



**Australian Rural
Leadership Foundation**
Leadership Impact
Case Study:
Unrestricted Scholarships



Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation



Unrestricted ARLP scholarships ensure diversity in program participants, and enrich the alumni network across rural and regional Australia.

Nuance. It's a vital part of living and working in regional Australia. From understanding the cultural significance of a place to getting a handle on the polaric difference between 'yeah...nah' and 'nah...yeah,' the nuances of the bush are what give it its rich uniqueness.



The only way to understand the nuance of a place is through immersion. To live and breathe the land and its people. To understand the history of a place and who was there before you. To yarn. And to develop a respect for what has happened there — even if you find it confronting. Even if you would have made different choices.

The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) knows that. And it knows that the making of regional leaders must happen in the regions. And that's what makes its flagship program, the Australian Regional Leadership Program (ARLP) so effective. Over 15 months, nominated leaders participate in immersive experiences in regional Australia and overseas. The focus on continuing adaptive leadership has allowed the program to thrive for nearly 30 years.

The participants, and the network they form, becomes the ARLP Fellowship — a dynamic group of graduates who work collectively for the greater good in regional Australia. The network is effective

because of the shared experience of having participated in the ARLP, but it's more than that. It consists of people who live and breathe regional Australia. Whose immersion in communities, industries, government and the welfare of their neighbours is its biggest strength.

Of that network, there is a small group of graduates, the Unrestricted Scholarship recipients, whose nuanced careers would previously have excluded them from participating in the ARLP. Superb leaders in their own right, but not funded for the program because their diverse experiences have meant that they don't fit neatly into a commodity or industry framework.

Thanks to Unrestricted Scholarships, whose donations come with no strings attached, the ARLP is able to think outside the box. The result is increased diversity, a strong understanding of nuance and perspective, and a splash of creativity that colours the whole cohort.



Yola Bakker

Artist | Advocate | Poet

Growing up in Darwin, cultural immersion was a big part of life for Yola. An Indonesian-Australian of Makassan and Moluccan ethnicity, every aspect of her life was touched by culture. Prior to colonisation, Yola's family members had a strong treaty with Aboriginal people in the north of Australia. Shared medicine, recipes, spices and similarities in songlines and dance connected her ancestors to the Larrakia, Djerimanga and Wadjiginy people.

That connection continued with Yola's dad, an earth mover. He worked with Aboriginal communities in and around Darwin, making access roads to

connect communities. But the connection didn't stop there. Yola's family were welcomed like siblings and she spent years dancing in the same Aboriginal communities — just one of many times in Yola's life when art has given her common ground with people who could have been perceived as 'other'.

As a recipient of an Unrestricted Scholarship to the ARLP, Yola went into the two-week experience in the Kimberley feeling like a fringe dweller. Which she was — Yola was the only participant who didn't belong to a specific organisation or industry.

"I walked into a room in which people's identity was very tied up in the job title that they held. I was hard to pigeonhole because people struggle with the intangible — if you don't fit into any box, who are you and what do you stand for?"

For Yola, who entered the ARLP with no expectations, because "that's the way I choose to exist," the key benefit of the program has been a strong sense of self-actualisation. "Imposter syndrome has disappeared," she says. "And that impacts how you carry yourself in any space".

Yola's strict upbringing, cultural expectations and immersion in Indonesian, Aboriginal and Australian cultures made her an expert at code-switching from a young age. As a bilingual woman of colour working among both miners and creatives, it's a practice she effortlessly continues today.

This unique perspective impacted her fellow participants — through creativity and dance, Yola encouraged them to break down barriers. Playing

with language and movement in a non-threatening environment breeds a practice of challenging power structures, which, when taken into the real world, results in more people from diverse backgrounds being given the tools they need to become leaders.

And that's what Yola is all about — taking the tools that she learned through the ARLP and sharing them with people who are marginalised. Enhancing inclusion, equity, and equipping young people with the tools they need to become our leaders in the future.









Fiona Gaske

Soprano | Grassroots politician | Changemaker

Fiona Gaske's first experience of immersion was also in the arts. With the support of her loving parents, Fiona's childhood was filled with drama and dance classes. Her true love as a child was singing. And she was good at it — so good that she was accepted into the Queensland Conservatorium of Music to study a Bachelor of Music. The program is highly competitive but Fiona doesn't do things by halves.

After completing her Bachelor of Music degree, Fiona worked as a singer around Brisbane. Multiple gigs per night and working hard to make ends meet took its toll on her health and in 1999,

she was diagnosed with Lupus. She remembers the day her doctor said to her "you can forget about being a singer — it's not going to happen". Crushed (and after a period of grieving), Fiona switched focus.

After retraining as a Speech Pathologist, Fiona's intermezzo took her from a coveted graduate position at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital to being part of a Rural Allied Health team on the outskirts of Toowoomba. At the Royal Brisbane, she became immersed in complex cases: Fiona completed multiple assessments each day for patients who were often dealing with multiple issues. Stroke, dementia and brain injuries were part of each day and she was also exposed to the head and neck oncology caseload.

Fiona's time on the Allied Health Team took her to regional and remote areas. They travelled to frail, elderly and disabled people's homes to provide desperately needed services that just weren't accessible. It was an eye-opening experience for Fiona — the vulnerability of her patients and some of the squalid conditions they endured were a far cry from the modern facilities at the hospital. This role, more than any other, showed Fiona the diversity of resources, healthcare, social support and living standard experienced by rural and regional Australians.

A move to St George QLD in 2008 saw Fiona run for council. After eight years, she became the Deputy Mayor, while raising two children and running her own dance school. Like Yola, Fiona experienced the ARLP as an Unrestricted Scholarship recipient. The diversity of her working life didn't fit into the

application constraints and, had it not been for the Unrestricted Scholarship framework, she would have missed out.

When Fiona ran her campaign for the Pumistone seat in the Queensland election in 2020, her experience on the ARLP allowed her to run a campaign with confidence and integrity. She has a long-held belief that "we can have decision makers that are connected to the grassroots and working hard for the community, not just themselves".

The experiential nature of the ARLP was a challenge for Fiona — she always liked to have her ducks in a row. But surrendering to the program meant letting go of her own expectations of both the program and herself. And after the fact, she's found that she's truly able to let go of that which she can't control, and the focus to double-down on the things that she can.

For Fiona, this looks like continuing her advocacy work in regional Australia. Whether its wild dog exclusion fencing, water buybacks in the Murray Darling Basin or labour shortages on berry farms — she believes that if the right stakeholders get together at the right time, the government can make decisions to improve the lives of real people in the bush, as well as the economic health of the regions. Her experience in the ARLP has given her the confidence, the network, and the training to make even more change in Australia's rural communities.







Rose Wright

Business founder | Regional advocate | Connector

Rose Wright speaks about growing food and caring for land with a passion that she traces back to the back-breaking work of her Italian parents.

"I am driven as the daughter of Italian migrant farmers who worked extraordinarily hard and gave it everything, and what stunned me as a kid was their struggle as price-takers ... what shocked me working with farmers in the 1990s and 2000s was the same disempowerment in the system," Rose explains.

"I knew I had to do something to change this. If I can help empower consumers to connect with farmers, we can change the food system for the good of human health."

And that's just what the Tweed Valley local is doing through the national reach of her business, Regionality, dedicated to helping regional businesses and communities revitalise and reinvent themselves.

While Rose has a long history working in the spaces of agriculture, research and regional tourism and development, she credits her experience on Course 23 of the Australian Rural Leadership Program as providing a "spark" that profoundly impacted her leadership.

"What I learned through the ARLP was the significance of Indigenous culture's connection to country. My epiphany was that this connection if understood could help us to heal our relationship with the First Nations people, our health and our planet," Rose reflects.

"I made a decision to focus on the areas where I could make a difference; facilitating conversations and connections. I gained the confidence to reach out to leaders like Bruce Pascoe and Charles Massy and created a bi-annual gathering called Farm2Plate Exchange, to allow a flow of ideas between farmers, traditional owners, chefs and tourism operators.

"It's a safe space where a conventional farmer can walk in and ask about regenerative farming, or about sacred sites on their properties and

connecting to Aboriginal leaders. People can exchange ideas and be inspired."

Over 25 years, Rose has seen concepts like 'agritourism' and 'food provenance' go from little-known ideas to major areas of focus for producers and consumers alike. And she has been a key part of this.

"I am a small cog in a big wheel, and I just try and help the people in my sphere of influence," she says. "But my business changed when the ARLP gave me the confidence to focus on where I could make the most impact and help regions to identify and share what made their community special."

While Rose's journey has been indelibly shaped by the ARLP, her path to the program wasn't straight-forward.

"I was tapped on the shoulder by another woman in tourism to apply for the ARLP, and it came at a time I felt I needed something. I had reached a point in my life where I had worked for others, run my own businesses, studied and held a range of board roles, but there was that need to learn more and be more," she says.

"At the time I applied for the ARLP I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I went to the interview in the middle of treatment" Rose explains. "I also learned that I didn't quite fit the 'box' for industry sponsorship."

While the timing wasn't right first time around, the following year Rose was allocated a place on Course 23 of the ARLP thanks to an unrestricted scholarship from the Thyne Reid Foundation.

"I am so grateful to the Thyne Reid Foundation," Rose says with emotion.

"Their investment in me allows me to help others. I keenly feel this responsibility to give back. There are lots of people who fall 'between the cracks' in regional industries and who nonetheless have a lot to give, and think differently," she says.

As Rose reflects on the investment made in her leadership, she has literally had to eke out a moment of stillness in a whirlwind of travel throughout regional Australia. From a fortnight of workshops with farmers in the Liverpool Plains, to working with traditional owners in Scenic Rim and farmers throughout Tasmania, she unashamedly brings a trademark passion, empathy and emotion to every interaction.

"Part of helping regions to innovate, diversify or create new opportunities for families and communities to build prosperity and care for land, comes down to empowering farmers to work together, share their stories and produce to authentically connect with visitors through experiences on farm. In doing so, they reconnect with themselves and nature that surrounds them," Rose says.

"The ARLP taught me about the concept of 'head, heart and hand'. I've learnt to trust my how my heart feels and use the power of my strategic mind, so I can act in a way that has far better outcomes – to connect with and care for people in a way that makes a real difference."



CANE CRUSHING SHED





BOTTLE PRICES TOO

INK CIN	82
SLOE & BERRY	72
PURE CANE	69

MINIS 200 ML.

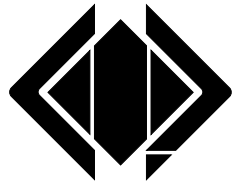
PURE CANE	21
INK CIN	13
PURE CANE	11.50

Diverse skills for diverse regions

Three women. Three incredibly different life experiences. Brought together by the Unrestricted Scholarship program. All three say that the ARLP changed their lives and all three are working to share their learnings within and among their communities. Yola and Fiona have started a consultancy firm, Lanah, which works across sectors to improve opportunities for rural and regional Australians. And Rose's deep immersion in her community means that she uses her experience to activate leadership both locally and further afield.

Rose, who completed the ARLP in 2016, stressed the importance of Unrestricted Scholarships most adamantly. "I would love to see more organisations let the ARLF choose the best person for the program. The ARLF is filled with incredible people with good judgement. The idea that we can build a diverse group of people from different industries is invaluable, and Unrestricted Scholarships facilitate that".

Graduates in this case study
were supported by:



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