



community based teacher education

Sarah Burke shares her experiences studying to be a teacher with the support of RATEP.

In 2016, Sarah completed her Certificate IV in Education through RATEP at TAFE Queensland North. In 2017 she is enrolled in a Bachelor of Education at James Cook University.



Tell us a bit about yourself, your background and community.

I was born in Cloncurry. My mother is from a non-Indigenous background. Her side of my family have lived in Cloncurry for the past 150 years. My father is from the Kalkadoon tribe, a tribe from the Mount Isa region of Queensland.

Growing up we spent a lot of time in my father's country in Kajabbi and at White Hills Station. The station is about two hours north of Cloncurry. I still love to go back there every chance I get, and take my daughters with me who are aged 20, 16 and 6. I now live in Townsville with my three daughters.

Why do you want to become a teacher?

I left school in Year 10, and never thought that university or a career as a teacher was attainable for someone like me. So I enrolled in a trade to become an electrician. I have worked as an electrician most of my adult life.

When I relocated to Townsville, I took on a business development role with a large energy

“From a young age I had always admired my teachers and how involved and supportive they were. I find that teachers are very genuine people, with a genuine interest in their students’ lives. That’s the type of teacher I want to become.”

company. I would often travel away alone around remote Queensland and Northern Territory. I didn't like being away so much from my family in the middle of nowhere, and I felt more and more isolated. Because of the isolation, I found myself thinking about pursuing my dream career as a teacher.

In 2016 I was offered a redundancy package. I took the redundancy as an opportunity to finally do something different, take a chance and undertake study. It was at this point in time, that I carried out research into what courses were available to become a teacher and realise my dream career.

Why did you choose to enrol through RATEP?

I finished school in Year 10, which meant I didn't have the required Year 11 or Year 12 qualifications to gain entry into university. I chose the RATEP course because it offered me the chance to become a qualified teacher's aide, and gain the qualifications to get into university.

I also chose to study through RATEP because of their off-site, community-based Indigenous program. I was enrolled with TAFE Queensland North, in Cairns, but I could study locally from Townsville.

What have you enjoyed the most about studying through RATEP?

The amount of support I received was most important to me and what I enjoyed the most. I was making such a huge career change later in life. I left my job and stable income and still had to support three daughters. It was a big risk for me both personally and financially. I couldn't have done it without such support.

What's more, I enjoyed going to Cairns for the block training. I went three times during the year. This is where I met with student peers and teachers face-to-face. It allowed me to share my stories and experiences and to build my networks. I would recommend students attend the block training in person as much as possible.

“Life at RATEP was like studying in my own community. My fellow students were from similar backgrounds – mostly Indigenous people who are mature age students with children. I had a lot in common with them. I also had a good amount of support from teachers, Elders and mentors. I never felt isolated.”

What advice would you give to others wanting to enrol in RATEP?

Considering the majority of people who were enrolled with me were parents, it's important such people make sure that they have the time to commit to study.

Another piece of advice is that RATEP is a great place to start your education. I started with RATEP and completed my Certificate IV in Education. This certification allowed me to get into James Cook University to begin my Bachelor of Education.

Plus, the off-site program allows students to study in any Queensland community where there is no RATEP site. This is important for Indigenous people who live in smaller townships or remote areas, giving them greater access to further their education.

“Commit yourself to know what's right in your heart, then it will all slot into place. Go after your dreams.”

How do you think RATEP recognises the important role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play within the community?

The RATEP course embeds the Indigenous culture into all teaching areas and subjects. I was always encouraged by my teachers, Elders and mentors, to incorporate our customs and traditions into my teaching programs.

For instance, I was encouraged to use dreamtime stories and dreamtime characters to teach children literacy and English, and for them to use the stories as building blocks to move on to more complicated literature. With science, I was taught to take the children outside of the classroom and go walkabout to demonstrate how science is at work in our communities.

I was also encouraged to let children talk in their own dialect and I was taught the importance of engaging with Elders and other community members to develop my teaching programs.