



Building the Aboriginal Health Research Workforce: CRAH Capacity Development Program

High-quality Aboriginal health research requires highly skilled researchers—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—of whom there are limited numbers with the necessary skills for this complex work. The CRC for Aboriginal Health is committed to strengthening the Aboriginal health research workforce through education and training, professional development activities, by developing partnerships and providing Aboriginal leadership.

We use the term capacity development to refer to the process of building skills, knowledge and capability. Capacity development includes formal and informal education and training, and other hands-on opportunities for development. Some people prefer the term capacity exchange, feeling this reflects the two-way process of learning that occurs, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

Capacity Development in the CRAH

Examples of capacity development in the CRC for Aboriginal Health include:

- giving scholarships or other support to Aboriginal students from VET level to PhD level (at slightly higher rates than, for example, the NHMRC);
 - supporting Aboriginal Health Workers (and others) to be involved in roundtables for setting research priorities;
 - exchanging ideas and knowledge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers working on CRAH research projects;
 - funding for students to attend conferences for networking and learning opportunities;
 - bringing together representatives of research, community and government sectors to hear about each other's experiences at showcases of CRAH research;
- supporting students to take part in the Academy of Social Sciences of Australia (ASSA) Summer School for Aboriginal postgraduate students at The University of Melbourne; and
 - supporting young Aboriginal researchers to present their work at international conferences, through the Indigenous International Program sponsored by the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH).

Outcomes

The CRAH has achieved great success in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to complete qualifications from VET level traineeships to PhDs. To date:

- 11 students have completed postgraduate qualifications.
- More than 20 others are still undertaking postgraduate studies.
- Two students are doing cadetships at undergraduate level.
- Of 9 trainees, 8 have completed their studies and almost all continue to work in research or in health services, with many going on to further study.
- 11 students have been supported to attend the ASSA Summer School.
- 15 people have been supported under the Indigenous International Program.



Students in the Introduction to Public Health course run by Batchelor Institute and Menzies School of Health Research

Kalinda Griffiths: From Lab Trainee to Masters Student

Kalinda Griffiths was born in Darwin of Yawuru, Banjarese and Welsh heritage. She currently works as a cadet within the Services, Systems and Society division at the Menzies School of Health Research on the CIPHER (Capacity Building in Indigenous Policy-relevant Health Research) program. With a scholarship through the National Indigenous Cadetship Program, Kalinda is about to start her last semester of a Bio-medical Science degree streaming in Public Health at Charles Darwin University.

Like many other CRCAH trainees or scholarship holders it was Kalinda's personal experiences that first moved her in the direction of a career in health research. 'My interest in Indigenous health disparities has stemmed from the impact that my immediate and extended family have experienced due to unnecessary illness and disease,' she said.

Kalinda began her career in Aboriginal health research with a CRCAH traineeship in laboratory techniques in 1998, and gained experience as a research technician predominantly on the DRUID (Diabetes and Related conditions in the Urban Indigenous Darwin region) study. Her work included design of laboratory protocols, sample collection and handling, training and data processing.

Kalinda says her goals include 'working towards improving the health of Indigenous Australians though equity and equality. I have recently become a member of the Menzies Indigenous ethics sub-committee and am looking forward to starting my Master of Public Health in mid 2008.'

Experienced Researchers Learning Too

Ross Bailie is one of the most experienced researchers working with the CRC for Aboriginal Health. Born in South Africa, he has been working in Aboriginal health at the Menzies School of Health Research since 1998, and before that in New Zealand and South Africa.

Ross is the project leader for a number of the CRCAH's most successful projects, and he has been integrally involved with the development of the CRCAH's new approach to research development. Ross says the organisation has provided him with critical opportunities to learn.

'In particular, I've learned to think more deeply about how research transfer and capacity development can be built into projects.'

'What the CRC for Aboriginal Health has done is worked hard at making the principles and priorities for Aboriginal research explicit, and put good processes in place to work those through.'

'It's created a space for people to talk and learn about a whole lot of things, including the politics of Aboriginal health research, how that's evolved, and how to work within that environment.'

'It's a learning organisation and the opportunities from that are fantastic.'

Policy Implications

A review of the CRCAH's capacity development programs in 2005— involving consultations across the CRCAH's stakeholders—identified the following barriers to Aboriginal people taking up careers in research:

- Most Aboriginal students are mature age with families. They cannot afford to live on scholarship stipends, making full-time study difficult.

- There is a highly competitive market for Aboriginal people with qualifications to work in government or service organisations on higher salaries than early career research can offer.
- The small number of Aboriginal students completing Year 12 means there are few with the qualifications for postgraduate research training.
- Honours level study is a critical turning point for those interested in research. Often those who would like to progress from an undergraduate degree into Honours are put off by the lack of available scholarships or other forms of support for students at that level.

Combined with the success of the CRCAH's capacity development program, the policy implications are:

- Flexible scholarship programs that include some pastoral support for Aboriginal students, and slightly higher stipends, can produce excellent results. In particular, availability of Honours scholarships should be increased.
- Pathways that enable Aboriginal students to move from VET level and upwards are important to improving access to higher education and higher degrees.
- Funding capacity development within project-based funding can have significant benefits. This should include support for the development of Aboriginal researchers within the project, and for the mentoring or advising of non-Aboriginal researchers about ways of working in Aboriginal contexts.

For More Information

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