

A Law Student with a Difference

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Being Aboriginal, growing up in far western Queensland and having attended four different high schools in five years it was highly unlikely that I was ever going to attend university – let alone become a law lecturer.

I have led a somewhat peripatetic life which has taken me all over the world, as well as most of Australia (Tasmania, an island off the Australian continent, is a place I have yet to discover). From the Torres Strait sunshine to the cold confines of Melbourne with interludes in a number of east coast cities including Rockhampton (known to the locals as Rockvegas) where I graduated from Central Queensland University (CQU) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1988. I was the first 'blackfella' to graduate from CQU, which says a lot about the availability and access to tertiary education for Aboriginal people (the first Aboriginal university graduate was in 1967: the late Charles Perkins). It was during my time in Rockhampton that — through the Aboriginal Legal Service — I became interested in law.

I moved to Melbourne to work for the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission where I also became involved in the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. I then returned to Brisbane, Queensland in 1990 to take up the position of Acting Queensland Director of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. After two years at the Commission I decided that I should 'bite the bullet' and go back to university to do law. UNSW Law School accepted me in 1993. I had spent enough time on the periphery of the Law.

Life at law school was a ball (if you take away the serious side where one has to study and work unbelievably hard to get that piece of paper that lets you put LLB after your name).

The first thing that struck me was how competitive law students were. I recall the first assignment we did. After we picked them up, it was obvious some of the students were disappointed with their mark (no doubt used to HDs in their undergrad degree). One of the students said to me 'Kevin, what did you get, I only got 65%' to which I replied 'One step closer to a law degree.' (I didn't have the heart to tell her I got a better mark than her).

The competitiveness extended to students forming little study groups with other like-minded students (read, the potential HD group and so on). They were seriously protective of their group notes and would be under pain of death if one of the group helped someone outside their little learned enclave. My problem was that I didn't care who I helped. I once sat down with a very stressed student before the Property exam and explained to her the answers to a previous years exam question. She later told me she followed what I had shown her and got a HD for Property Law (I didn't get a HD). The student in question went on to become the face of Allan Allen and Hemsley.

Probably the most amusing time was in a pub one night in Newtown after we had finished making a training video for lawyers on Indigenous legal issues which I narrated (it is still shown at College of Law). I was having a few beers with the rest of the crew that made the doco when I was approached by this guy who asked me if I was Kevin Williams. As he didn't look as dodgy as some of my mates I said I was. He then profusely thanked me for my Constitutional Law notes because, he said, without them he would never have passed the subject. I questioned him about how he managed to have my notes as I had only given them to two of my fellow students who were having problems with the subject. He said everyone in the law school had copies, because 'they were just the best'.

The Graduate law program at UNSW was intense. Fortunately I managed to finish in three years, which was quite surprising given the distractions that university life has to offer. As a mature aged student I enjoyed immensely the machinations of the law – those arcane principles were finally demystified.

Armed with a law degree (I was now one of a select group of blackfellas, who had two university degrees... and soon to add a Master of Laws) my sense of altruism was tempered with serious lashings of cynicism (the omnipresent erudite and sagacious black that evolves with age and maturity).

I stayed at UNSW to implement the Indigenous Pre-law Program. I was concerned with the horrific failure rate of Indigenous law students while I was studying at UNSW, so with government funding, the Law school set up a six week intensive law program for potential Indigenous students. We inculcated students with an overload of what the law was about (especially black letter law subjects such as Contracts and Tort

law). We taught them research and writing skills, how to write case notes and assignments and generally pushed them beyond their limits. This was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had; to know that I was instrumental in getting blackfellas into law school and to see them graduate with law degrees.

I have found my law degree to be invaluable, especially since the Howard government came to power in 1996 and endeavoured to make wholesale changes to the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth). I went to Europe in 1998 and managed to convince the United Nations that the amendments to the Act were in breach of the UN Convention on the *Elimination of all Forms of Racism*. But that is another story – along with many others that would not have happened if I did not have a law degree.

I have digressed somewhat, in that I have written about my experiences with the law since finishing my degree, so back to being a law student at that venerable establishment UNSW Faculty of Law.

Apart from having some of the best academic legal minds in the country teaching me, the most enjoyable part of life at law school was knowing that I had helped many of my fellow students get through law school and they reciprocated. So much for that competitiveness that I first witnessed when I started law.