

October 25, 2023

Future First Nations lawyers graduate from new program

The first students have graduated in a groundbreaking new program to increase the number of Aboriginal people working in the law.

The Aboriginal Legal Career Pathways Program is a partnership between Legal Aid NSW, TAFE NSW, and Macquarie University, in which students take a path from TAFE study to a law degree while working in a support role at Legal Aid NSW.

On Friday, 18 students graduated after completing both a legal services qualification and work experience at Legal Aid NSW.

Legal Aid NSW CEO Monique Hitter said the program would help improve the legal sector for First Nations people, including for the 23 per cent of Legal Aid clients who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

“I cannot overstate the importance of this program, and the potential that it has for us to better serve our Aboriginal clients and to elevate Aboriginal voices in the justice system,” she said.

After graduating, participants can continue to a Graduate Certificate of Law at Macquarie University, followed by a Juris Doctor degree if they choose, supported by a full scholarship from the Macquarie University Law School.

Program graduate and Gadigal woman Simone Roberts, 41, is planning to continue through the program pathway to become a solicitor.

“Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been in trouble with the law and if I can prevent that and help by defending them and helping them know their rights then that’s really great,” she said.

The program, recently named a finalist in the Premier’s Awards, is aimed at addressing Aboriginal underrepresentation in the sector, with research suggesting only 0.8 per cent of solicitors in Australia identified as First Nations.

Yuin and Bidjigal woman Kimberley Wilson, Director, Aboriginal Services, Legal Aid NSW, said the program is about supporting Aboriginal career opportunities.

“The program empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access employment pathways, including education and training, that aligns with their aspirations, which is a key priority as part of Closing the Gap,” she said.

Macquarie University Honorary Associate Professor Uncle Boe Rambaldini emphasised the importance of education for Aboriginal people.

“When our people complete education it not only opens up opportunities for them and also shows others what’s possible,” he said. “Education enables our people to

lead our services. And this is how we close the gap. I am so proud of these students for completing their studies and look forward to seeing what they do next.”

TAFE NSW Chief Delivery Officer Janet Schorer congratulated the graduates for their efforts over the course of the program.

“Working with Legal Aid and Macquarie University, TAFE NSW customised the program, so it was accessible and relevant to learners. It’s inspiring to see this cohort are now one step closer to reaching their goals and making a difference in the legal sector and the community,” Ms Schorer said.

“Initiatives like the Aboriginal Legal Career Pathways program are a great way to transition from education and training into employment, and tailor graduate’s skills and experience to meet employer’s needs.”

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Graduate Simone Roberts is available for interview.