

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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## **Conaci Scholars head to Rome**

First Nations students Drew Campbell and Jacob Lasserre are preparing for their first visit to the Eternal City after winning Australian Catholic University's prestigious Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship.

Named in honour of an Aboriginal boy who travelled from Nyoongar Country in Western Australia to Rome to study in a Benedictine monastery in the in the 1850s, the Conaci Scholarship offers Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students the opportunity to study at ACU's Rome Campus.

ACU Pro-Vice Chancellor (Indigenous) Kelly Humphrey said the Conaci Scholarship was "a truly special opportunity".

"Drew and Jacob aren't just travelling, they're walking in the footsteps of Francis Xavier Conaci, proudly representing their communities and culture," Ms Humphrey said.

"It's an excellent opportunity to grow as young leaders, connect with others at our Rome Campus and show the next generation of First Nations students just how far their journey can go."

### **Dreaming big**

Jacob, 19, is a proud Kamilaroi man, originally from Cambooya, 40 minutes south of Toowoomba. He is in the second year of a Bachelor of Arts /Bachelor of Secondary Education at ACU's Brisbane Campus.

"I just finished my first prac, and now I'm off to Rome, so it's been pretty full on," Jacob said.

"But it's confirmed my decision to become a teacher, I can't wait to get into the classroom."

Drew, 19, is a Wiradjuri woman who grew up in Nambour on the Sunshine Coast. After representing Queensland in soccer, she was inspired by her social worker mother to embark on a career with impact. She is undertaking a Bachelor of Speech Pathology at ACU's Brisbane Campus.

"I had an aunty who said a speech pathologist saved her life – for people struggling to communicate after strokes, or kids who can't communicate, it's vital," Drew said.

"I would love to do placements in rural areas and give back to Indigenous communities."

The pair bonded over the experience of moving from small towns to the city for university and a shared desire to take up every opportunity on offer and use their studies to make a difference.

"I'd say jump on every opportunity that comes your way – it is what pushes you to do something great in the world," Drew said.

For Jacob, ACU's First People's support network has helped ease the transition to university.

"Coming from a small town to a big city like Brisbane for university was overwhelming at first, but having a dedicated space on campus really helped, and all of the other Indigenous students were so welcoming – they feel like family."

## **Passing on culture**

As Conaci Scholars, Drew and Jacob will represent First Nations people during NAIDOC Week in Rome, hosted by Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, His Excellency Keith Pitt.

The theme for NAIDOC Week 2025 is “The Next Generation: Strength, Vision & Legacy”, which celebrates the contributions of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and highlights the importance of supporting their development and empowerment.

“At the Australian Embassy to the Holy See, we are delighted to welcome Drew and Jacob to help us celebrate NAIDOC Week here in Rome,” Ambassador Pitt said.

“The Conaci Scholarship pays homage to the role of our First Nations in the development of Australia-Holy See relations, while also strengthening the human connections that underpin them.”

Jacob is looking forward to sharing his culture on his first overseas trip.

“I’ve always been proud to represent my community and culture, so to share that is an amazing opportunity. We’re going to take over some Indigenous artefacts and traditional artworks to help explain their history and their significance.

“I also can’t wait to explore – I am a big history guy, so I can’t wait to visit the Vatican, Florence, Naples and all of the archeological sites around Italy.”

## **Exploring faith**

Both Drew and Jacob are eager to trace the journey of their scholarship namesake and pay their respects to Conaci, who is believed to be buried in the Papal Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls.

For Jacob, who was raised in a staunch Catholic family, the pilgrimage to honour Conaci has extra resonance.

“Because of my family and my faith, I have a very strong moral compass,” Jacob said.

“My grandmother was a religious teacher when she was younger, and is very devout, so she’s very excited that I get the chance to visit the Vatican.

“Pope Francis was so influential, and it’s exciting to see how Pope Leo will carve out his own path – I feel like it’s a time of renewal.”

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