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Unis try to ease Indigenous path from home to college

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The first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives, Ken Wyatt, was told to drop out of school in year five because he was told he "would amount to nothing more than another Aboriginal person".

"If you think back to 50 years ago, education wasn't universal, access to it was problematic," he told the audience celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first Indigenous man to graduate from university, Charlie Perkins.

Despite five Indigenous MPs now occupying chairs in federal parliament, education is still not universal, the latest PISA results have revealed.

The findings, released on Tuesday, showed only 25 per cent of Indigenous students reached a standard of maths that could be used in everyday life, only 32 per cent did so in reading, while lagging more than two school years behind their non-Indigenous peers in both subject areas and science.

So bad have Indigenous education outcomes remained that on the 50th anniversary of Perkins' graduation, Australia's newest Indigenous senator said the best education for Indigenous Australians was in jail.

"One of the highlights for what the prison system is doing is educating our prisoners, giving them degrees offering them opportunities so that they can try and better their lives when they walk out the gates," Senator Malarndirri McCarthy told the audience at the University of Sydney's Great Hall in October.

"Have a think about that: There is something terribly wrong in our country when we must rely on our prison system for the best education for our people."

Aborigines account for 26 per cent of prison inmates despite comprising only 2.5 per cent of the Australian population.

The incarceration and school statistics are mirrored at university level, where Indigenous students account for only 1 per cent of Australia's students. Of those that do make it to university, a mere 28 per cent complete their degrees, figures from the federal Department of Education reveal.

Efforts are being made to turn those statistics around, with the hope that they will flow on to schooling and the wider Indigenous community.

UNSW is running a winter school for Indigenous high school students to ease the transition from regional areas to university; in Camperdown the University of Sydney will launch a program that will subsidise more than \$7000 worth of the first year of accommodation for all Indigenous students.

"We lose the bulk of students who don't complete their degree in their first year," said the University of Sydney's Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Indigenous Strategy and Services, Shane Houston.

Brieanna Watson moved between 17 schools before majoring in Ancient History at the University of Sydney. She said community-based accommodation was crucial for Indigenous students making the jump to an unfamiliar city.

"There is the big stigma at the university that it's mostly white students and only white students apply for colleges," she said.

From next year, a deal with the culturally diverse International House will enable hundreds of the university's students to apply for subsidised accommodation.

"The University of Sydney is one of the universities trying to help Indigenous students as much as they can, but what they have done has taken far longer than it should," Ms Watson said.

Professor Houston pointed out that there were now 16,000 Indigenous students in higher education across the country.

"We have to accept that just getting people in the door is not good enough."