

My Future,
My Culture,
My Way.

NSW Department of Education



Case Study – Tessa Honer

Who I am?

I'm Tessa – a Wiradjuri woman and I attend Engadine High School. I'm doing a School-based Apprenticeship and Traineeship (SBAT) at Taronga Zoo.

Life in primary school

Como Public School was a supportive school with a really loving community. I developed strong friendships and enjoyed being at a small school, where everyone knew everyone. They really promoted a strong connection to culture – with a specific staff member focusing on Aboriginal events, culture and support. She is the reason that my family was able to re-connect with our culture.

Starting high school

I moved house just when I started at Engadine High School. It was a whole new start. It was a rough adjustment period because I didn't know anybody. I had a pretty hard time finding people that I connected with and could be friends with.

I found my friendship group by trial and error, losing friends, making new ones. There was a lot of changing around, but now I've got great friends and good teachers and I love what I do.

Academically, the early years of high school weren't great for me. I was always really good with reading and writing but never maths. In Year 9, there was a big drop in my maths results. My mum and school were really supportive and provided me a more structured learning environment. I challenged myself and it paid off.

Through the support of my family and their high expectations of me, and the efforts of my teachers, my results have got a lot better.

Getting extra support

There was one teacher, Miss Miller, who was the main source of support when I started school. She was always there and checking in and asking me to participate in cultural activities, workshops and excursions.

My parents have always been very supportive of my goals and education. Having extra support within the school has helped them feel more at ease with my future and my success.

So, what's an SBAT?

SBAT stands for a School Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship (SBAT). It's a great opportunity to earn money while gaining practical skills. It's a great way to set yourself up for a career at the same time.



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New South Wales
Aboriginal Education
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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.

SBATS combine paid work, training, and school. You can get credit towards your HSC, and a nationally recognised Vocational Education and Training (VET) credential while getting paid work experience.

Mr Haywood, my Careers Advisor, found out about my SBAT program at Taronga Zoo and explained the 3 options – business and accounting, tourism and animal studies. He helped me to apply. I had to submit recent report cards and attend an interview. I was successful and am now completing a Certificate III in Tourism.

What my week looks like

I go to school 4 days a week and I have one day that I am assigned to go to Taronga. Every 6 months you change where you are in the zoo.

Right now, I'm in 'Communities and families', which can be a real mixed bag. Some days we go out in the Zoomobile, where we take out animals in the van and do a presentation about them, mainly for younger children. We also do a visit called 'Animals of the Dreaming,' where we go out with Uncle Col Hardy, the Golden Guitar Winner. He sings songs and you present the animals from an Aboriginal perspective.

At the end of the day, you have an hour meeting with a course advisor, and you go through your coursework for the Cert III.

Every day that you work, you get paid.

Gaining confidence and experience

I started in guest experience, which really grew my confidence talking to people. Before I started at Taronga, I was a very shy, withdrawn person. I couldn't talk to anyone for the life of me. Working at Taronga, I have grown leaps and bounds in my education and my confidence.

It's just been an amazing experience and opportunity to be able to push myself as far as I have.



Tessa at school

My future

Once I finish my certificate and school, I will be able to apply for a job at Taronga Zoo. The possibility of getting a job was a big motivator. I still want to go to university so I'm hoping to do part time work and study at university at the same time.

What advice do you have for students considering a pathway?

Do it! It is so amazing; the skills that you build and the people you meet. Everything is so worth it, especially the pay. It is invaluable experience that you gain while you're doing school. Then you come out of it with the certificate and you're employable.

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).