Ensuring Value in Research: Capacity Building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research

NHMRC Annual Research Symposium, Sydney 2018

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Acknowledgement of Country

- We acknowledge that we are meeting on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and we pay our respects to their Elders, past and present.
Value in research through capacity-building: multidimensional

- What is research capacity-building (RCB) in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research context?
  - In the academy: mentoring and developing the careers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers
  - Developing the cultural awareness (‘cultural capability’, ‘cultural safety’) of non-Aboriginal health researchers working in the discipline
  - Enhancing the institutional cultural capacity/capability of the academy
  - Building the research skills of the Aboriginal health workforce in community settings, recognising their major role in facilitating culturally appropriate healthcare delivery & program development
  - Educating and developing the cultural awareness of non-Aboriginal health workers towards cultural safety
Background on NHMRC policy initiatives

• NHMRC committed to RCB for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, to redress the glaring gaps in health outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

• Population Health Capacity Building Grants increased the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce.

• Since 2002, the NHMRC has committed to spend at least 5% of its funding on Indigenous research

• NHMRC funding for Indigenous health increased from $4 million (2.5% of the total) in 2000 to $48 million (almost 6%) in 2012, and

• In 2015-2016 4% of awarded grants had Indigenous CI’s.
What does the literature say about the ‘How’ and ‘Why’ of RCB?

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<tr>
<th>Ease of research</th>
<th>Better health outcomes</th>
<th>More value</th>
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<td>Community engagement does not take as long</td>
<td>Research conducted by people within the community who know the primary health concerns of the community they are researching</td>
<td>Genuine concern with what is being researched</td>
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<td>Researchers from within the community have better relationships with the communities they are researching</td>
<td>Two way learning – as the researchers conduct their research and feed it back into the community two way learning occurs</td>
<td>Independent research pools who are able to create more sustainable projects</td>
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<td>Aware of priorities before external researchers are</td>
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<td>Peer mentoring within communities</td>
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<td>Increased cultural context – proximity to the issues</td>
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<td>Increases research funding opportunities</td>
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What does the literature say about the ‘How’ and ‘Why’ of RCB?

- RCB aims to ensure not only equitable and ethical employment but also value in research translation due to the cultural awareness, community connectedness, and authentic leadership that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personnel bring to health research.

- But, word of caution: critique the language of ‘capacity building’ = inference of ‘incapacity’, or ‘deficit discourse’

- RCB aims for a shift in power relationships, from depending on external skills to recognising and building community strengths, resilience, resources, creativity, and trust. But must be ‘2-way learning’, with organisations building their capacity

- Push back from Aboriginal communities due to a lack of cultural sensitivity. Research was continuously being done by external researchers and provided little benefit to the community being researched
Success stories: From the literature

• Capacity building two Aboriginal maternal and infant health workers in SE Qld, via PAR mentoring and research training (Hickey et al, 2017)

• A community-based RCB framework for health workers in remote NSW (Bailey et al, 2006) to supplement institution-based training resources for health workers with community-based research training modules (not yet been evaluated)

• Built in RCB
Our Focus: research workforce capacity in health and medical related disciplines at University

- RCB within the academic research setting in the Translational Health Research Institute (Western Sydney University) – fewer if any case studies identified
- Our scenario: Maridulu Budyari Gumal – a Sydney-wide consortium of research and health organisations – in its partnership based at Western Sydney University
- We (AHWB-CAG) are an Aboriginal-led research unit that explores Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research translation through model methods of partnership, engagement, education and capacity-building.
- Maridulu Budyari Gumal (‘SPHERE’) has no centralised Aboriginal employment strategy or RCB policy, so we bring WSU’s programs and policies to bear upon the operation, organisation and research of the AHWB-CAG
OATSIEE and WSU capacity-building initiatives

• OATSIEE represents one of the main areas within the University that focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs; it is entirely Aboriginal-staffed and led.

• Through our First Peoples’ employment policy, WSU developed targets for employment and education initiatives so that the percentage of Indigenous employees (researchers, and academic and professional staff) and students is at population parity.

• Elders on Campus, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Research Subcommittee

• WSU also provides all employees with an opportunity to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history so that they may work effectively in every setting (capacity/capability building the organisation)
Capacity Building at Western Sydney University: Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Engagement
Method: ‘Yarning’, reflexivity and narrative

- New paradigms in ‘Aboriginal research ethics’ allow our Indigeneity to come to the fore when researching (much like other approaches in social sciences focusing on one’s social location and subjectivity).
- Telling our story (auto-ethnography) is a “research tool” that provides space for first-hand narratives and is “more in line with an Aboriginal worldview [e.g. orality and story-telling] than traditional scholarly methods” (Sanduliak, 2016).
- Like “research yarning” for qualitative interviews (Leeson et al. 2016), narrating our RCB story is a form of knowledge-sharing based on principles of relationship and authenticity.
- Dynamic and fluid, dialogical, conversational
RCB: Kayla’s Story

RCB: (1) two identified positions occupied, leading the research; (2) the targeted mentoring and career development programs for the research assistant, and her expressed aspirations to now progress a career as an academic researcher.

What is my researcher story?

• I became interested in research when it became clear to me that changes made on a large scale are done through research. I became interested in this particular role as I am passionate about health outcomes for minorities, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

• Working as a research assistant while currently in the second year of my podiatric medicine degree has allowed my research skills to develop simultaneously in both work and academia. It is a unique experience to be able to complete an undergraduate degree and work as a research assistant and this is obvious with the knowledge I have developed through university and the skill set I have developed from my role as a research assistant that I have been placed in a privileged position.
How has WSU & Maridulu facilitated a culturally safe and appropriate work environment for me as a researcher?

- Throughout my time working for WSU/SPHERE I have felt a huge drive to hear my personal thoughts on any topic as a young woman of colour. I have always felt that my own opinions and thoughts were valued amongst my team and have never felt it to be tokenistic.

- The respect my colleagues and other partners of SPHERE have for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander culture and knowledge is very evident and has always felt authentic and made me feel very welcome.
Concrete RCB strategies and outcomes

- How has this role enabled me to grow my skills? How has it transformed my mindset?
- Before entering into the role I had very little idea of what a research assistant does or how this would benefit me in the long run.
- I have developed skills in conducting searches on many different databases
- On a personal level this role has opened me to a world of very educated, Aboriginal women and has allowed me to feel more accomplished and proud of myself daily
- I’ve participated in many training programs since starting this role last year including project management and website building training
- Mentoring and support from a range of staff
What have I learned about myself through doing this study (‘Hearts & Tracks’)?

- Always been shy or even embarrassed about my Aboriginality
- Aboriginal led has given me a stronger sense of identity
- Able to work independently on tasks – especially with the guidance Ruth provided
- More interested in research than I originally anticipated
- Particularly interested in research regarding minorities or socioeconomically disadvantaged populations
- It has been interesting to see how deep the issues we have been looking into run and has made me passionate about the cause
Research aspirations as a result of RCB

- What would I like to do in the future now that I have had this experience?
- Honours and then PhD
- Practice remotely as a podiatrist, but I still see myself working on research projects into the future
- I have a better understanding of the importance of research but more importantly culturally appropriate research
- Have become very comfortable with the idea of being an Aboriginal woman and being in a team of people who want input
- Primarily interested in being involved in Aboriginal led research projects
What remains?

- Research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia has a chequered history, particularly in health-related fields, where much research in the past was often poorly designed, non-collaborative and based on racialism/racism.
- The ethics of research, including how it is done and whether it benefits our First Peoples is still reiterated in very recent research; we are right to be cynical about broad change.
- While community engagement has improved as a result of (NHMRC) policy changes, there is more reform needed to optimise research outcomes for Aboriginal people from research.
- Challenges: Universities are conservative institutions, pressures of classic KPIs threaten revolutionary methods of engagement (and co-creation, co-attribution etc.)