

INTERVIEW

WITH GEMMA MCKINNON

by Robert McCreery



Gemma McKinnon is descended from the Barkindji people of far western New South Wales. She is a law graduate from the University of New South Wales ('UNSW') and the recent recipient of a Churchill Fellowship. Gemma's Fellowship has allowed her to examine programs to assist Indigenous students gain entry to law school and support them throughout the course of their studies.

You have been awarded a Churchill Fellowship, can you tell us a bit about what a Churchill Fellowship is and the application process you went through?

The Churchill Fellowship is a program that funds Australians to complete a research project of their design overseas, with the aim that they will return to Australia and share their findings. The application process involved a written application and two rounds of interviews. A successful applicant needs to show why their project is important, why it requires research overseas, why you're the right person to conduct the research and finally, what you plan to do to share your findings on your return.

Can you tell us about your research project?

My Fellowship is sponsored by Monash University. Monash sponsor a Fellowship for projects focused on university management. My research looks at admissions programs and support mechanisms for Indigenous law students. I travelled to Canada, the US and New Zealand, and met with people from various universities and programs to find out about what difficulties students face during the course of their degree and what support

services and admissions programs are available to them. The project was designed to assist in improving graduation rates of Aboriginal law students in Australia, so I also gathered statistics on the graduation rates of students at the institutions that I visited.

What research has the Fellowship allowed you to do that you otherwise wouldn't have been able to?

For me, the Fellowship allowed me to travel overseas and conduct research in an area of personal interest. I don't currently work in this field but it is something that I am very passionate about. The Fellowship made it possible for me to do research that I may never have had the opportunity to do otherwise, especially not at this early stage in my career. Although there are obvious financial burdens associated with conducting research outside of your line of work (including taking a two month leave of absence), it gives you flexibility in your research. Much of my research was done through sharing stories with other Indigenous people involved in the law, or the study of law. If one person's story introduced me to a new concept or issue, I was free to explore that further and tailor my project to look into that issue in other locations if I found it to be particularly interesting or relevant. This is what made the Fellowship experience so special for me.

What have been some of the key findings of your research so far?

My research has shown that cultural and academic supports need to operate in parallel with each other. Academically, a focus on skills rather than content seems to provide strong outcomes. In terms of admissions, there are a variety of methods used by universities, but whatever the process is it needs to be complemented by an appropriate support program throughout the course of study. Finally, I noted that students enjoy and engage more in study when there is a strong presence of Indigenous academics and staff within the faculty.

A large part of your research involves examining alternative entry programs. What exactly are alternative entry programs?

By alternative entry programs, I'm talking about pathways to entry. Many universities offer alternative means of gaining entry to law school for Indigenous students as opposed to having to meet the mainstream entry requirements of the school. Alternative entry programs recognise the need to create equality in both the university, and legal systems.

Are there currently alternative entry programs available to Indigenous students in Australia?

Yes, each university has its own program for entry. Some have programs that involve on-campus preparation courses; others have different ATAR [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank] requirements for Aboriginal students.

What was your own pathway to studying law at university?

I completed UNSW's pre-law program. The program involves a 4-week on-campus academic program. Students' ability to complete a law degree is assessed during the period, and admission is awarded to those who are found to be capable at that point.

Where have you worked since graduating with your law degree?

I completed my PLT [Practical Legal Training] with a large corporate firm and am now practising as a solicitor at a community legal centre.

Why have you now chosen to return to the community sector?

Like many Aboriginal law students I wanted to study law so that I could use my degree for the benefit of Aboriginal people. Working in the community sector gives me the opportunity to work with Aboriginal communities. Although it's often a baptism of fire, I also appreciate the opportunity to have carriage of matters—in terms of experience in legal practice for a young lawyer, I don't think I'd be given the kind of responsibility that I have working in the community sector anywhere else.

What advice do you have for young Indigenous men and women wanting to study law?

I guess primarily my advice is that it's possible and that you're not alone. The network of Indigenous lawyers and law students is not only strong here in Australia, but also globally. Studying law will open doors for you that you never believed possible and will give you the tools to change the world you live in should you choose to.

Finally, what impact do you hope your research and findings will have for Indigenous students wanting to study law in Australia?

I hope that universities around Australia will take note of what schools are doing overseas. There are significant but simple changes that can be implemented in Australian

law schools that I believe can make a big difference to the experience of Indigenous law students in Australia. I also hope that the network of schools that contributed to my research will help to facilitate exchange programs for

Indigenous law students throughout the three countries. I found the experience to be valuable, not only academically, but culturally also, and I think it would be great to see more networking of students between the CANZUS nations.

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