Indigenous PhD
Familiarisation Program

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As part of the broader strategy for Indigenous development at the University of Melbourne, the Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health hosted the third Indigenous PhD Familiarisation Program in 2017.

Situated in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, the Melbourne Poche Centre provides training and development for emerging and established Indigenous academic leaders.

The PhD Familiarisation Program forms part of the Centre’s creation of academic pathways for Indigenous PhD candidates, ensuring Indigenous graduates and health professionals develop their influence and networks, and drive an agenda for change in their fields of expertise.

PhD student Emily Munro-Harrison speaking at the 2016 Lowitja Conference. 
*Photo credit: Lowitja Institute*
The 2017 Program was specifically designed for Indigenous doctors, medical students and other health professionals, and was delivered in collaboration with University partners across the Melbourne Biomedical Precinct.

Input was sought from a range of medical research experts, to deliver a discipline specific program. The participants for the 2017 Program included three doctors, one medical student and one social worker.
networking and collaboration

The Program’s design focused on enabling a supportive, collaborative environment. General discussions were held on the motivations for undertaking a research higher degree and were coupled with dedicated time for each participant to develop and analyse their own research ideas.

Networking underpinned the entire program, as previous participants had told us that it is incredibly valuable to be able to share ideas amongst themselves, ask questions to current Indigenous students and researchers, as well as learn from leaders across a range of health and medical research fields.

Rather than larger cohorts in previous years, the 2017 Program hosted only five participants, providing the opportunity for a more dedicated, personalised experience and encouraging discussion between participants and facilitators.

This more interactive approach encouraged participants to share their ideas during workshops, and to feel confident raising issues and concerns regarding a PhD.
Participants from each of the three Programs have gone in several directions with some enrolling in PhD programs at the University of Melbourne, while others are undertaking PhDs elsewhere. A small number have also used the experience to inform their next career moves which may include considering other ways to further develop their expertise in a particular area.

The success of the Familiarisation Program is measured by the contribution made to shaping each participant’s vision towards how they can build on their knowledge, either through research or other ways.

The outcomes from the 2017 Program have the potential to be significant. A decision to focus the 2017 Program was based on the premise that relatively few Indigenous medical professionals also hold a PhD. The participants indicated to us in their evaluations that the likelihood of them applying for a PhD over the next 3-5 years is probable, which would make a significant increase in the number of Indigenous doctors with a PhD.
Feedback from all three Familiarisation Programs has shown that participants value their experience, both in terms of understanding the specifics of what a PhD might mean for them, as well as an opportunity to build their own professional networks.

From the 2017 Program, major highlights for the participants were the personal insights and small group discussions with current Indigenous PhD students and some of Melbourne’s leading health researchers.

Feedback from the participants included:

“The generosity and warmth from the facilitators was something I didn’t expect. I knew they’d be nice but they were like long-lost old mates. So generous in their knowledge and experience, both personal and professional.”

“It was fantastic, the information was really practical and helpful. Katherine is an inspiring supervisor, giving high expectations on what to look for in supervisors.”

“The highlight for me was Misty’s session on ‘What’s your research idea?’. Instant feedback was great and I think I have a greater understanding of what it [a PhD] entails. I’m no longer scared of not having all the answers.”

“The highlight was having Misty, clinician researchers Ruth and Charlotte, and WEHI staff all come together to facilitate a group discussion. Incredible, approachable, warm and helped demystify the concerns around the PhD.”
An underlying theme from the participants’ feedback was the balance of broad information of undertaking a PhD, coupled with time for individual, topic-specific discussion for each participant.

“Good amount of content and it flowed well. It was very helpful in getting thoughts in order.”

“Incredibly well-structured in that there were a diversity of viewpoints on PhDs represented (i.e. institutional, beginner, advanced candidate’s experiences, logistics etc).”

“It provided both a broad overview plus detailed discussions (funding, domains, supervision) from both student and supervisor perspective.”

“Heavy sessions with lots of content were balanced with breaks and time to process. Each day built the knowledge, which was great.”

The feedback we receive from participants will guide our future direction and helps inform how we think of ways to continually assist future Indigenous research leaders.

Each participant brings with them unique professional and academic experiences, building on the formal aspects with intangible contributions.
The Melbourne Poche Centre now has the challenge to ensure that future Indigenous researchers across health disciplines are able to realise their goals.

Part of this challenge is to provide the linkages across organisations involved in health and medical research so that future Indigenous research students have access to the best supervision and encouraged to think critically about their topics of interest.

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