

My Future,
My Culture,
My Way.

NSW Department of Education



Case Study – Sarah O'Brien

Who I am

I'm Sarah O'Brien, a proud Wiradjuri woman from Tumut and Western Sydney. I graduated from St Mary's Senior High School in 2006, and now work as a doctor in Wagga Wagga.

The HSC was a bit daunting. I was the first person in my family to sit those exams, but my parents were very encouraging. My Dad always said it was really important for me to finish high school and go to uni. He used to say to me, "once you've got the HSC/uni degree, no one can take it off you". I saw the HSC as the gateway to something different.

Making sure I'm not the last person to do the HSC is more important to me than being the first. It's like the two hour marathon; once someone does it, you know it can be done.

I think connection to Culture is important

My parents always instilled in me that I should be proud of who I am – so my culture and my identity as an Aboriginal person are the foundations that keep me grounded. I chose to do medicine because I wanted to work with and help Aboriginal communities, and now I'm back here in Wagga Wagga, in my community.

I think having a strong connection to the Aboriginal community is so important, even if

you're not on country. Find people and programs in community to support you – elders' groups, women's groups, and NAIDOC events. There's not one particular way to be an Aboriginal person, and your identity is yours to develop over time.

I have a strong support team to help me on my journey

School was always a safe haven for me. It was predictable when things at home weren't great. I was lucky enough to meet my best friend in high school and she's been my person ever since. I still message her when I'm making a big decision and we talk through it. Having good teachers around me who recognised my potential and gave me the attention I needed was also really helpful.

As an Aboriginal girl growing up in Western Sydney, I got the message that I wasn't good enough all the time, and there were moments where I thought, "I'm not smart enough to do this." When I felt like that, I would always seek advice from people who believed in me. And reflect on why I was doing medicine – because I want to be a role model and help my community.

If you are struggling during the HSC, I know it can be really hard to open up and admit you're feeling vulnerable and need help. Seek out someone you trust to use as a sounding board. It might be a friend, Aunty, Uncle, or even a professional – your favourite teacher, school counsellor, local GP or



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



Sarah and husband David and son Adrian at Medical School graduation 2021

Aboriginal Medical Service doctor. And don't believe everything you read on the internet!

I think it's really easy for people to say things like "stay positive!" but the reality is that, as an Aboriginal student, you're probably facing challenges that other students aren't facing. Reality can be a little bit harsh, and you have to take your own path and find supports that work for you to get through it. To help myself reflect and understand how my life experiences are informing the decisions that I make, for example, I see a psychologist, to get that different perspective.

The tough stuff aside, there were also moments when I felt really sure of myself on the HSC journey – when I felt like I was deadly. It's so important to take those moments and be proud of how you've performed. The night I got my uni offer, being able to tell my parents that I was going to university – that was the coolest thing ever.

I picked up some great study skills along the way

At St Mary's, I was responsible for my own learning through the HSC, and I gained skills that carried me through uni. Starting uni wasn't a hard transition for me because I already had independence, and study and life skills. They're all really important in medicine because you never stop studying when you're a doctor.

The best study skill I learned at school was breaking my learning into little chunks, so I don't get overwhelmed looking at the whole picture. I'm not a crammer, so being organised and knowing how to strategically plan my study and manage my time – learning how to work backwards and map out the outcomes – has always helped me. If you're prepared, it means you're ready to take up an opportunity when it comes along.

Being able to pick specific subjects for the HSC also taught me a bit more about myself. I did a drama and a VET subject for the HSC, and from doing them, I learned that I'm a really practical person.

Trying different things and having a good all-round experience in the HSC also made me happier – not everything has to be 100% serious all the time. It's healthy to have hobbies and creative outlets. Looking back, Drama played a massive part in helping me build my confidence, so even though the subject itself didn't seem obviously academic, I got a lot out of it.

My path to medicine had a few stops on the way

I started an Arts degree at UNSW after finishing high school, and switched to a combined Bachelor of Arts and Social Work after a couple of years. I was almost finished but not sure if I was on the right path when I had a chat to the Aboriginal Health Director at the coffee shop I was working at in Mt Druitt.

They suggested I apply for the Djirruwang Aboriginal Mental Health Worker Education and Training Program at Charles Sturt University, and I ended up leaving UNSW before graduation for that program. It was a big switch from Randwick to Wagga Wagga, but I loved working in the mental health space. Ultimately, that experience inspired me to become a doctor.

My advice for finding your path

Like anything in life, you're going to want to quit when things feel hard. Have a really good think about who you are, why you're doing the HSC, and what you're trying to achieve. It takes a lot of maturity and reflection, so take stock and re-evaluate with a trusted person every now and then.

If you don't have a clear direction, then I don't think it hurts to try different things. I think I'm a better doctor now because I have life experience, and I understand life isn't always a direct path. It's been a long journey, but I don't think there's anything wrong with taking the road less travelled and knowing yourself, and what you want, before committing to a career.

Want to know more?

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