me and another mentee, Cameron, brought in our Nintendo DSs and sat down to play them at a meeting. Cue the chatterboxes.

That breakthrough was enough to spark more interaction between the mentees, as we all had a love of video and strategy games, and between the mentors.

MENTOR/AMBASSADOR
DISABILITY
WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL AREAS

ABOUT CURTIN SPECIALIST MENTORING PROGRAM

In 2014, the Curtin University Specialist Mentoring Program (CSMP) for students on the Autism Spectrum and related conditions, was rolled out. It was one of the first specialist tertiary mentoring programs available in Australia.

The program was designed in response to the growing numbers of students on the Autism Spectrum enrolling in tertiary education courses worldwide. CSMP was based on successful international programs and aimed to improve this vulnerable population's retention, academic success and wellbeing at university. Research has indicated that such students often have significant academic strengths but may experience high drop-out rates because of difficulties with planning/organisation, verbal/non-verbal comprehension, group work, oral presentations, forming friendships, and seeking timely help.

Successful honours and postgraduate student peer mentors provide support and guidance according to each mentee's individual needs. Mentors work toward the long-term goal of helping their mentee gain as much academic success, independence and employment readiness as possible in preparation for a more successful adult life.

The program now has 80 mentees receiving help with navigating their tertiary studies and employment/work experience prospects at Curtin University.

More information on CSMP is available here: https://students.curtin.edu.au/experience/mentoring/autism-related-conditions/

I also realised, after a semester with the CSMP, that my skills in communication were far better than I thought, which gave me the confidence to speak up at the groups and talk to Jasmine and Theresa about how we could improve the program. I take no credit for where the CSMP is today—that is all down to the amazing work done by Jasmine, Theresa, Craig and Elaine—but Jasmine and Theresa saw a lot of me over the next three years, on the CSMP Committee and as a CSMP Ambassador.

My family couldn't believe the difference it had made in my confidence, and my marks and experience at uni went from isolated to amazing. I also learned more about myself, my diagnosis, and how others saw my disability. I no longer saw my disability as a disability. My unique way of thinking helped my writing in my creative writing courses and lab write-ups; my lack of filter put me on many panel discussions and in other speaking roles because of my honesty; and my bravery to tell people about my Autism drew people towards me.

Long story short, I had three amazing mentors, endless support from the others in the group, and gained valuable leadership and communication experience.

In January 2017, I graduated from Curtin with a Bachelor of Science, Majoring in Physics and Specialising in Astrophysics, with a good dose of creative writing experience thrown in for good measure. I was also working part- time at my first real job and a mentor to a school aged student with Autism. And it was all thank to the support of my family and the CSMP.

Since then, I have moved out of home, bought my own house, become a mentor to another student, joined the Board of Directors for Autism West, started a new full-time job, joined a martial arts school, and started a new relationship — everything Mum was told I would probably never have.

Taking leaps of faith, and trying new things—especially for someone with Autism—is hard, and university is daunting enough! But if it hadn't been for that phone call in my first year, I wouldn't be where I am today. Curtin's support, the CSMP and my family helped me get through uni and navigate the adult world, a very scary world I'll have you know, and I wouldn't change any of it. Not the failed exams, not the meltdowns, or the hyper anxiety over assessments and tests.

The CSMP has given me the confidence to be myself and to be proud of it. I would say to anyone who is just starting uni that keeping your mind open to the possibilities is the best thing you can do. Because you never know what could happen!"

Image © Arianne Chavez, Curtin University

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/student-voice-jacinta-reynolds/

Jonathan Sae-Koew

Jonathan Sae-Koew is currently completing a PhD in Psychology at Murdoch University, after achieving First Class Honours in Psychology and Philosophy at undergraduate level.

Jonathan overcame significant barriers to his success; his self-confidence was shattered by the attitudes of those who could not see his academic potential.

Despite being streamed out of ATAR, Jonathan did not give up on his dream to go to university. His determination saw him complete the OnTrack program and he now reflects on the personal growth that can be achieved through higher education.

"I grew up in the suburbs of Perth, Western Australia, attending both government and private high schools. I had an affinity for the arts, sciences and a particular interest in English literature, but always struggled finding the motivation to apply myself to my studies.

I suffered a lot of bullying and was made to feel inadequate by my teachers who told me I wasn't good enough to go to university. Ultimately, they refused to teach me, encouraging me just to sleep in class and letting me go home early.

Although my teachers streamed me out of ATAR, I still aspired to go to university. Most of my family had pursued tertiary education, but in the end I just couldn't picture myself there, given my low self-esteem, gradually eroded throughout my school life.

> *"I'm learning so much and developing new skills which provide opportunities for personal growth, both mentally and academically.*

By the time I reached Year 10, the barriers in my way seemed insurmountable and I dropped out of school.

A few years on, I enrolled in Canning College's Flying Start program. Although I felt I was going through the motions of Year 11 study, a personal interest in philosophy and psychology began to emerge. I was advised to join Murdoch University's OnTrack program in order to move towards the university degree I would require if I was going to shape a future around learning and helping people.

I learned a lot from OnTrack, notably that if I pushed myself and persevered then I could achieve my goals. It took me two attempts to complete the program, but I finally felt motivated by a sense of purpose and direction in my career path, and passed second time with High Distinctions.

> *"Although my teachers streamed me out of ATAR, I still aspired to go to university [but] the barriers in my way seemed insurmountable and I dropped out of school.*

ABOUT ONTRACK

OnTrack is a program designed to provide preparation and access to people who aspire to achieve a university degree but do not qualify for direct entry into Murdoch University.

The OnTrack program is a 14-week university enabling course that qualifies students to apply directly for any undergraduate degree at Murdoch University that requires a Selection Rank of 70. It is also approved as a full-time study option by Centrelink.

OnTrack provides students with:

- a supportive, adult learning environment in which to develop effective study habits and learning strategies
- tuition to develop academic skills, knowledge and understandings to an undergraduate level
- assistance to select an undergraduate degree program that matches students' aspirations, interests and talents
- a network of peer and academic support at Murdoch University.

The program is one of five main enabling courses that provide admission pathways into Murdoch University: OnTrack; OnTrack Sprint; FlexiTrack; TLC 110; and K-Track (a free course offered through the Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders starting out with tertiary education or looking for a change in direction).

More information on OnTrack is available here: https://www.murdoch.edu.au/study/courses/course-details/OnTrack#

> *"I learned a lot from OnTrack, notably that if I pushed myself and persevered then I could achieve my goals.*

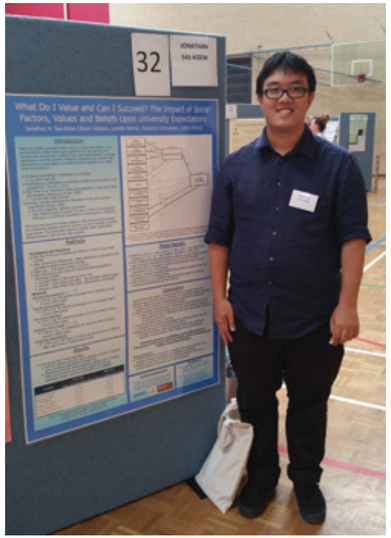
Through OnTrack, I discovered skills for learning and tailoring my education around my interests, building my confidence and teaching me the critical thinking and research skills that would be the foundations on which to build my knowledge.

I am now doing my PhD in Psychology after graduating with First Class Honours in Murdoch University's undergraduate Psychology and Philosophy course.

I'm learning so much and developing new skills which provide continued opportunities for personal growth, both mentally and academically.

Through telling my story to students, and collecting data at schools in Kalgoorlie and the Peel region, it became apparent that they were often overwhelmed by the pressure to achieve a high ATAR. They were inspired to learn that there are other pathways to achieving your goals if you persevere and are willing to put in the hard work, despite the obstacles you may face.

I now have a greater understanding of young people and have developed the skills to communicate with them, as well as with their teachers and communities. It is with these skills, among all that I have gained from my academic journey, that I hope to move forward into a career as a psychologist, researcher into mental health, or public speaker."



FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/story-student-voice-jonathan-sae-koew/

Amber Scott

Originally from regional Tasmania, and the first in her family to attend university, Amber Scott is a law graduate from the University of Tasmania.

Amber had to overcome challenges including relocation from her home town which meant separation from her family and support network.

Her transition to higher education was assisted by the HEPPP-funded University Connections Program (UCP). In 2019, Amber completed the Tasmanian Legal Practice Course and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Tasmania. She is now employed as a family lawyer on the north-west coast of Tasmania.

"I was in Year 11 when I decided I wanted to be a lawyer, but when I crunched the numbers with a career adviser at my college, she said it was unlikely I would achieve the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) I needed.

I grew up in Latrobe, and being so far from higher education made it feel like an even harder goal to achieve. The closest place for me to study law was three hours away from my home town, which made the prospect of going to university even less likely, particularly as I had little understanding of the opportunities that moving to a bigger city could bring.

Despite the barriers to achieving my goals, I was determined to dedicate the next two years to getting an ATAR that would allow me to study law. My college teachers recommended the UCP as a means to study university courses at college. I was aware that the style of learning at university is very different to school, and the fact that the courses were free and would be counted as credit towards my degree was very enticing.

The best aspect of the UCP was getting a head start on university learning and study skills. By the time I started my degree at the University of Tasmania, I already knew of the online learning platforms and the means of communication with lecturers and tutors. My involvement in the program certainly made the transition from college to university easier.

While I needed an ATAR well above what I thought I could achieve, I put my mind to it, worked hard and believed in myself. I had the will to get the result and the desire to get it. I ended up with an ATAR three points over the total I needed, it can be done.

Having to move out of home to study was difficult. I'm a very family-oriented person and am quite close with my friends, so being away from home was hard for me. However, I met some fantastic people at university and was lucky enough to live with two very close friends. Money was also a significant issue for the course of my study.

> *"The best aspect of the UCP was getting a head start on university learning and study skills ... My involvement in the program certainly made the transition from college to university easier."*

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY CONNECTIONS PROGRAM

The University Connections Program (UCP), formerly known as the University College Program, enables eligible Year 11 and 12 students the opportunity to undertake introductory level university units at the same time, or in addition to, their Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) studies. Most of these units fill a gap in, or extend learning within, the senior secondary curriculum.

Run since 2008, the UCP involves a partnership between the University of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Department of Education, the Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification (TASC) and Tasmanian schools from all sectors.

In 2019, 22 senior secondary schools and colleges and over 1000 students were involved in the Program statewide.

The Program provides students with:

- a supported introduction to, and familiarity with, university learning and teaching systems and facilities and services
- familiarity with university campuses and teaching staff
- increased confidence to undertake university study
- increased exposure to students around university courses and opportunities
- an easier and less stressful transition to higher education
- the opportunity to credit learning towards a relevant degree.

More information on UCP is available here:
https://www.utas.edu.au/ucp

REGIONAL/REMOTE
FIRST-IN-FAMILY
WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL AREAS

> *"The closest place for me to study law was three hours away from my home town, which made the prospect of going to university even less likely ...*

The desire to go home was always there and that made focusing on study and reaching my goals and aspirations quite difficult. I found myself scheduling my timetable in order to allow for the time to go home if necessary.

I learnt to adapt to a style of study and learning that could facilitate me travelling home and working from there at times in order to spend that needed time with friends and family.

Beyond university study, I discovered new and exciting opportunities. I convened the Tasmanian Youth Local Government Conference, which hadn't been run for approximately 10 years, so I was starting from scratch with a new team and designing it to be something to educate and facilitate the youth voice for the local council level of government.

I have spoken about the UCP units to students at Don College and hope to be able to influence youth in my community to take a similar view on higher education coming from a regional area — the view that it can be done if you're willing to remove yourself from your comfort zone and do that hard work."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/story-student-voice-amber-scott/

Damon Stevens

Damon Stevens was the first in his immediate family to pursue higher education and, while he aspired to do so, he found it difficult to envisage what university study would entail. With the help of a strong support network and programs such as In2Uni, he transitioned easily to life as a university student. Recognising the positive impact of the program, Damon went on to become an In2Uni Mentor at the University of Wollongong (UOW).

In 2018, Damon graduated with a Bachelor of Laws Honours (Class 1) — Bachelor of International Studies (Distinction). He was admitted as a solicitor in 2019, and works as a volunteer paralegal at the Marrickville Legal Centre assisting disadvantaged clients.

"University was never something I could clearly picture in my mind; I knew almost nothing about it, except that I wanted to go. I can't quite put my finger on what made me decide that I wanted to go so early on. It wasn't peer, teacher or parental pressure. I think it was more curiosity and proving to myself I could do it, and that I'd figure out the specifics later! I was doing it for me. This was my attitude from early on in high school, but it took many years for me to put all the pieces together and become the first member of my immediate family to go to university.

Some years on, I have now graduated with a Bachelor of Laws Honours (Class 1) — Bachelor of International Studies (Distinction). I completed my Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice (GDLP) and was admitted as a solicitor in 2019.

For three years, I worked as an In2Uni mentor as part of the Outreach & Pathways Unit. This was extremely rewarding as I helped conduct informative, engaging sessions for both primary and high school students of many different ages. They ranged from university taster sessions and fun activities, to HSC study skills workshops. Through these sessions, I was able to personally help many students make a smooth transition to life as a university student, when many of them didn't dream it was possible they could make it to this 'scary' place called university.

During high school, I was a pretty typical student. I wasn't too involved in leadership activities, but I always had a commitment to study and a love of reading. I remember all the sporty kids getting congratulated weekly on their achievements but it didn't feel like there was as much emphasis on promoting academia. Sometimes in class, if we weren't given textbooks, I would try to search for my own — to the annoyance of some of my teachers!

I vividly remember our senior class being visited by a group that called themselves the In2Uni Mentors. One of the mentors was the older brother of one of my best friends. He had done very well in his HSC and was studying a Deans' Scholar program at UOW. The mentors explained what university was like by describing some of the degrees on offer, as well as the multiple pathways to get there. I felt very comforted by this information, and started researching degrees myself. Journalism, arts and law were some of many that took my interest.

At the end of Year 11, the school careers advisor called me into her office with an offer to participate in the inaugural In2Uni Summer Master Class program. Having such a positive impression of university, I gladly accepted. The program was brilliant — I got to experience life as an officially enrolled university student before starting Year 12. We were given access to the university's facilities, we attended lectures and tutorials, and I met amazing people.

ABOUT IN2UNI

The University of Wollongong (UOW) offers a number of outreach activities to enable the aspirations, attainment, awareness and access to higher education for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds.

The In2Uni program fosters engagement with students from Years 2–12 in communities with a high representation of low socioeconomic status (SES) students through on-campus visits, study skills programs, workshops, master classes and a university preparation program.

The program initially commenced with on-campus visits for students in Years 2 to 10, study skills programs for Year 11 students, and curriculum-based projects for Years 7 and 8 students. These programs have been refined each year, to now include teacher professional development activities and curriculum for teachers to deliver in the classroom, and workshops that encourage students and parents working together in their learning journey. Pivotal additions to the In2Uni program were the launches of the Year 12 Summer Master Classes, the Year 12 University Preparation Program in 2014 and STEM+X in 2018.

These programs provide a student-centred approach to learning and supporting students with diverse needs, while extending the school curriculum and enhancing student preparedness for higher education.

More information on In2Uni is available here: https://www.uow.edu.au/engage/outreach-pathways/in2uni/

This was the final piece of the puzzle I needed to properly visualise university, and suddenly I wished I could skip to the end of my HSC and start studying there straight away! Later, working as an In2Uni Mentor, I helped deliver this same program to several classes of students.

The most rewarding part of my job as an In2Uni Mentor was helping students from diverse backgrounds set goals, and surprise themselves by surpassing them. Probably, my favourite program was the University Preparation Program (UPP). This involved facilitating study sessions for small groups of Year 12 students who wanted to go to university but didn't believe they could achieve the marks necessary. I have been able to share in the stories of so many students, and having them come up and thank me out of the blue for helping them get to university is amazing.

I realised my In2Uni journey had come full circle when I returned to my former high school to deliver a three-hour session to Year 11 students, and a former teacher commented on how confident, knowledgeable and helpful I was as a presenter. If even one student in that classroom I sat in five years ago decided to investigate further education after the session, I feel I've done my job.

Working at In2Uni also led me to other helpful opportunities. I was fortunate to grow personally and professionally through working with UOW's Learning Co-Op as a Peer Academic Coach (PAC), as an In2Uni Administrative Assistant, as an Event Staff Member for the Student Service Division, as a Disability Services Student Notetaker and in several roles on the Law Students' Society.

After over five years, in 2019, following my graduation, I bid farewell to my In2Uni position — my first job that opened so many opportunities for me and let me work with school students of all ages. Toward the end of my time in the role, I was proud to receive a peer-voted In2Uni Mentor recognition award for my contributions to mentoring and delivery of transition programs.

I now work as a volunteer paralegal at the Marrickville Legal Centre (MLC), assisting disadvantaged clients. It is extremely rewarding to see how the legal knowledge I've developed through law school can be put into practice. I am looking to gain further experience in the community legal or government sectors in the future. I can't wait to see what the future holds for me!

The main piece of advice I'd give to students is, no matter what background or area you come from, achieving your goals will require effort, determination, a good support network and putting yourself out there. Natural talent is a small head start, but to really get anywhere it takes a load of hard work."

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-student-voice-damon-stevens/

Image © Mark Newsham

Ruby Walsh

REGIONAL/REMOTE
LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS
MENTOR/AMBASSADOR

Ruby Walsh is a University of Wollongong Australia (UOW) graduate, now working in Wagga Wagga in a community engagement role in the charity sector. Going to university for Ruby meant leaving the strong and loving support network in her small regional community to a new, and initially overwhelming, on-campus environment.

Through the financial support of UOW's In2Uni scholarship, Ruby was able to overcome the economic challenges that came with moving out of home for the first time and beginning university studies.

Ruby hopes to continue working in regional Australia in order to give back and change the perception of growing up in a regional area as strength, rather than a disadvantage.

"I grew up in a small regional town in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. We had just one shop, a general store, and my primary school only had around 30 kids. Travelling to and from high school took me one and a half hours a day.

I consider myself extremely lucky to have grown up in a small town such as this, especially in such a loving and supportive family. It gave me a strong sense of community and identity.

I didn't always think attending university would be a feasible option, due to where I was located. However, in Year 10, the UOW In2Uni team came to my school and made me think about my future from a different perspective. This program, which took us through the different opportunities at university, gave me the confidence and ability to pursue higher education. I knew that higher education could give me a qualification that would enable me to positively impact those in less-fortunate positions and help those in need. This was one of my main drivers for committing to university.

> *[The In2Uni scholarship] helped me pay for the different expenses associated with moving out of home for the first time ...*

Even though I was lucky enough to have visited the UOW campus during high school on a few occasions, it was still incredibly overwhelming in the early stages. I had moved out of home, leaving a small and supportive community, going to living on campus in a large new city. Plus, I had to work part-time during my studies to support myself financially.

I was very fortunate to receive the In2Uni scholarship during my first year of study. This helped me pay for the different expenses associated with moving out of home for the first time and beginning university studies.

As I had moved from a small town, I initially didn't have many friends at university. I found living on campus was a great way to meet new people and expand my networks which ended up being a really enjoyable experience for me. I also undertook a number of volunteering opportunities during my studies, such as becoming an In2Uni Mentor and volunteering with AIME and the Cancer Council. This experience not only gave me the chance to give back to the community, but also helped me develop a number of transferable skills.

> *I want to continue to work in regional Australia and rural communities in the hope that one day growing up in a regional area will not be considered a disadvantage and that there will be equal opportunities in both regional and metro areas.*

Becoming an In2Uni Mentor was an extremely enjoyable part of my time at university, as I had firsthand experience of the impact this program can have. As an In2Uni Mentor, I was given the opportunity to work in a low socioeconomic primary school one day a week, which was very rewarding.

I now work in the charity sector, in a community engagement role. It was always a goal of mine to give back to the community and work in an organisation that is dedicated to helping others. Completing my bachelor degree, and the experiences I had whilst studying at university, definitely helped prepare me for the workforce and gave me the necessary skills needed to gain a position like the one I currently hold.

I think more needs to be done around the cost of living for university students. For students who move from regional areas, on-campus accommodation is a really good option, as this is a great way to meet new people and establish yourself in a new community. However, this is becoming increasingly expensive, and would be financially unviable for some. That said, the cost of relocating for regional students can be huge, therefore I also think regional students could be better supported through the transition to higher education, and more scholarships made available for these students.

> *I consider myself extremely lucky to have grown up in a small town ... It gave me a strong sense of community and identity.*

I hope that the experiences I have had will encourage other students, who are in similar situations as myself. I would strongly recommend anyone who lives regionally, and is considering higher education, to pursue their goals. It can be overwhelming and daunting at times; however, there are amazing support networks available at university, and people in similar positions as yourself, which helps with the transition and adjusting to your new environment.

As I studied a Bachelor of Public Health, working in a sector that was dedicated to helping others or having a positive social impact was always a goal of mine. I hope to continuously grow professionally and help those who are less fortunate or are socially disadvantaged.

I want to continue to work in regional Australia and rural communities in the hope that one day growing up in a regional area will not be considered a disadvantage and that there will be equal opportunities in both regional and metro areas."

Image © Mark Newsham

FULL STORY AVAILABLE ONLINE:
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/my-story-the-next-chapter-ruby-walsh/

About the NCSEHE

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) is a research and policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education. The Centre is based at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia.

The NCSEHE provides national leadership in student equity in higher education, connecting research, policy and practice to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people.

The diverse activities conducted by the Centre focus on strengthening Australia's research quality, capability and capacity to build a robust evidence base; and informing evidence-based policy design and implementation, and institutional best practice. An emphasis on the "student voice" and evaluation and communication of best practice equity initiatives contextualises research and data analysis.

The Centre has established a strong national presence, contributing to student equity becoming firmly embedded into higher education policy.

The NCSEHE conducts a broad scope of activities including:

- research-based projects both independently and in collaboration with other organisations, funded through external grants or through Centre resources.
- the NCSEHE Research Grants Program
- equity policy and program evaluation
- Research Fellowships and Equity Fellowships
- student equity data analysis, online resources and briefing notes
- print and digital publications
- collaborative and independent events
- representation at national and international conferences
- an emphasis on effective communication through channels including: website, electronic newsletters, social media and general media exposure.

> *"Informing public policy design and implementation, and institutional practice, to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people"*

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We are proud to share this case study publication with you in print, and online at **ncsehe.edu.au**.

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