

Financial Support – Faith in Aboriginal Law Students

By Fiona Hussin, Lecturer in Law, NTU

As the Indigenous Support Coordinator at the Faculty of Law for the past three years, I have been witness to a variety of academic results from law students of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

With the Aboriginal Pre-Law Program due to commence in January 1997, I started looking at the financial support that was available to indigenous law students. There were two reasons for this. The first was that there is a financial hardship which is suffered by law students of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent which is disproportionate when compared with mainstream law students. Law students of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent represent a disproportionate amount of people who live in poverty, so it is natural that these figures be represented in the law student body.

The second reason was to provide a carrot. While Aboriginal people are interested in studying law, there is a perception held by many students that law school is out of their league, or that they will not fit into the stereotype of the law student. This can be a disincentive. The availability of even a chance to obtain financial support through a scholarship or cadetship can be enough to persuade an interested student to apply for law.

In 1997 there were several forms of additional financial support available to students of Aboriginal or Torres Strait

Islander descent. These included:

- Director of Public Prosecutions Cadetship
- Northern Territory Public Service Cadetship
- Attorney-General's Scholarship
- Morning Star Scholarship
- Equity Scholarship
- DEETYA Cadetship.

Of these, the first three were offered for the first time in 1997. Each of the recipients has performed well above average. The DPP Cadetship was awarded to a first year student who achieved credits in two subjects and passes in the others. These results are exceptional for first year Aboriginal law students. These students were the only Aboriginal law students to achieve results higher than a pass in 1997, or in the previous two years.

The Attorney-General's Scholarship was awarded to David Woodroffe. David was in his third year of study in 1997. David's results from first semester 1997 were excellent. He received a credit in the subject of Evidence, a distinction in Indigenous People and Property Law and a high distinction for Corporations Law. In second semester he received a distinction for International Law, Civil Procedure and Islamic Law and a credit for Family Law.

David received the highest mark for his assignment in International Law and his lecturer commented that the quality of his work was "head and shoulders"

above that of the other students enrolled at the unit. David will be awarded the Law Faculty prize for International Law.

David's comments about the benefits of the scholarship gave me a third reason to investigate further opportunities for financial support. David said that the scholarship made him "feel bound to do well because people have shown faith in me. I have a responsibility not only to myself, but to others." David said that receiving a mark higher than a pass was important to an Aboriginal student because of perceptions by family and community that they are "out of their league" in law. He said, "It is important to know that you are not scraping through. You are as good as the other students and that makes you strive to do better."

Financial support gives students a more balanced economic status and it motivates them to excel in study. It is crucial to the legal profession and the community that the imbalance in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lawyers be redressed. It is equally important that indigenous students of law are given the opportunity and motivation to break down negative perceptions of their ability and to excel.

If any firm or organisation is interested in establishing a scholarship or cadetship for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander law students, they can contact me on 8946 6963.

– Fiona Hussin, Lecturer in Law

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Appearance in Court of Summary Jurisdiction of People not Admitted to Practise

Members of the profession are advised that, following a survey of the profession, the Council of the Law Society has resolved at its January 1998 meeting, that an articled clerk should never appear on any contentious matter, but should be permitted to appear on matters such as agreed adjournments or to take judgment.