

Keynote Address at the Project Imba Awards Ceremony 29 September 2016

The Hon Justice A Philippides Court of Appeal

In addressing you this evening, I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners of this land, its elders past and present, and the community today.

I was delighted to be asked to speak at this evening's awards ceremony to celebrate the successful participation in Project Imba of 25 high school students from Cunnamulla.

Everything about Project Imba is inspirational. It is the initiative of two outstanding indigenous law students studying at QUT. They are Allison Boland and Corey Curran.

The disadvantage that young indigenous youth face is well known, as are the statistics of poor educational outcomes, high unemployment rates and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. The statistics are disheartening, distressing and can lead to a sense of despondency and overwhelming hopelessness.

But that was *not* the response of Allison and Corey. They met while attending QUT's 2012 Indigenous Pre Law and Justice Program. Allison and Corey co-founded Project Imba in 2014. They were approaching the third year of their law degrees. They were grateful for all the support they had received and how it had enabled them to succeed in their first two years of university.

Project Imba was born out of their desire and determination to do something about the harsh reality of the prospects facing young indigenous people. They wanted in particular to do something tangible to encourage young indigenous people from Allison's hometown of Cunnamulla to go onto tertiary education.



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They have been coordinating Project Imba each year since then. They both received a QUT Student Leadership Award in 2015 in recognition of their demonstrated leadership capacities which, I have no doubt, will be seen again and again.

“Imba” means listen and learn in Kooma language. It reflects the goals of Project Imba. Its goals are to highlight the importance of education and the opportunities it can provide and in Allison and Corey’s words “to challenge and inspire indigenous students to believe in their own abilities and see university as a real opportunity”.

Those goals are achieved in a two-step process. The first involves a visit to high school students in Cunnamulla where academic and cultural workshops are organised. This is followed by a visit to Brisbane to participate in a week-long program at QUT.

The program reflects the diverse number of areas that might be considered for career paths. It involves visiting various QUT faculties; such as the Faculties of Education, Business, Health, Science and Engineering and Creative Industries. There is also engagement with Caxton Legal Centre, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Royal Australian Air Force, including a visit to Amberley Air Base. The Project includes learning about leadership development initiatives, and hearing more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Throughout there is also the strong engagement of Ashurst and QUT’s Oodgeroo Unit, who are the principal sponsors of the Project.

And, it is the completion of this challenging, innovative second phase of the Project that we celebrate this evening. It has required commitment from each student, adhering to a very full program, testing capacities and comfort zones. In completing this part of the Project, the 25 students present this evening have shown the type of curiosity, commitment, strength of character and desire to broaden their intellectual horizons and set their own goals that will see them shine in their future pathways.



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Allison, Corey and the wonderful supporters and sponsors of this initiative can be justifiably proud of the all students who have participated over the last three years in Project Imba. That participation has seen students undertaking a Bachelor of Justice at QUT, careers in the army and traineeships in Cunnamulla. But, in addition, the broader successes of Project Imba are reflected in the input received from each year's participants.

After taking part in the Project, last year's participants expressed a clearer vision of their future goals and plans. They expressed greater belief that tertiary institutions valued indigenous culture. Their confidence increased significantly, especially in terms of believing that attending university was a real possibility. There was an equally impressive increase in the numbers of students motivated to do their best so as to have greater choices on completion of their school studies.

I am sure that those outcomes have been replicated this year. In this year's group there are four year 12 students. I am delighted to learn that this week all four have lodged a Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) Application.

For those of you who have lodged QTAC applications, I hope this week is the start of an important engagement with tertiary education. If you take that path and stay on course, it will be one that will empower you and open the door to many opportunities.

I know you are aware that, while it will be an exciting path, it will by no means be an easy path. You will experience obstacles and at times you might experience doubts about your abilities. There are times, however, when every student who undertakes university studies feels a bit daunted.

There are some important things to remember at such times. Do not to let anyone define you or set the limits of what you can achieve. Don't let the negativity of others deter you. Replace that negativity with a dialogue of choice and challenge. There is a tremendous sense of empowerment that comes from being self-motivated. You are each capable of achieving so much more than you presently realise. Give yourself the



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opportunity to reach for those achievements. And remember that you have the richness of an amazingly resilient culture, one that has endured for tens of thousands of years, to draw on. Know your extraordinary culture and be proud of it – it will sustain you in difficult times.

There are many pathways to fulfilment. And not everyone will want to take the pathway of tertiary education. But for those of you who decide not to pursue tertiary education, make sure you do so for the right reasons and that you do not rule out university for the wrong reasons.

Don't allow yourself to be stereotyped into having low expectations of yourselves. Don't accept that indigenous students cannot get into the best universities in Australia. The reality is that indigenous students have been amongst those that have excelled at Australian universities. They have been amongst the top students of their year in many fields. And indigenous students have continued their studies at some of the most prestigious universities in the world; at Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard. In fact, Professor Mary Ann Bin-Sallik was the first indigenous person to gain a doctorate from Harvard University, after completing a PhD in Education. Her work as a pioneer for indigenous participation in higher education and her important role in both the health and education sectors saw her recognized as the 2016 NAIDOC Female Elder of the year.

Because connection to land and family is an important aspect of indigenous culture, the idea of moving to the city can be more challenging for indigenous students. From your experience this week you will have become familiar with the environment of QUT and you have been introduced to the support and help that is available through the Oodgeroo Unit. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support units are present at all the universities in Brisbane. At the University of Queensland you will find the Goorie Berrimpa Unit and at Griffith University there is the Gumurri Student Support Unit. Such units are found in universities throughout Australia.



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Given that a large percentage of indigenous students come from regional areas with a low socio-economic background, the financial cost of obtaining a university degree is a particular challenge, especially the costs of accommodation. However, there are a growing number of scholarships and other funding options that are offered at universities in Queensland and elsewhere. Allison and Corey have information about those which you can access.

University is a place where you can explore the subjects that you really love and be taught by some of the best and most inspiring teachers. You can pursue any career that you want to. You may already have in mind a particular career you want to pursue at university. You will find inspiring indigenous role models who have preceded you in whatever career you choose to pursue.

But perhaps you do not have a clear vision yet of a career path. Don't be concerned about that. University is also a place to study for the sheer delight of learning. You may simply want to experience the absolute pleasure of being in an environment with others who are as excited about learning as you are.

University is about making your own choices: deciding what subjects you want to explore, deciding what university clubs or societies you want to join outside of your studies and deciding what path you want to take in life.

What I *can* say for certain from my perspective is that the law and the other professions need the viewpoints and insights that you are able to provide as indigenous people. In that respect, it is not just your community, but the broader Australian community, that needs you. We need to hear your ideas, your insights and your voices. We need the understanding that comes from being able to see the complexity of issues you face through your eyes.

You all have important contributions to make. In this room are future leaders. And – I have no doubt at all – future lawyers and judges. Your generation will find new and



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better ways to achieve a just society. Without your voice, our community cannot hope to achieve the heights it desires.

I end by repeating, there is so much to applaud about Project Imba.

I applaud the creative initiative of Allison and Corey in imagining the Project and putting it into effect. The Project demonstrates what can be achieved when indigenous leadership is combined with the strong ongoing support of the broader community.

In that respect, I also applaud the engagement of all those in the diverse group that provides ongoing support and sponsorship for the Project. You have shown that you are committed to more than just rhetoric or tokenistic gestures. I especially applaud the Project's principal supporters, the Oodgeroo Unit and Ashurst.

And I am especially delighted to applaud the 25 wonderful students from Cunnamulla who have undertaken and completed this Project.

You have had the courage to think big, to believe in yourselves. I wish you every success with the rest of your studies.