

The Day the Postie Came



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'The Day the Postie Came' is an edited version of '46 in 99: Indigenous Australian students completing senior secondary education', the product of a project designed to reveal the perceptions and ideas of Indigenous students who successfully completed their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) in 1999. Sixteen of the 46 who were successful agreed to be interviewed and the paper records and analyses their views and experiences.

I was in New South Wales at the time the postie came
'Cause we were having a holiday with friends that lived
This side of Bathurst.
Um, and dad was at home and he rang us (*pause*)
It was about — I don't know — 9 o'clock in the morning.
And he'd gone down to the post office to pick up my results.
And none of us were awake at the time
We were getting up like at 12 o'clock in the afternoon
And I hear the phone ringing
And I pick up the phone
And he goes, 'I've got your results.'
And I said, 'Oh God!', and I hung up the phone on him (*laughter*) ...
And he rung back, and he goes 'What did you do that for?'
And I said, 'I don't want to know — keep it to yourself!'
But yeah, it was
When I got home and I had a look

I was just glad that I'd passed ... (Tom)

On a day in December, close to Christmas Day, the postie comes, bringing news to those students who have succeeded in Year 12 — and those who have not.

It is a day of public reckoning, a day that is met with equal doses of anticipation and fear by most senior secondary students and their families. Receiving the news can be a critical moment in the lives of young people, and in the lives of those in their communities.

Sixteen Indigenous students shared with us their thoughts and feelings about how they dealt with their 'moments of truth', and how their families reacted to their news. They graphically recounted their stories of 'receiving the results'.

I went in the kitchen, I went in the kitchen.
I put it in on the bench — no, I put it on the table.
And then it was, like, time for tea
And so I put it on the bench.
And then from the bench it got to the top of the fridge
And from the top of the fridge it fell
It just got overcrowded, and then it fell to the back.
And then, from the back
When we cleaned, when we cleaned up from the back of the fridge
We took it out
And then all my stuff was all put on my bed.
And then I went into my room, saw it there and went
'Ohhh, OK, I guess it's time for me to open it up.'
And then I opened it up.
And as I was opening it up I was walking into the lounge room
Where all them other mob was.
And I said, 'Oh, here's my results.'
And Auntie [named] goes, 'Results for what?'
And I said, 'Oh, my SACE!'
'My, um, completing Year 12!'
And she goes 'Oh — well, whatcha get?'
I said, 'I don't know yet.'
And then I only had, like, one little bit, just on the end to open up!
And I was just standing there looking at it
And I said, 'No, I never done it. I never passed.'
And she goes, 'Do you want me to open it?'
And I said, 'Nuhnuh-no, I'll do it, I'll do it!'
So I quickly opened it up.
And took it out, I read it, I went, 'Uhh, I passed!'
Oh, it was just the biggest thrill of my life.
And then I — as soon as, um, I showed [named teacher]

And [named teacher] and that,
They said they wanted a photocopy ... (May)

What we heard from successful students was a range of emotions — apprehension, fear, delight, satisfaction, exhilaration, relief, and at times, disappointment. In these stories, the students narrated their avoidance tactics and their anxiety.

Alison rang me up and told me she'd got hers.
Then I think I went home and picked them up.
I didn't open them until after New Year
Too scared to ...
I was just too scared to.
I put them in the drawer and I hid them and that was it.
Mum was asking me
'Have you got them?'
'Na.'
Yeah, I freaked out
I didn't want to open them ...
She [*Alison*] asked me what I got
And I said, 'I haven't opened them yet.'
I don't think I opened them until the 2nd or 3rd of January.
She asked me what I did get
I said, 'I don't know yet.'
And she said, 'Haven't you opened them?'
'No!'
'Get them out the drawer!'
'Yeah.'
She'd ended up opening them.
When I pulled them out
And, yeah, she actually got less than me
It didn't really faze me
What I got — as long as I passed.
I was just totally relieved that I'd finished. (Kerry)

What is clear from these stories is the great symbolic importance of the senior secondary certificate to the students, their families, and their communities; and to the way they imagined themselves, and to the way their families and communities imagined them.

The awarding of a senior secondary school credential, such as the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), or its equivalent around Australia — the New South Wales Higher School Certificate (HSC), or the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) — is a public act. It is a public recognition of those who are 'capable', 'passed', 'completed', 'finished', or 'have graduated'. This is a rite of passage leading to further education, training, work, and citizenship.

In 1999, 46 Indigenous students completed the SACE. These 46 students constitute the largest number of Indigenous Australian students to have completed senior secondary schooling in a single year in South Australia, and are the cause of some jubilation on the part of education authorities, such as the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA), who are concerned with improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Questions have arisen regarding ways to improve the likelihood of an increase in the number of Indigenous students completing the SACE in future years, and whether an analysis of the experiences of those who succeeded, rather than those who were 'pushed out' (Groome and Hamilton, 1995, p. 5), might indicate the prospect of success for future initiatives.

In our research study (Mercurio and Clayton, in press) we have taken up the challenge put forward by Schwab (1999, p. 58) to focus attention on those students who have succeeded:

[there is] potentially a great deal to learn from successful students ... understanding why and how they 'swim against the stream' is just as important as understanding what factors contribute to leaving school early.

We sought insights into how the Indigenous students understood their success. A descriptive analysis of the whole 1999 cohort of Indigenous students in South Australia frames the research study. A narrative analysis of the experiences of sixteen Indigenous students provides the study with its voice. It is this latter part of the research study that is the focus of this paper.

Conversations with Sixteen Successful Indigenous Students

We invited all 46 Indigenous students who had completed the SACE in 1999 to discuss with us their perceptions about how and why they were able to succeed.

Sixteen Indigenous students agreed to speak with us — twelve female and four male. Six of these students had completed their secondary education in regional and remote rural, government schools; and ten had attended Catholic, Independent, or government, metropolitan high schools. Fourteen of the students were young adults aged 18–19; one was in her 20s, and another in her 40s.

Twelve of the students enrolled in a university course at the beginning of 2000, two enrolled in a Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) course, one deferred university enrolment until 2001, and another went into the workforce.

The students were interviewed between August and November 2000, that is, at least eight months after they had received their secondary school certificate. Given that fourteen of the interview group had enrolled in an educational institution, this timing proved fortunate, as it was then possible to obtain their views on the transition to university or TAFE study, their views on their academic progress in the Semester 1, and impressions about their directions for the immediate and longer-term future.

Our conversations with the students touched on a common set of topics: their study program, level of support, guidance from others, peer group support, school attendance, study habits, life outside school, family commitments, identity formation, aspirations, and their experiences of racism.

Our conversations led us to believe that the considerable success of these students can, to a very large extent, be explained by their imagining themselves as successful students, as Indigenous people, and as future workers and citizens. We believe that imagining oneself in the role of ‘the student’, ‘the Indigenous person’, and ‘the worker and citizen’, is the first step in accepting that persona; and that success requires, to some extent, this acceptance, this imagining.

Imagining Themselves, Imagining Their Futures

Imagining ‘the Student’

The students imagined themselves as ‘the student’. When asked what it takes to complete the secondary school certificate, these students explained it with words such as ‘goals’, ‘commitment’, ‘organisation’, ‘time management’, ‘product’, ‘priorities’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘attendance’, ‘determination’, ‘mentors’, and ‘role models’. The students sincerely believed that success was buried among this array of attributes, and were willing to convey the importance of these for attaining success to other Indigenous students who were about to undertake their senior secondary education. Victoria, David, and Kerry were fervent advocates of these attributes as being essential ingredients in the recipe for success:

Commitment, dedication, organisation —

I reckon organisation is the highest skill out of the whole range. (Victoria)

Oh, a lot of hard work.

Um, some important sacrifices

If you can't umm, juggle your time around

You have to give up a couple of things like I did.

Umm, so yeah, it's just a lot of hard work

You've gotta put in the hours.

You think

People say, ‘Ah, do this many hours.’

But you end up doing a lot more than that. (David)

Have a career, like have a goal

Like a career goal first

Of what you actually want to get into

And make it um, within your reach ...

When I first went through [Year 12]

Um, I don't think any of us really had a goal of what we want to do.

The ones that did

They got through easy as ... (Kerry)

These students not only imagined ‘the student’, but were comfortable with taking the role on board — to the point of becoming role-models, themselves. Perhaps an indication of this is the

fact that at least five of these students took leadership positions in the student life of the school. Victoria and Patricia were prefects in their schools, Patricia also held the position of president of the students' representative council and was heavily involved in organising the school formal. May won the prestigious 'Student of the Year' award, and represented Australia at an international conference in Florence. Anna was a student representative of the theatre company committee in her country town. Rachel obtained the highest tertiary entrance rank¹ in her school. Tom organised a Nunga Club in his school and ensured that a flagpole was erected that would fly the Aboriginal flag daily. Other students, such as Zara, Kerry, and James, although accepting the concept of 'the student', preferred not to involve themselves in the official student life of the school.

Attending school, doing homework, readjusting their priorities in order to do well at school, all were accepted — albeit at times reluctantly — and regarded as given. Fourteen of the sixteen students were very good attendees and, on average, missed less than a week during the school year through illness. Lucy gave this advice to future Year 12 students:

You definitely need to go to your classes

For sure ...

You're not going to do anything if you don't go to them.

Yep. Turn up for a start. (Lucy)

The impending Year 12 workload prompted some of the students to rethink their priorities, and to give up some of their favorite pastimes to concentrate on what they expected to be a gruelling year. Stephen stopped taking piano lessons, Lucy left the cadets, and David gave up playing football:

But um, there was football.

And I was having a hard time juggling football and school in Year 11

Because there was a big jump from Year 10.

So I thought

I would give up football for the next 2 years

Which was Year 12

And this year to see how

Because there's that gap

You know, Year 12, you're got to hand up everything up on time and that

And this year I didn't know what the workload would be like.

So I had to

I gave up football

And that's probably the only thing I had outside of school-life, sports-wise ...

¹ The Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER), is a percentile rank accepted by Australian universities as a critical criterion for the admission of students direct from schooling. University entrance indexes or ranks are variously entitled the University Admission Index (UAI) in the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) in Victoria, the Overall Position (OP) in Queensland, and the TER in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, and Western Australia.

I was really into my football and
I just missed Sundays
I played on Sunday and, yeah, missed Sunday.
And, yeah, there was nothing to do on Sundays
Unless the Crows were on or
I sat down and watched them
But
Yeah, it was pretty hard. (David)

The students believed they had the determination and confidence to succeed, and were, to a large extent, self-reliant. Victoria had her heart set on studying Law, and was determined to enter university on her own merits, and not 'get in through the Aboriginal access thing'.

Being the first in the family to succeed at school was, for thirteen students, incentive enough. Confidence was boosted when family members affirmed their abilities, singling them out as 'the only one in the family' or 'the first in the family' to succeed academically. Underlying this support is the belief by parents and caregivers, and the students themselves, in the value of education.

My parents were constantly pushing me.
'You have to finish.'
'Go to uni.'
'You're going to be the only one in the family'
That sort of thing. (Tom)

James is a good example of the level of determination, self-reliance, and resilience that was needed. For James there came a point during Year 12 when, because of conflict in the family, he realised that if he was to have any chance of completing the SACE, he would have to leave his family home. Here he tells of the difficulty he had in deciding to leave, his understanding of his mother's point of view, his ability to tap into support networks, and how he coped with the temporary dislocation:

And I told mum
And I said, 'I have to move out if I want to finish.'
After, she said she understands and stuff like that
And, um, I got on to the priest, I guess ...
And I told him [the priest], 'I'm going to go through Year 12 ...'
And they came up
With independent places
That are in different suburbs
And to get into one of them I have to be assessed by one of the youth workers. (James)

For James, the need to succeed was grounded in his rejection of the modes of living of some members of his extended family. James placed his trust in education to move him, and his family, along a different road:

I wanted to complete it.

Umm, umm, I've been brought up in a family
That never really finished their schooling.
And I see the struggling
And just thought
'Well, I'm not going to go down that road.'
'I — going to do something with life, myself.'
So, I want to complete my schooling
So I can get a degree and get a job. (James)

According to six of the students (Patricia, Victoria, Silvia, Sophie, Rachel, and Anna) there was never really any doubt that they would gain the SACE, or that they would proceed to university studies. For others (Tom, Zara, Stephen, Joanne, Lucy, David, May, Mary, James, and Kerry) there were some anxious moments. Despite bouts of self-doubt caused by anxiety at the thought of not completing the SACE, Lucy stated emphatically:

No, I never thought of leaving.
There was
There were times when I thought
'Maybe, you know, I won't pass.'
'But I'll try'
'And see what I can do ...'
Yeah, I was definitely going to stay right through to the end.
Whether I passed or not was another question
But, yeah
I was definitely giving it a go. (Lucy)

The students were frank about the collective encouragement they received from parents and caregivers, teachers, tutors, Aboriginal Education Teachers, school principals, and friends who helped them to imagine themselves as 'the successful student'; they too internalised the goal of completing schooling, and the importance of education to future success as workers and citizens.

According to the students, the support ('faith', 'encouragement', 'support', and 'love') shown by their parents and caregivers, was perhaps the single most important factor in ensuring that they succeeded.

When asked to nominate the person who encouraged them the most, many students pointed to either a particular parent or guardian or to both of their parents or caregivers:

Well, mum and dad firstly
Because they always had faith in me
They always knew I could pass and that ...
Saying, ah
'You're always up late doing your work —' and stuff
I was up at 2 o'clock in the morning doing it
Because I know she loves me.

And I don't know how I'll be able to finish it
And she's going
'Well, you've put in the hard yards here, you might as well put a bit more in!'
They were always just nagging me about it and stuff
But they really helped. (David)

But they really supported me and told me to keep on going
And like, every time I'd go home late
Get home late from school
And from studying and that
I'd say, 'I'm gonna throw it in.'
'I'm sick of it!'
'I'm just gonna chuck it in!'
They said, 'What are you going to chuck it in now for?'
'You've only just got two more terms to go!'
Or '... a term to go.'
Or '... a few more months to go.'
'And then, that's it.'
'You're finished.'
'You don't have to worry about anything else!' (May)

Although some students lived in extended families and had many family obligations (May, James, and David), others did not (Rachel, Silvia, Zara, Victoria, Mary and Patricia). Victoria spoke of being consciously protected by her family from the obligations of a large extended family. Her mother and she believed that taking an active role in a large extended family would not help her chances of doing well at Year 12. Although Mary did not have family obligations she explained that such obligations were often the reason so many Indigenous students are not able to continue their secondary schooling beyond Year 10. She speaks here of an Indigenous friend in her Tourism class:

I think she found it very hard to do work
Because she was away a lot
And of course
The thing is with Indigenous people ...
They have their families
They have their obligations
And I don't have those obligations
So I'm at school all the time, whenever I can be ...
Whereas, they've got obligations
And when they go home
They're the oldest in the family
Therefore they look after the younger ones
That's their job

Umm, and the teachers don't realise that. (Mary)

'Good teachers' made the difference to many students. The students were quick to nominate individual teachers for particular subjects: Patricia, her Aboriginal Studies teacher; Rachel, her Mathematics teacher; and Victoria, her History teacher:

Oh, he inspired me, definitely

He was, like, the whole mentor thing. (Victoria)

Joanne, a student from a remote rural town and the only student in Year 12 at her school, had a teacher who helped her with most of her subjects:

He was, like, my teacher in Year 12

Just that one teacher

Until I did a couple of other subjects. (Joanne)

This teacher would ring Joanne, anticipating that she might be having some difficulties, and would meet her after school to help her complete her assignments.

Many students used the support services provided by the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), and by Aboriginal Education Teachers (AETs) available in their schools. This support clearly made a difference. Nine out of the sixteen students had ATAS tutors in Year 12. Zara had two tutors: one for Mathematics, 'and another tutor for all my other subjects'. For Zara, 'the Maths guy was a genius, a real caring guy'. David had assistance from the same tutor who convinced him to apply for a university course in Architecture, even though he had not undertaken a Year 12 program of study that would lead to a calculation of a tertiary entrance rank. (David was accepted into Architecture and is achieving very good marks.) Tom had tutors for Chemistry and Biology, 'the subjects which I really showed a lot of interest in'. He spoke highly of his AET, a 'brilliant woman, absolutely brilliant', who was 'more a friend than she was a superior adult'.

The students spoke about how they enjoyed school friendships and how important these were to their success. Mary spoke fondly of a close friend she had during the previous years' study. Stephen spoke about how he enjoyed going across the road with his friends to buy pasties! He brought his school friend Peter to the interview, and attributed Peter as being the source of much of his enthusiasm for his study. David and James went to the same school as each other, and were very close friends. At the time of the interview, James was living with David's family. None of the interviewed students made a special point of telling us whether their friends were Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

Surprisingly, we found that although the students appreciated having the opportunity to learn about Indigenous topics and issues during the study of some of their subjects, they did not seem concerned, nor did they expect that this would be part of their formal study.

What, then, was the importance of receiving the certificate on that day in December? In a sense, it affirmed their belief in the value of imagining 'the student', and their commitment to imagining education as a vehicle for success. The symbolic value of the certificate as a public acknowledgement of having completed school was not lost on these students, their families, or their communities. What was critically important was 'getting the certificate'. Listening to the

stories of these students, we were left with the impression that it was of paramount importance that when they opened the envelope they found a SACE certificate in it.

One can only guess at the absolute devastation that must be felt by those students who open the envelope and find a document that, in their eyes, represents a failure.

Imagining ‘the Indigenous Person’

We believe that a major factor in the success of the interviewed students is that they are positive and comfortable with their Aboriginality.

In this section, our purpose is to portray some of the students’ thoughts as they move along their personal journeys in relation to their identity. We have adopted the approach of Oxenham et al. (1999) to simply document the students’ exploration of their identity, rather than to require them to justify their Aboriginality.

For some students (Rachel, Patricia, Sophie, Silvia, and Stephen), their understanding of themselves as Aboriginal people could be explained as either ‘background’ or ‘descent’:

So, it’s a family history thing, basically

It’s kind of an identity thing.

Like where I came from

But not so much as me being actively involved in the community now ...

I don’t even know if there are any other Indigenous students at my school

None that I know of ...

Yeah, when, you know, when it comes down to filling forms

I’ll always tick that because that is what I identify as

And it think it’s important for both my parents, you know

Even for my mother

That my sister and I identify with Aborigines. (Rachel)

For many of the interviewed students, being publicly known as ‘being Aboriginal’ is a private matter that they control. Some of their friends do not know that they are Aboriginal. Their light-coloured skin allows them to affirm this sense of being only when they believe it is important and necessary. For example, taking part in these interviews was important to these students. Similarly, they feel it is necessary to make their Aboriginality public when people — usually friends or acquaintances — make racist comments, which the students euphemistically referred to as giving them ‘flak’. Such public episodes compel the interviewed students to reveal that they are Aboriginal, in an attempt to dispel stereotypes and to bring about justice for Aboriginal people:

And so, like, people would ask me

And I’d say, ‘Yeah, I’m Aboriginal’

And they’d say, ‘Oh.’ (*laughter*)

Yeah, so there are some people that, like, didn’t know, I suppose ...

But if it came up, sort of thing ...

Then yeah, like, say, 'Yeah, yeah, I am.' (Silvia)

For David, Lucy, Anna, Victoria, May, Joanne, Mary, Tom, Zara, and Kerry, 'being Aboriginal' seems to take on a more public sense in their everyday lives. However, some of the students (for example, Silvia and Rachel) bring up their Aboriginality when they need to defend it; others (for example, Tom, Zara, and Kerry) do not appreciate having to declare their Aboriginality to those who refuse to believe that they *are* Aboriginal — whether the disbelief comes from non-Aboriginal, or in some cases, Aboriginal people.

In the next passage, Tom talks of feeling like an outsider among the Indigenous students in school. His family are only recently identifying, having discovered that they are Aboriginal when Tom was in 'about Year 8 or 9'. Tom's comments illustrate the dilemmas of justification versus exploration of identity (Oxenham, 1999):

Ah, yeah, um, identity? (*pause*)

As I was saying, um, yeah, white, being very white in the school

And having to look after

Or not look after, but

Get people of a different coloured skin

They saw me as an outcast more than anything.

Even um, within the Aboriginal people, the group

I was more of an outcast because of the colour of my skin.

(*Pause*) umm

I suppose they saw me more as an outsider ...

But it's really hard to find (*pause*)

An identity

An Aboriginal identity

When you have so many,

And even your own 'people'

Um, pushing against you ...

Um, it's very hard to try and focus on an identity because my parents

Um, we didn't even know until my sister got involved in the Aboriginal group

And um, we started tracking our history and found that the Aboriginal side of the family

Although we've still trying to track the family group and where it's from

Um, because it's really hard with the stolen generation

Um, and it makes it very difficult to know that

That's what happened.

And identity is really hard

Hard to get a hold of

And you tend to pick up a lot of other people's identities

Or take bits and pieces from their identity (*pause*) or culture ... (Tom)

Tom speaks of his 'identity crisis': issues of whiteness, culture, 'the other', and playing it safe. The following passage is about positioning, about the juxtapositioning of 'white culture' and

‘Aboriginal culture’, about ‘them’ and ‘us’, and about sameness and difference. It is a statement about Tom’s active, ongoing personal journey, about *following* ‘them’, *sitting* ‘in the middle’, *playing* ‘it safe’, and *getting* ‘a lot of flak’:

But yeah, I was brought up in white culture.
And trying to get my Aboriginal culture
And the identity crisis that I had
‘Am I white?’
‘Do I follow them or am I Aboriginal?’
‘Do I follow them, or why can’t I just sit in the middle, and be *different*?’
Which was what I ended up doing for a while.
I sat in the middle, and thought
‘Well, I’ll do what I can with them —’
‘And I’ll do what I can with *them*.’
But at the end of the day, we were just going to sit on the fence
And play it safe
And have our little security blanket so I’m not getting any of that flak.
But I did get flak, a lot of flak
‘You hang around with *them*! Rah, rah, rah!’ (Tom)

Perhaps the clearest example of the importance of ‘body politics’ and its relationship with the justification or exploration of identity is that given by Kerry, who was interviewed by telephone from interstate, and weaved into the conversation a description of herself:

My mother is [Aboriginal].
She’s whiter than me, though.
She’s whiter than me
She’s very, very fair.
I mean, I’ve got blonde hair, blue eyes, really fair skin.
A lot of people don’t even think I’m Aboriginal.
As soon as you say that
They absolutely freak out
Think you’re a liar. (Kerry)

The definition of themselves held by May and Joanne is grounded in particular Aboriginal communities and languages. May is clear about her origins, and relates closely to her extended family and particularly her grandparents. Joanne is from remote rural South Australia, she identifies with the Aboriginal community in her area, and studied Arabana in the Year 12 subject, Australian Indigenous Languages. Her father speaks Arrente, Pitjantjatjarra, and Arabana, and her mother speaks Naribon and Dieri.

I guess sometimes it’s hard to explain to people
Like, I was born in Queensland
And the group of
The, um, black fellas from there are the Murrises

And the group are the Waka Waka people
And that's where my mum's from.
And like, I was born there and then I moved down here — at the age of 2
Like my dad
He isn't my dad
But he was the only father figure I've ever known.
So I just call him dad.
And he accepts it.
And — so does everybody else ...
Yeah, um, a Nurranga person
Well, the — a Nurranga person is where the Point Pearce mob come from Nurranga
And the Waka Waka person is where
Is where my mum is from
In Cherbourg, near Brisbane.
I don't know, I guess I see myself as both. (May)

We heard how the students imagine themselves as 'the Indigenous person'. We had the overwhelming impression that these interviewed students were positive and comfortable about their Aboriginality. Although they were actively participating in, often difficult, explorations of their identity, as Rachel put it:

I'll always tick that because that is what I identify as. (Rachel)

Imagining 'the Worker and Citizen'

The interviewed students have imagined themselves in the role of 'the future worker and citizen'. Many had very firm ideas on what they wanted to study at university or TAFE, and what they wished to do after their studies and training. Most of them had long-term plans and were able to articulate these in detail. We were left with the impression that many of the interviewed students would certainly succeed in their university and TAFE studies, although they may need to take longer than they had expected to take.

Both Victoria and Silvia have opted to study a double degree in law. Victoria believes that she will not be a practising lawyer, whereas Silvia wants to be a barrister. David has had his 'passion' for many years:

And I had this dream, um, of building my own
Like going through Architecture
And getting into a firm for 10 years or so
And then probably setting up my own little firm ...
It's a dream — passion — that I've had since Year 9 ...
When I've completed my university degree
And been accepted
Or got a job in an architectural firm in Adelaide, Melbourne

Anywhere

Even overseas.

Five years of high school

Got another 5 years of this. *(laughter)*

So —

You get a good education.

You get a good education — you get a good job.

I'll be out of here by the time I'm 23

And that's not even half my life gone.

So by that time I'll be in a good job. (David)

Some of the students (for example, Tom, Zara, Joanne, and Sophie) found the transition to university particularly difficult; but rather than dampen their enthusiasm, it made them rethink their goals and how they might achieve them, and they adjusted their plans accordingly. Tom now says that he has adjusted to the rigours of university. Zara has found the pace of work at university too fast, and has decided to study fewer subjects in Semester 2. Like Zara, Joanne has decided that the pace of her studies is too fast. She found 'leaving a small community and coming to the big smoke' difficult; she prepared for her studies 'on and off', and thus has decided to take fewer subjects in Semester 2. She has enrolled in a Teaching degree and wants to teach Indigenous students in a rural community. She remains enthusiastic and quietly confident. Sophie is finding her studies particularly challenging. Sophie has enrolled in a Bachelor of International Studies degree, and is studying a difficult set of undergraduate subjects — Economics, Quantitative Methods, Japanese, and Introduction to Management — given that she did not study any of these subjects in Year 12! She plans to enrol at another university next year, one which she believes provides a more 'focused course', and which offers scholarships to go overseas.

Although Patricia and Anna have dropped out of university, they intend to recommence their studies next year. Patricia was the first to admit that her ideas on what she would like to do have changed over the past twelve months and she is now keen to study Business Management. Anna realised fairly early in the semester that the course she had chosen was not going to be as she had envisaged it. She therefore withdrew from university, and applied for a traineeship, which she was successful in gaining. She plans to return to university after she has completed her traineeship. She is no longer living with her aunt, and has moved to the city, where she plans to rent a place with her brother. She auditioned for the Elder Conservatorium [of Music] but was not successful. However, she has not lost sight of her dream of being part of the musical world:

Yep. *(laughter)*

Ah, one day, I want to own my own, um, recording studio

That's my big, my very big plan.

I don't know if I'll get there or not

But, yeah, whatever. (Anna)

Some students have deferred their entry to university and training. James decided that he would need to earn some money to get him through university. Therefore, he applied for, and

gained, a clerical traineeship with the South Australian Health Commission (now the Department of Human Services). He did not find this interesting and, while at the Health Commission, was counselled to apply to study Medicine next year. He has decided that he wishes to pursue this idea. He has subsequently undertaken a six-month Certificate II Hospitality course, intending to work in the hospitality industry while studying medicine.

Stephen decided to defer his diploma studies in Agriculture for one year. He is working on his father's property and intends to come to Adelaide at the beginning of next year to commence his studies. Stephen stuns his friend Peter, who also attended the interview, with his confidence, forward-thinking, and the totality of his plans for the future:

OK, um, my long-term goal is to buy a biggish piece of property for myself
And build a house on that
And get it all paid for, and be successful.
That's mine.
There's a place I've got an eye on, yep.
'Really?' [interjects Peter]
Yeah mate. Your place!
'This is what he does on the tractor all day — thinks about these things!' [Peter]
Yeah, that's true
I spend a lot of thinking hours on the tractor.' (Stephen)

Mary decided that she would study at TAFE to be an assistant teacher. She aims to help Indigenous students in primary schools. She has found the courses at TAFE difficult.

May is passing her subjects at TAFE. For May, gaining a traineeship at the South Australian Museum and working with 'the biggest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection in the world', is a surprise, as much as it is a privilege. Although she says that she has no grand plan, she believes that one day she will undertake a degree at a university, and 'it is really important for everyone to have a degree in life':

I just want to take it as I go
I didn't really expect to have the traineeship
I expected to have a long break.
A twelve-month break from studying
But this traineeship, an extra, high expectations
And I just couldn't refuse it.
So, yeah, it was an offer I couldn't refuse ...
Like, the new Australian Aboriginal Cultural Gallery.
Like, the *biggest!*
Like, the *biggest* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection in the world!
Yeah, yeah
So we have the biggest collection in the State
Or in the whole of Australia
And then the whole of the world

So it was like that.

It was like giving

Having an opportunity of being one of the first Indigenous trainees

The first of four to start working here at the museum. (May)

Kerry returned to school as an adult to complete her secondary schooling. This was necessary for her to realise her dream of entering the police force. On finishing school, she decided to travel around Australia, and found herself working on a prawn-fishing boat in Western Australia. Her plans are to:

Go back out on the prawn boats

Um, do another seven or eight months there, until September.

Then I'll apply for the police force while I'm back home. (Kerry)

We asked when they thought they would be successful; some students replied that they were already successful because they had completed the SACE, they had passed. Others felt that they would be successful only when they completed their university degree.

May saw it differently. She couched success not in terms of completing a degree or being successful at a career but of being an important member of a family and of a community:

When I'm dead! (*laughter*) (*long pause*)

No, no, I shouldn't talk like that (*long pause*)

When? (*long pause*)

I don't know. (*pause*)

I haven't really thought about that either. (*pause*)

I guess (*pause*) when I am settled and I have children of my own

I'll probably be still working after that.

I don't know, when I am an older, greyer woman with my grannies sitting on my lap. (*laughter*)

Talking about the experiences that I've done.

Saying, 'Yeah I did that, I did that too.'

'Yep this is mine, that's mine too.'

Um — just — I don't know, I guess. (May)

Similarly, James couched success in terms of family responsibilities and becoming a primary provider for his mother and sister:

Next year if I do get into that course

I'll get a scholarship.

That's why they want me to get into Medicine

So it's an incentive from the Health Department

So if I do

I'm probably looking at getting a loan from ATSIC

And move my mother out

So that she can live in the house as well

If she needs to

So she can look after the house while I go to uni

And do my homework ...

My sister, well, she can stay in the house. (James)

The group of students who were interviewed had important and developing roles in their communities. We were afforded an insight into how these students imagined themselves in their roles as citizens. May's successful achievements have made her reflective about her own abilities and her place in the community. She was careful to point out that she saw herself as no different from others her own age, and would not want them to see her as more talented or more successful:

I don't want to seem like the type that —

I don't know, that's done a lot of things

And then nudged everybody off

That wasn't up to my standard.

I don't see

I don't look at myself as being higher than anybody else.

I see myself as being, as being the same level as everybody else.

So when my cousins and all their friends are saying

'Oh, you've done this and you've done that.'

I say, 'Yeah, but I'm exactly the same as you.' (May)

The day the Postie came ...

was an exciting day for Mum and Dad

We believe that these sixteen students were successful because they were able to imagine themselves in the role of 'the student', and were both *expected* and *determined* to succeed. They did so while on a continuing journey of self-discovery. Although these students are called upon regularly to justify their Aboriginality, they are positive and comfortable with it. We found that they have plans, many of them detailed and long-term, which they are keen to see come to fruition. We were left with the strong impression that these big plans have a good chance of being realised.

We were impressed by their energy, their frankness about their journeys of identity, and their thoughtfulness about the meaning of 'success'; and by the futures they seek for themselves, their families, and their communities. Their ideas and feelings were encapsulated by their stories of receiving the SACE certificate and their emotions 'when the postie came'. We shared in the apprehension, elation, and relief felt by the students and their families on their completion of the SACE. For Joanne and her family, being the first Aboriginal student in her remote community to complete Year 12 was a joyous occasion:

We were coming back from [named a country town]

And the envelope was sitting on the table

And mum goes, 'There's this letter for you, can you open it straight away?' (*laughter*)

And I go, 'No, I have to do something.'

And she said, 'Open it now!'
And dad's there sitting at the table looking at it
And he goes, 'That's from SSABSA.'
I go, 'I can see the name on it, dad.'
He goes, 'Just open the God damn thing.'
I go, 'OK.'
And just opened it and left it on the table so they could read it first
And went and did my stuff
And when I came back
Dad was there chucking the papers in the air, and going 'Yes!!!'
I'm going, like, 'Dad, settle down!'
Yeah, it was an exciting day for mum and dad ...
Well, I wanted to forget about — and go home and relax
But they wanted to go out.
So we went out shopping
And dad spoilt me stupid rotten
He bought me, um, CDs, and clothes
And we went out for tea
To this flash place. (*laughter*)
I go
'Dad, we didn't have to come here.'
'It's too flash!'
'Fish and chips would have been fine.' (Joanne)

Heartwarming stories such as Joanne's told us much about the importance of the certificate to these students, to their families, and to their communities.

We learnt that what was important to most of the students was not that they had achieved a high tertiary entrance rank, but that they had completed the SACE, that they had 'passed', and that they had 'got it'.

We learnt how important it is for Indigenous students — like all students — to be encouraged and supported.

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