INDIGENOUS FAMILIARISATION PROGRAM 2015

“Empowering and supportive”
Between 29 September – 1 October 2015 the Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health in collaboration with the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, with support from Chancellery, held the inaugural Indigenous PhD Familiarisation Program. The Program was held to facilitate the development of prospective Indigenous PhD students and assist them in preparing for graduate research study at the University of Melbourne (UoM).

Focussed on creating academic pathways for the next generation of Indigenous leadership, the concept of the Familiarisation Program was to help work towards the Poche Centre’s vision for achieving 20 new Indigenous PhD enrolments by the year 2020.

Thirteen prospective PhD students participated in the Program. Of these, six are based in Melbourne and the remaining seven are from interstate. Participants were identified through an Expression of Interest process, as being at a stage in their academic and/or work career that a research higher degree is achievable for them in the next five years.
Program Highlights

“Meeting the other delegates. Gave me a sense of purpose, belonging, community and hope”

“What is standing in your way (the session) - excellent facilitators, built capacity and resilience”

“The ability and knowledge of the presenters”

“Student panel and the dinner – networking, learning more about what was involved in a PhD.”

“Meeting the other participants and broadening my thoughts and expectations of what a PhD will be like.”

“Meeting important university figures and getting advice directly from them.”

“Given the opportunity to be in a program with people experiencing similar barriers and questions.”
The Workshops

“A highlight of the program was meeting important university figures and getting advice directly from them”

Participant

The Familiarisation Program used engaging and interactive workshops to stimulate thinking and discussion around each of the participants’ interest in a research higher degree. Workshops were able to present a broad range of information for participants, whilst still being able to focus specifically on each individual’s topic.

Workshops included in the Familiarisation program included:

- *What’s your research idea?* (Exploration of each participant’s individual research)
- *Not for the money – what are you doing a PhD for?* (What are the motivations and goals for undertaking a PhD, and how it can assist in building a career)
- *What’s standing in your way?* (Barriers, distractions and challenges of undertaking a PhD)
- *The University of Melbourne’s PhD+ Program* (Extra elements to a PhD program that will support Indigenous PhD students through to graduation)
- *Enrolment and admissions* (Administrative guidance as to the enrolment process)
- *Why do I need a supervisor? A guiding light, a partner, a mentor or something else?* (The role of a PhD supervisor, what traits exist in a good one)
- *Getting started: Comprehensive library research* (Structuring successful research strategies)
- *Moving from the political to a PhD* (Narrowing a research agenda into an achievable PhD topic)
“Thank you for the wonderful opportunity to attend this program and for being so interested in my future.”
The Workshop *What’s standing in your way?* invited participants to share, outline and attempt to foresee expected challenges and barriers regarding PhD study.

Four themes emerged from the discussion, which were: psychological resilience, work/study/life balance, financial security, and the research topic. Of the challenges and issues addressed in the workshop, some were those that could be addressed by the student in their own context, however others were institutional barriers that the University can provide assistance with. The information below demonstrates these challenges within each theme.

1: Psychological resilience
- Mentors and role models (external to PhD supervisors)
- Collaborative networks and events, including symposiums for Indigenous PhD students, workshops, cohort events
- Establishing your own PhD network, both informal and formal
- Spend time with like-minded and positive people, and draw support from them
- Buddy system
- Good mental health strategies
- Recognise your peak output times and plan around these

2: Work/study/life balance
- Being in control and balancing family, study, work
- Learning your boundaries – being selfish in the right situations
- Having discussions with family about expected workload
- The University’s residency requirement
- Taking timeout – it’s ok to take time away from PhD to have a life
- Treat the PhD like a job. Clock in and clock out, don’t let it consume every minute of the day
- Create a rhythm
- Find office space, where you will be comfortable.
3: Financial Security
- Identifying how much work you can manage in addition to your PhD to both financially survive and still make necessary progress
- Seeking financial advice and how to financially plan for undertaking a PhD
- What scholarships are available and what to apply for (and by when)

4: The research topic
One of the key themes from this Workshop and the Familiarisation Program overall, was that many participants arrived with a specific idea they wanted to pursue, and were both emotionally and professionally connected to it. However, it became apparent that a PhD student can still pursue those interests but it is also worth being open to change and being flexible regarding research opportunities.

Some key points from this discussion included:
- Building your own critical resilience
- Connect academically and not emotionally
- Learn to manage your relationships with supervisors
- Always ask the ‘why’ and ‘so what’ questions
- Continue to engage with academics that challenge
- Be prepared to defend your work
- Refer to your initial question
- It is a journey, not your whole life
- Create a flow and back up plans. If ‘A’ doesn’t work, then what is ‘B’?
- Keep a stable environment
Outcomes

A unique opportunity for the University to gauge possible barriers for Indigenous students and promote change across the academy

An evaluation was undertaken at the conclusion of each day to determine the participants’ views on five key areas for each session. Overall, most sessions received excellent feedback and participants felt the outcomes proposed had been met.

Participants also provided feedback about the Program as a whole (summaries of these results are below). This feedback was quite positive, and demonstrates the success of the program in providing students with a meaningful and positive framework for the process of embarking on and traveling through a PhD journey.

Feedback indicated that the workshop facilitators delivered the content described, were knowledgeable in their respective areas and in direct coordination with the proposed learning outcomes.

"The program went above and beyond my expectations by a great degree. Research and leadership development opportunities at Melbourne were brilliantly presented in an inviting and encouraging manner."

A unique opportunity for the University to gauge possible barriers for Indigenous students and promote change across the academy

Participant evaluation of all workshops combined
Average rating
1 - Strongly Disagree / 5 - Strongly Agree

Feedback from Participant Evaluations - average of all workshops

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<th>Did the session cover the topics described?</th>
<th>Did you feel the session achieved the objectives proposed?</th>
<th>The facilitator(s) was knowledgeable and delivered the workshop in a successful manner</th>
<th>This workshop was well placed within the structure of the program</th>
<th>Was the content delivered in this workshop at a relevant advanced level, appropriate for higher degree research students?</th>
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Although still achieving relatively high scores, the feedback demonstrates that for future Programs, workshops could be positioned more appropriately within the structure of the program.

The participants also felt that taking the Program as a cohort contributed to the experience and were keen to maintain a cohort experience throughout a prospective PhD program.

Resulting from this firm indication that a cohort experience is important for Indigenous PhD students in their PhD journey, the University of Melbourne should give further consideration to this idea, and continue to expand and explore how the PhD+ program can be implemented.

HAVE ALL YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF THE FAMILIARISATION PROGRAM BEEN MET?

“Yes, and exceeded. I came with an open mind and was pleasantly surprised at the content and high level of support offered to each participant”

“Beyond. I didn’t really expect such an overt commitment by the staff to the students”

“Yes, it’s been an amazing opportunity to explore in depth my ideas about doing a PhD. Excellent program. Well done”

“Yes – Program has provided me with very detailed information in regards to completing a PhD”

“I spent the past 12 months trying to source the information from University regarding the information I received in this program, so yes, and thank you”

“The program exceeded my expectations and made me think very differently about my topic interests and what will be possible barriers and end dates for me to finish”
The success of the Familiarisation Program has been a direct result of the University of Melbourne recognising the key strategies behind the Indigenous PhD+ Program. To assist Indigenous PhD students through to graduation, tailoring a program of support to each individual student and clarifying to students what support the University can provide are two essential strategies that can facilitate success.

Many Indigenous PhD students require financial support, such as Strategic Australian Postgraduate Awards (STRAPAs) or Fay Marles Scholarships to succeed, however other non-financial support will be provided across the University.

Non-financial support that the University can provide might include tailored partnering of prospective PhD supervisors with applicants, diversity training for supervisors of Indigenous students, and PhD application writing workshops.

The Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, through the Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, is able to provide resources for working with each Indigenous PhD applicant throughout their journey with the University, from an initial research interest, through to graduation and beyond.
Critical to the success of Indigenous graduate researchers, is the opportunity to provide a cohort experience for the students. Regardless of their fields of research, the Familiarisation Program has demonstrated that Indigenous students are keen to share their journey, providing collegial support as necessary.

The Familiarisation Program will be a key strategy for the University to help develop the PhD+ Program. Also, by responding to the analysis in the earlier challenges discussion (pp 4-5), the University will be able to enable a more successful suite of supports specifically for Indigenous students.

All of the strategies and programs suggested as part of the Indigenous PhD+ Program are aligned with the University of Melbourne’s Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) 2015-2017. Specifically, Action Area 6 of the RAP focuses on research and relates directly to cross-disciplinary and inter-Faculty Indigenous research pathways.
The Familiarisation Program has provided the University with a unique opportunity to identify the next cohort of Indigenous graduate researchers, some of their challenges and barriers to study at the University, and feedback for future engagement with prospective students.

Following the Program, the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health has been liaising with participants and engaging with them to help them manage their enrolment process at the University.

The ‘Challenges’ workshop provided the University with key ideas in which future students can be supported through to graduation, with one of the key strategies being the development of a formalised Indigenous student cohort.

The Melbourne Poche Centre plans to work with Indigenous units across the University to develop the cohort idea and seek to build on the existing support programs currently offered.

“From my experience in the program, the University is prepared to support Indigenous PhD students”
Participant
The Gift

“The improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians is one of our nation’s biggest challenges. It is vital we do everything we can”
Greg Poche

The Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health was established as a result of a generous gift of $10 million to the University of Melbourne, from philanthropists Greg Poche and Kay van Norton Poche. The Centre will provide training and development programs for emerging and established Indigenous leaders, and create academic pathways for Indigenous PhD candidates and postdoctoral fellows in health.

Both Greg and Kay believe improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians is one of our nation’s biggest and most urgent challenges. The Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health proudly joins established Poche Centres at the University of Sydney, Flinders University (Adelaide and Alice Springs) and the University of Western Australia.