

My Future,
My Culture,
My Way.

NSW Department of Education



Case Study – James Ballangarry

Who I am?

My name is James Ballangarry, I'm a Gumbaynggirr man from Bowraville. For me, I finished Year 12 because I really wanted to stay around my friends. It's as simple as that. When you're a teenager your social life is huge, it's your entire life.

I finished Year 12 and I was the first in my family to do so. However I didn't do an ATAR. I didn't think that university was for me. I didn't think it was something I wanted to aspire to or could aspire to. However, 2 years later, when I was working as a teacher's aide, the staff suggested I go try the Yapug program at the University of Newcastle.

I did it for the year, graduated and loved it. I went on to complete a Bachelor of Primary Teaching and Honours, and am now currently doing a PhD. During this time I've also been working as an Academic and Researcher at the University of Newcastle.

Early days

I went to Mindaribba Preschool in Maitland in the first cohort. Because it is an Aboriginal Preschool school it was very normal to be around other Aboriginal people and Elders. Just being in that sort of environment, I developed a real sense of who I was and where I fit in. It normalised Aboriginal culture within education for me.

I went to Macksville Public School from Years 1 to 6. Macksville embraced Aboriginal culture within the school through cultural excursion opportunities and provided space to bring that culture back to the school and to share it with the whole school community.

Sharing Aboriginal culture was a normal, accepted thing. To me as a student sharing Aboriginal culture was normal, it seemed very organic. I honestly believe in the powers of normality. You know, if I can be in a classroom and you cannot tell where Indigenous content starts and non-Indigenous ends, then it's normal.

Starting high school

I went to Macksville High for Years 7 to 9. What Mackville really had, and I haven't been there in years, is a really strong school culture. I don't think we realised it, but a strong school culture makes a massive difference.

People may say students are the heart of a school. I disagree; I believe the staff are the heart, the students are the lifeblood. The staff have to be willing to build a strong school culture and that will feed into the students.



In partnership with CAPO



New South Wales
Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group Inc.

Aboriginal artwork created by Felicity Adams who is a proud descendant of the Kamilaroi people, currently living and learning on Dharug Country.

Changing schools

I did Years 10 to 12 at Rutherford Technology High in Maitland. The school culture was very different, it was less regional and felt like a city compared to Macksville.

There was an Aboriginal English teacher, who went out of his way to connect with Aboriginal students. He created an Aboriginal boys' dance group with 10 to 15 students. So I joined that just to be with the mob, I guess. I wasn't thinking, 'I'm going to do my culture', I just wanted to be around the other boys my age.

Changing expectations

"My Dad didn't finish high school, he dropped out in Year 11. My Mum dropped out in Year 10 and my sister also dropped out in Year 10. I just didn't want to do that.

When I was young people said, "If you don't like school, wait till Year 10 and you can drop out. You can leave". That was the thing that was said to Aboriginal students across the board. That was said by their families and by teachers.

And why was it said? Because that was the normal thing to think.

All I knew was that I didn't want to drop out. And the reason for that was not to break the cycle or any of those massive things that people say, but just to stay with my friends."

Finishing school and finding work

My Aunty told me to take a break after school, so I took 6 months off to work out what I wanted to do. I then worked as a labourer for a while.

Through community connections I got a job as a tutor by helping out with the BroSpeak program at a different high school. I'd go in once a week and from that it led to a job there as a Norta Norta tutor.

The teachers at that school said to me, "What do you think about being a teacher"? They suggested I go to the University of Newcastle and do the Yapug program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.



James in community

Remember, I got my HSC but I had no intention of going to uni, so I didn't do an ATAR. So, I thought I'd give Yapug a go, why not, it was free. The courses are developed by the Wollotuka Institute. The courses are delivered by Indigenous academics, created by Indigenous academics and use Indigenous content and Indigenous pedagogies.

Before I went to Rutherford High, I didn't even know that there were any Indigenous teachers. Then I went to uni and I found out there are, Aboriginal speech pathologists, Aboriginal engineers, Aboriginal doctors, Aboriginal social workers, Aboriginal midwives, Aboriginal lawyers. This really opened my eyes to all of that, the impact was made because at Wollotuka it was all normal.

My advice to other students

Talk to the teachers you trust. Don't get caught up in all the HSC pressure. Stay where you feel connected.

Want to know more?

Visit My Future, My Culture, My Way, follow the Department of Education on social media, talk to your school, or contact your local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG).