

MEDIA RELEASE

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Conaci scholars proud to represent Dharug mob in Rome

Proud Dharug students Tanisha Sonter and Hayden Atkins have taken their culture, community and aspirations to Rome as recipients of Australian Catholic University's 2026 Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship.

The scholarship will see the two ACU students live and study at ACU's Rome Campus while representing the Dharug Nation, whose ancestral lands extend across much of the Greater Sydney region, from the Hawkesbury River to Broken Bay.

Their selection marks a significant milestone in the history of the Conaci Scholarship, with Tanisha and Hayden becoming the first two students from the same Aboriginal Nation to receive the scholarship in the same year.

Named in honour of Francis Xavier Conaci, a young Aboriginal boy who travelled from Noongar Country in Western Australia to Rome to study at a Benedictine monastery in the 1850s, the scholarship offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students a unique opportunity for cultural exchange, leadership development and international study.

ACU Pro-Vice Chancellor (Indigenous) Kelly Humphrey said the Conaci Scholarship was a life-changing experience of cultural exchange and learning.

“Tanisha and Hayden represent the very best of what this scholarship stands for,” Ms Humphrey said.

“As proud Dharug scholars, they will carry their culture, their community and their aspirations with them to Rome.

“Their selection is significant not only because they’re the first two students from the same Nation to receive the scholarship together, but because they embody the leadership, determination and generosity that will inspire future generations of First Nations students.

“They are following in the footsteps of Francis Xavier Conaci while creating a legacy of their own.

“The Conaci Scholarship is an overseas study experience that fosters further opportunities. While in Rome, previous scholarship recipients have built relationships, shared culture, and represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on a global stage.”

During their time in Rome, Tanisha and Hayden will engage with leaders and dignitaries, including representatives within the Vatican, while proudly sharing their experiences as Dharug people and members of the ACU community.

Finding their mob at uni

Hayden, 24, is a proud Dharug man from the Hawkesbury region in north-west Sydney and is in his third year of a Bachelor of Physiotherapy at ACU's North Sydney Campus.

“What kept me at ACU is the Yalbalinga Indigenous Higher Education Unit. Yalbalinga has been so supportive, especially in helping me develop professional relationships,” Hayden said.

“It’s been bigger than university for me. They’ve set me up with lots of connections outside of on-campus learning. I’m grateful.”

Tanisha, 20, is a Dharug woman living in Western Sydney. Tanisha is halfway through a Bachelor of Education (Primary) at ACU’s Blacktown Campus.

As a recipient of the Teacher Scholarship Program offered by Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese, Tanisha works part-time as an Associate Teacher at St Luke’s Marsden Park.

She discovered her love of teaching while at an Indigenous youth leadership program in high school.

“I got to learn about different aspects of my culture and teach that to groups of primary school children which helped me choose my career,” Tanisha said.

“It was really healing to connect with other Indigenous students within the dioceses, because we are very spread out and very scarce. To come together with everyone and learn together and then teach our culture was very empowering.”

Putting Dharug on the world map

Despite having a shared cultural connection to the Dharug nation, Hayden and Tanisha have only met through the Conaci scholarship.

“You have hundreds of different mobs within Australia and now there’s two of us from the same one off to study in Rome. That’s pretty special,” Hayden said.

“There isn’t much Indigenous success highlighted out our way, but we are two people of Indigenous background getting selected for a university scholarship, who get to highlight our area and put it on the world stage.”

Hayden describes his family’s cultural journey as one of strength, curiosity and reconnection.

Inspired by his older brother’s leadership, he has continued to deepen his understanding of culture while pursuing his university studies.

“My brother opened many doors for our family,” Hayden said.

“He was the first to achieve a lot of things and he’s someone I still look to today. His example showed me what’s possible.”

Hayden hopes his experience in Rome will open doors to be a role model like his brother and previous Conaci scholars for the next generation of First Nations youth.

“I hope to highlight that it is possible for a Dharug kid to achieve their goals, that it’s not this big challenge if you just have the right connections and support,” he said.

Tanisha also grew up learning about her culture and throughout her Catholic schooling continued to build connections to the Dharug people. For her, the Conaci scholarship represents the next stage of cultural learning and healing, and the fulfilment of a childhood dream to study overseas.

“I actually wanted to study in Italy from a very, very young age,” Tanisha said.

“I was drawn to the Conaci scholarship but I didn’t think I was going to be chosen. It’s an opportunity to represent something bigger than myself.”

Passing on culture

As Conaci Scholars, Tanisha and Hayden will represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders during NAIDOC Week in Rome, hosted by Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, His Excellency Keith Pitt.

This year's NAIDOC Week theme is "50 Years of Deadly", marking five decades of amplifying and celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

"The Australian Embassy to the Holy See welcomes Tanisha and Hayden to Rome where we will mark 50 years of NAIDOC Week," Ambassador Pitt said.

"The Conaci Scholarship celebrates the contribution of First Nations people to Australia's relations with the Holy See, and we are delighted to support and recognise ACU's scholars every year."

For Hayden, the opportunity reflects both the progress achieved by previous generations and the responsibility of creating opportunities for those who follow.

"My dad grew up in a very different Australia to the one we live in today," he said.

"Being able to travel to Rome as a Conaci Scholar shows how far we've come, but it also reminds me of the responsibility we have to keep creating opportunities for the next generation.

"If I can help young people see what's possible, then that's something really meaningful."

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