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Media Release

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Closing the gap in the legal sector

A ground-breaking new program, run by Macquarie University, TAFE NSW and Legal Aid NSW, will increase the skilled and credentialed Aboriginal workforce in the legal sector.

The Aboriginal Legal Career Pathways program will enable 200 Aboriginal people to gain nationally accredited qualifications in legal services and provide a clear pathway to a law degree. The initiative will help address a significant shortfall, with research suggesting only 0.8 per cent of solicitors in Australia identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.¹

The program enables participants to complete either a certificate or diploma in legal or paralegal services at TAFE NSW while working at Legal Aid NSW.

After graduating, participants can continue to a Graduate Certificate of Law at Macquarie University, followed by a Juris Doctor degree if they choose. Students who continue to university will do so on a full scholarship supported by the Macquarie University Law School and Djurali Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research.

"This program is the first of its kind in New South Wales, providing employment, study leave, travel, accommodation, catering, and legal and paralegal services training preceding entry to Macquarie University Law School," says Amanda Morgan, Project Manager and Yorta Yorta woman.

"It's important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know that a career in the legal services workforce is accessible and possible if that's what they want for themselves. We are smart enough, we are capable and we deserve to occupy this space and develop into the advocates we've always wanted to be."

¹ Allman K, Dale A 'The state of the profession 2021', in *Law Society Journal Online*. August 2021, <https://lsj.com.au/articles/the-state-of-the-profession-2021/>

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The program is being delivered using a [seven-step model of vocational education](#) co-designed with Macquarie University researchers Associate Professor Uncle Boe Rambaldini and Dr Kylie Gwynne. The model has a 93 per cent completion rate and has already resulted in more than 500 qualifications being awarded to Aboriginal students across multiple disciplines.

“Supporting Aboriginal students to work and study has multiple important benefits that address past and contemporary socioeconomic disadvantages and will work towards delivering better physical and mental health outcomes for them and their families,” Associate Professor Rambaldini says.

“Some of the people in this program have not been able to complete high school, and some are from very remote areas, they are keen to address the high incarceration rate, so being able to study and work is important to them personally, and life-changing,” he says.

More than 20 students have already commenced their qualifications at TAFE NSW, with another intake of 10 students planned for July and a third intake earmarked for later this year.

Gadigal woman Simone Roberts, 41, is part of the first intake. The former air hostess said she was excited to have the opportunity to contribute to the legal profession and her community.

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

“I’m really enjoying the challenge. I’m keen to stay at Legal Aid NSW and move around different departments and learn more about the law.”

The students attend face-to-face sessions at TAFE NSW Ultimo as well as weekly teacher-led virtual classes while also working at a Legal Aid NSW office. Eligible participants study fee-free under the Australian and NSW Governments’ Fee-free TAFE initiative, and Legal Aid NSW is providing study leave.

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TAFE NSW Chief Delivery Officer Janet Schorer said the program offers participants a unique blend of supported study and work as they embark on a career in the legal services sector.

“TAFE NSW is delighted to be working with Legal Aid NSW and Macquarie University to support people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds build their skills and experiences for a career in the legal industry.”

“We’re committed to making this program accessible and relevant for participants, and our teachers have customised the training to suit the policies and procedures of Legal Aid NSW.”

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 within the NSW Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap,” she said.

“We look forward to working closely with TAFE NSW and Macquarie University to support the participants to succeed and advance their career in the legal sector.”

The seven-step model was first used to train Aboriginal dental assistants, and last year was used to train Aboriginal audiometrists.

Out of a class of 15, 10 students completed a Diploma of Audiometry, and another three completed the Certificate IV in Audiometry, with two more to finish their studies soon. Before this course, there were only two Aboriginal audiometrists in NSW.

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