MEDIA RELEASE

Mary MacKillop Today

Investing in people who stay: how a regional study hub and First Nations scholarships are rebuilding the Kimberley from within

A 24/7 study hub in Broome and a growth in scholarship funding are giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Kimberley something the system has long denied them: the chance to build a career without leaving home.

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For generations, the path to higher education in the Kimberley required one thing above all others: leaving. Leaving Country, leaving community, leaving family. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, that was a barrier too great to cross.

A partnership between the Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) and Mary MacKillop Today is changing that by backing the people already here, with the cultural knowledge, community connections, and deep commitment to stay.

Building the workforce the Kimberley needs from within

Since opening, the Broome PKUC hub, which opened officially in September 2023, has supported more than 310 registered students in the West Kimberley, with 172 actively enrolled today. Of last year's 19 graduates, two are already working at Broome Hospital.

Amanda Davies, Centre Manager at PKUC Broome, says that outcome is precisely the point.

"People living in their regions, they like to stay here. They don't want to upskill and leave their community. They want to upskill and stay. And when they do, they strengthen the very communities they come from."

The hub offers high-speed NBN internet, face-to-face academic support, and round-the-clock swipe-card access because for many students, study happens after work and after the children are in bed. It also provides something harder to quantify: the kind of individual support that makes the difference between a student continuing and a student giving up.

"I had a student in here an hour before you arrived this morning. I've been on the phone to one of our partner universities trying to help her through something. If we weren't here, she wouldn't have had that." continued Amanda.

From the cattle stations to the courtroom

Cameron is a Jaru and Kija man, living two and a half hours north of Broome. At 15, he went to work on the cattle stations, following the path generations of Aboriginal men before him had taken, shaped by a belief that certain doors were simply not open to people like him.

Today, Cameron is studying paralegal studies through PKUC and the University of New England, supported by Mary MacKillop Today's First Nations Scholarship Program. He is also a father of two, a former Department of Justice Program Officer, and now works in child protection, deliberately building a picture of both sides of the justice system before he tries to change it.

What drew him to law was what he witnessed inside West Kimberley Prison, where he worked for five and a half years. Approximately two-thirds of the prisoners were on remand, some waiting up to 18 months to be sentenced. Without a sentence, they could not access rehabilitation programs. Cameron watched men sit, largely unoccupied, while a clogged court system worked through its backlog.

"The dream is to work with the courts, trying to unblock the system, trying to assist where I can. As an Aboriginal person from up in the Kimberley, I can get the background information magistrates need to make their determinations. The dream is to be that connector between the court and the people." said Cameron, scholarship recipient.

Cameron's insight is not theoretical, it is drawn from lived experience on both sides of the justice equation, and from deep roots in the community he is trying to serve. It is exactly the kind of knowledge that cannot be imported from a metropolitan legal practice, and exactly the kind of workforce investment that has lasting impact.

He studies online from home, managing a two-hour time difference with his New South Wales university, unreliable connectivity, no access to physical library resources, and the financial pressure of raising two young children on a single income in one of Australia's most expensive regions.

"The cost of living up here is astronomical. Just coming across to Broome is a planned thing now, you know it's going to hit the wallet. These sorts of scholarships just make a world of difference. It takes the edge off the burden." said Cameron

An increase in scholarship funding

Last year, Mary MacKillop Today launched a scholarship pool for West Kimberley students. With the PKUC partnership now formalised, the commitment in FY27 goes further still.

The difference is tangible. Mikayla, a Yawuru and Bardi woman from Broome, is studying her Diploma in Psychology online while working at a youth mental health organisation and raising her four-year-old daughter. She tried studying in Perth and found she could not stay away from home, so she came back. The scholarship has made it possible for her to continue without leaving.

"There have been times where this is all really hard. But having the scholarship will really help me to commit. It's like a reason to keep going," said Mikayla.

She hopes to complete her undergraduate degree and eventually a PhD in research psychology, a career that will deepen the evidence base for mental health support in communities like her own.

What walking alongside actually looks like

Mary MacKillop Today Chief Executive Officer Jane Woolford said the partnership with PKUC reflects the organisation's commitment to supporting communities to lead their own futures.

"Saint Mary MacKillop understood that education offered where people are, not where the system expects them to be, changes everything. In the Kimberley, we are seeing that truth play out. When we invest in people who are already part of the community, who understand its culture, its language, and its needs, the impact goes far beyond one individual. It ripples outward." Said Jane Woolford, CEO, Mary MacKillop Today.

Cameron's message to those who make the scholarships possible is direct:

"What might seem like a little to some, it's a lot for us up here. We only have our effort and our character. And thanks to your organisation, it helps us help."

Mary MacKillop Today's First Nations Scholarship Program provides financial support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students pursuing tertiary education in remote communities across Australia. Donations can be made at marymackilloptoday.org.au/donate.

About Mary MacKillop Today

Mary MacKillop Today is an Australian Catholic international development and community organisation inspired by the legacy of Saint Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of Saint Joseph. We work in partnership with communities in Australia, Timor-Leste, Fiji, and Peru, delivering programs in education, financial inclusion, and life skills.

About the Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC)

PKUC is a federally funded initiative providing face-to-face study support and tertiary pathways for students in regional and remote Western Australia. The Broome Regional Universities Study Hub is the only 24/7 hub in the PKUC network, supporting over 310 students in the West Kimberley since opening in September 2023.

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