



Curtin University

The impact of working in partnership with First Nations Peoples to develop culturally responsive occupational therapy graduates.

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FIRST NATIONS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Curtin University acknowledges all First Nations of this place we call Australia and recognises the many nations who have looked after Country for more than 60,000 years.

We are honoured and grateful for the privilege to maintain campuses operating in Boorloo (Perth) and Karlkurla (Kalgoorlie) in Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present as Custodians and Owners of these lands. We recognise their deep knowledge and their cultural, spiritual and educational practices, and aspire to learn and teach in partnership with them.

Curtin also acknowledges First Nations peoples connected with our global campuses. We are committed to working in partnership with all Custodians and Owners to strengthen and embed First Nations' voices and perspectives in our decision-making, now and into the future.

Louise Hansen Yarning Program

- Commenced in 2015 to build confidence and capacity in OT students to provide services that are appropriate and safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to challenge current practice where they see an opportunity.
- Program includes:
 - 1 x On Country day with Elders and family sharing Nyoongar culture
 - 6 x monthly yarning sessions on campus with online access for students who are undertaking remote fieldwork placements
- 2025 Evaluation of program with Elders to understand the impact of program and what we suspected was the “ripple effect.”



OT students On Country day with Elders
Wadjuk Nyoongar Boodja (Nyoongar Country)



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On Country

- Introductions and building relationships with Elders
- Cultural activities - art, cooking, sampling cultural food, learning about country through bushwalking
- Truth telling yarning circles
- Dancing
- Significance of Country

Yarning Sessions

- Listen to Elders yarn
- Working relationally and sharing backgrounds to support truth telling
- Ask questions in a safe space
- Discuss current placement experiences

Culturally Responsive Practice

- **Culturally responsive practice** describes strengths-based, action-oriented and culturally capable approaches that facilitate increased access to affordable, available, appropriate and acceptable healthcare
- Occupational Therapy Board of Australia (AHPRA) competency standards (2019)
 - Professionalism
 - Knowledge and learning
 - Occupational therapy process and practice
 - Communication

Evaluation of Program

- Are students who participate in the program reporting confidence and capacity to influence their Occupational Therapy practice?
- What are the impacts on them personally and professionally ?
- What are the perceptions and impacts and observations on their fieldwork supervisors
- Co-produced project and methodology with Elders, framed by relational ways of working . Ethics obtained
- Research methods guided by Relational Impact Evaluation, developed out of the Looking Forward program of research <https://debakarn.com/our-work/our-approach>
- Participants - Students and Supervisors invited to complete a survey
 - Students (n=16)
 - Placement Supervisors (n=17) -

PERSONAL IMPACTS

Learning about the culture
in a hands on manner

Developing awareness of the
role bush medicine has in
aboriginal culture

Opportunity to hear stories

See how diverse the Aboriginal
cultures are

Space to learn

- painting
- learning to make damper
- eating kangaroo for the first time
- being involved in a smoking ceremony

On Country

Reflect on lived experience of
Aboriginal Australians

STUDENT RESPONSES (N=16)

“My engagement in the program inspired me to seek further cultural learning and ways of immersing myself into health care for Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Australians.”

Respecting connection to Country (and ways to enable this even if the person is physically not on Country).

“Use culture in practice such as using images, art, music, sounds of wildlife in a therapeutic way.”

An Elder informed us of the importance of assisting Indigenous Australian clients to feel comfortable when they are away from their Country.

“I appreciate that all of the different areas within Australia have different rules and traditions.”

Being willing to try and make a difference.

Educating colleagues, calling out racism and being true to my word.

PROFESSIONAL INSIGHTS

Being more confident to ask questions and sit and listen without feeling worried about saying or doing the wrong thing.

. They have given us space to learn and ask questions we avoid. An example of the personal impacts would be hearing about an Elder's personal experience with the stolen generation during a Yarning session. It was very raw and powerful to hear."

Building trust and rapport

Respect

I don't think it informed my practice anywhere as much as a placement in [region].

Increase the therapeutic relationship/break down the hierarchal powers that exist in health care environments.

I feel like I learnt more from patients on [my rural prac]

In the yarning stories we learnt of the importance to adapt practice and be flexible.

PERSONAL IMPACTS

Yarning Circle

Importance of curiosity

Felt judged

Repetitive

STUDENT RESPONSES (N=16)

"Being more confident in working with other Indigenous peoples on placements, especially while in Broome. Having the space to have discussion and be told their stories and history created more understanding and impacted then the way I was able to practice as a professional on placement."

"The program demonstrated the profound impact yarning can have on relationships between two or more people. I have integrated yarning into the centre of all my OT practice with my Indigenous clients since starting work as a new grad, which has helped build trust with my clients."

PROFESSIONAL INSIGHTS

“My students had Aboriginal clients on their caseload and were able to identify best practices to build rapport to make therapy provision more effective, and reported that they found the yarning program helpful while on this placement.”

“Student[s] can empathise and understand families cultural practices and beliefs and consider this during their practice.”

Adapting their [students’] communication style

Placement Supervisors

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES (N=17)

Building rapport

“Being present in the moment and not focused on completing checklists or forms. Students to acknowledge/be aware of their own cultural biases and values.”

Respecting and being inquisitive for all cultures

- 28.57% of supervisors acknowledged that students had discussed their yarning circle experience with them during their placement

Taking the time to yarn

Using activities that are centred around culture

Impacts of intergenerational trauma and customs of aboriginal families

More education needs to be provided on other cultures who make up large percentages of Australia e.g. Asian immigrants.

Placement Supervisors

Good for students to share the knowledge they learned with supervising therapists.

SOME FINAL QUOTES

I am thankful for the training I had as an OT student on cultural awareness. It is important for students to learn about cultural competence and cultural responsiveness as Australia is a multiculturally diverse nation.

I hope to see fieldwork students demonstrate respect for cultural diversity, family-centred practice, and adaptability in communication. They should practise cultural humility by reflecting on their own biases and seeking to understand family perspectives..

I have observed that students are often well-versed in concepts such as historical context, culture, and family connections, which is encouraging. However, they would benefit from a stronger understanding of the complex interaction of other key determinants of health and wellbeing.

Next steps

- Continue to work with Elders to implement any program changes which may include more distinct themes in yarning sessions
- Continued review of program from all interest holders perspectives
- Consider a larger evaluation of the development and use of relational practice in Occupational Therapy

References

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Thank you

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