

# Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Scholarships

## Evaluation Summary

Evaluation conducted by independent consultant Jo Thompson

### Background

Mary MacKillop Today was officially formed on July 1 2018 through the amalgamation of The Mary MacKillop Foundation, Mary MacKillop International and the Josephite Foundation. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Scholarship program was established by the Mary MacKillop Foundation in 1998 with the objective of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars to achieve their higher education goals.

The purpose of the evaluation was to capture the perspectives of stakeholders and provide an assessment of the extent to which the program has met its stated objectives. The evaluation process therefore assessed the extent to which the program has, and can continue to recognise and respond to the diverse experiences and aspirations of First Nation peoples within the tertiary education sector. As such the extent to which barriers to education are addressed through organisational processes that include First Nation peoples in decision making processes were evaluated.

### The Process

The evaluation took place between April and July 2018 and was led by consultant Jo Thompson. Given the range of stakeholders involved in the program, it was important to apply an evaluation methodology that could include as many of the varying stakeholder types as possible. Therefore, a participatory evaluation<sup>1</sup> using a mixed method<sup>2</sup> approach, was undertaken. The evaluator compiled evidence from various data sources through literature review and a desk review of the program data. Current and former scholarship holders, staff, Board members, key community partners and supporters were engaged through online surveys, phone or face-to-face interviews, and through a participatory planning workshop.

### Key Findings

#### 1. Program Impact

- Financial Support: 87% of students confirmed that the financial support provided by the scholarship program was critical in helping them to complete their studies.

*“If the Foundation scholarship was not in place, I might have given up.”*

- Personal Support: data showed that the program has been able to deliver a solid level of personal support to a number of students, and this could be strengthened through partnership with community-owned organisations and peer mentoring to ensure the program is more responsive to individual circumstances

*“[The program] is a one size fits all program but we’re not all one size.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Participatory evaluation is an approach that involves the stakeholders of a program in the evaluation process.

<sup>2</sup> A mixed-method evaluation systematically integrates two or more evaluation methods, potentially at every stage of the evaluation process, usually drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data.

- Confidence: 92% of current and past scholarship recipients acknowledged that being awarded the scholarship has played a significant role in building their confidence

*“Knowing that others had the confidence to grant me this scholarship proves that I have more worth than I first believed.”*

- Employment Outcomes: Out of the 89 graduates who reported back to Mary MacKillop, 82% had found work in a ‘professional’ sector

*“The skills and knowledge that I have gained from my studies are being utilised daily because my work involves engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander non-government organisations and assisting them.”*

- Broader Community Impact: 48% were/are working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations or communities.

*“When I am at home I encourage the younger kids to do their best at school and set long-term goals. Last year I was a group leader/mentor for the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (funded by the Smith Family) and UNSW Winter School.”*

## 2. Broader Findings

It is recognised that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to succeed at a tertiary level, there is often a need to access a range of social, financial and academic support<sup>3</sup>. This indicates that the complexities involved in student retention requires a suite of initiatives that include but go beyond financial support. Therefore, to be effective the program should also consider where possible aspirational, institutional and cultural barriers in partnership with community-owned organisations. The evaluation also found that TAFE, college and bridging courses are valuable pathways to employment or higher learning, and support for students is vital while undertaking these courses and during the first year of university. Personalised and culturally appropriate support is essential for building confidence and navigating new academic environments. This includes having appropriate personal and academic mentors and appropriate tutors. Furthermore programs that support secondary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to raise aspiration levels through the provision of career pathway options and positive role models, are often critical to increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students entering tertiary studies.

## Key Recommendations made to Mary MacKillop Today

- That the scholarship amount be increased to reflect the rising cost of living in Australia
- That an independent advisory panel be established to lead decision-making processes, consisting of program alumni and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives with skills and experience in the tertiary education sector
- That Mary MacKillop Today consider piloting another scholarships stream within a targeted geographic area, preferably targeting rural and remote communities in line with the organisation’s mandate. This will be piloted in late 2019.
- That application and reporting procedures for students be simplified, including considering online forms where possible

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<sup>3</sup> Behrendt L, Larkin S, Griew R & Kelly P (2012) *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report.*

- That Mary MacKillop Today consider extending the scholarship program to students undertaking bridging study or TAFE courses, recognising that these are valuable pathways to higher learning and employment
- That Mary MacKillop Today establish partnerships with community-owned organisations who are well positioned to provide support, guidance and advice to scholarship holders, and that the contact details for these partners be easily accessible
- That Mary MacKillop Today establish partnerships with community-owned organisations who are working to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and tertiary institutions e.g. through school-based initiatives designed to address aspirational barriers
- That Mary MacKillop Today continue to support those most affected by exclusion, and aim to improve access for people with disability, single parent families and people from rural and remote communities
- That regular and ongoing opportunities be established for scholarship holders to provide feedback, share ideas and continuously shape and improve the program