

Joining the elite

“Program hopes to coax them away from the poverty line”

Trinity College’s century-long tradition of ivory tower prestige has beached the college on an island with its blue-blooded brothers. Essentially modelled upon the silver spoons of its Cambridge and Oxford fathers, the Melbourne college has distinctly remained an icon of privilege. Until now.

With over half a million dollars worth of scholarships, the residential college’s social landscape is now gradually shedding itself of the stagnant hubris that once, and still is, dogging public appraisal of the Anglican institution.

The dean of Trinity College, Campbell Bairstow, explains Trinity’s self-regulating conscience. “Collegiate education [should be] available to as many people as possible. Trinity College is a relatively expensive education, but we’ve been able to find benefactors and donors who support the idea of people having access to education.”

Dana Zarzycki, Trinity’s associate director of advancement, elaborates further, “One of Trinity’s long term goals is to be a needs-blind institution, meaning we aim to make the ‘Trinity Experience’ available to anyone.”

“It’s a position that’s been achieved by some of the very established universities in the United States, for example, and that would mean that Trinity would offer a place to whoever applied on the grounds of their merit rather than their financial circumstance,” Bairstow says.

Scholarships are, but the tip of the iceberg, in Trinity’s rapidly evolving social conscience. Members of its administration are also trying to reverse cultures of disparity in Australia’s educational landscape. Increasingly so, is their focus on Indigenous education.

“The college believes the contribution we can make to Indigenous education is our contribution to reconciliation,” Bairstow says.

In the realm of tertiary education, Indigenous students represent 1.2% of the entire domestic student population.

Rita Ekberg, the Co-ordinator of the Minyerri Trip, a trip that visits a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory, 270 km out of Katherine, explains the disparity between educational standards. “The reading level was particularly low of all the students, which is basically because they grow up speaking three languages. The Year 10s have picture books in their classroom. That is scary.”

Inspired by its lofty goal of absolute egalitarianism, with Bairstow leading the charge,

Trinity College is planning to admit and graduate more Indigenous students with a program called “Step UP”.

To be in place next year, the program hopes to coax them away from the poverty line and into a tertiary education with the succulent char-grilled flavours of collegiate success.

A scholarship-funded residential pass to College worth up to \$2600 for high school students from Years 9 to Years 11 should



do it, according to Vincent Ramos, associate director of community relations at Trinity College.

“This ‘inviting in’ makes the College accessible, and is, from what I can see, a strong encouragement to continue on to higher education,” Ramos says. “For two entire weeks, they gain a much more intense sense of the kinds of things that a ‘real’ college student would do.”

The invitation is part of the Young Leaders Summer School where students across the globe “get a taste of what it’s like to go to uni and live at college.”

“Simply being in the environment, being exposed to the traditions, the expectations, the general excellence of the place, can

be very motivating to any student.”

One girl, Emily, who was invited into the College, wrote to Ramos, and said, “I would like to thank you for the great opportunity that we were able to experience by spending 2 weeks at Trinity College. I personally would now like to go to Trinity to further my educational studies.”

This sort of contact that ensues is a central point to the Step UP program to “keep the ideas and motivation going,” rationalises Ramos who is on Facebook terms with past students.

“We’ll be looking to keep in touch with them as they progress through school, and hope to see as many as possible, want to pursue a

degree and go on to higher education,” he says.

Step UP begins to bear its fruits when high school graduates are enrolled on a needs-blind scholarship into a special undergraduate degree tailored to the cultural needs of the Indigenous students.

“We are working with the university to establish curriculum that will help Indigenous students be successful at the University of Melbourne,” Zarzycki explains.

“Trinity is also likely to develop tutorials for this program and to have staff, who are culturally sensitive to the students’ needs, on hand to assist on a daily basis,” she says.

The Paper on the Step UP

program details: “Students will be resident at Trinity or other affiliate University Colleges with attendant tutorials, mentoring, chaplaincy, and support and celebration of Indigenous culture, while undertaking their undergraduate degree.”

Bairstow remains cautious with his optimism for the program that will sow the Indigenous seed into the rich garden of higher education.

“We don’t know whether it’ll work, but we believe it’ll work,” he concludes.

“It’s one of those important and happy things where people’s passions, interest and resources come together. It’s wonderful.”

Louis Dai