For mature-age education student Lisa Wright, a chance friendship with a fellow student who is Indigenous has developed into a quest to specialise in Indigenous education.

“She introduced me to some of her friends at the Strathfield Campus, and as I became aware of the education issues confronting Aboriginal people I became passionate about wanting to make a difference,” said Lisa, pictured above left.

Lisa applied successfully for a Teach Our Mob scholarship, a NSW Department of Education initiative providing enhanced training for teachers to work in schools with large numbers of Indigenous students for a minimum of three years.

Through the scholarship, Lisa met her mentor, Ms Karen Barker, “a proud Gamilaroi and Ngemba woman” from western NSW, pictured above right.

Lisa’s enhanced training has included two subjects studied with Indigenous students through ACU National’s Yalbalinja Indigenous Education Unit, a two-week internship in an Indigenous community with her mentor, and a six-week internship in a public school.

“Any stereotypes about Aboriginal people are obliterated when you sit in a tutorial with a group of trainee teachers, almost half of whom are Indigenous, and so articulate, knowledgeable and passionate,” said Lisa, who has almost finished her education degree.

“Then to go to a community like Moree and spend two weeks totally immersed in the community under the guidance of my mentor, Karen Barker, is indescribably beneficial. Unless you have actually been in a community with the local people where you are continually in the minority for days on end, it is impossible to imagine the experience.”

Ms Barker, an Aboriginal Education Assistant at St Philomena’s School, Moree, has praised Lisa’s open mind and willingness to make a difference.

“As an Indigenous mentor I don’t expect mentees to know all there is to know about our culture, society or issues. I do however expect them to be honest, committed, genuine and sincere, particularly when dealing at a grassroots level within our communities.

“Lisa is passionate about achieving equality in education for all students, and her eagerness has inspired me to lead in my own right in Indigenous education.

“She immersed herself into our community with an open mind and as a result has formed strong ties. She has not only learnt to open her heart and eyes, more importantly she has learnt to open her ears to the Indigenous community. She has challenged herself and should be congratulated on it.”

Ms Barker said the program focuses on issues such as education delivery to Indigenous students and communities, building partnerships, influencing and creating key relationships with communities and stakeholders.

“We need more inspirational teachers like those in the program, who share the vision of achieving equality education for our Indigenous students,” said Ms Barker, who is passionate about Indigenous leadership. “I look forward to this program growing even bigger. I strongly believe in giving our students and communities the opportunity to be the architect in their education solutions, so they can be active participants in their communities.”

Lisa, who has also become involved in the first ever Indigenous Toastmasters Club, at Redfern, in inner Sydney, remains “committed to improving outcomes for Aboriginal students.”