



# Transforming the public health workforce through immersion in a First Nations empowerment program: A case study of postgraduate student change



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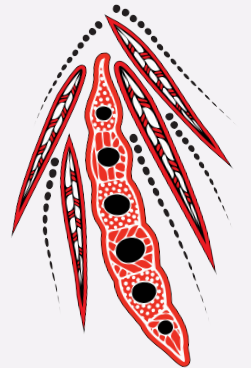
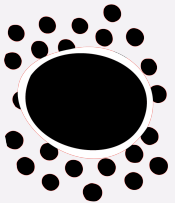


# Acknowledgement of Country

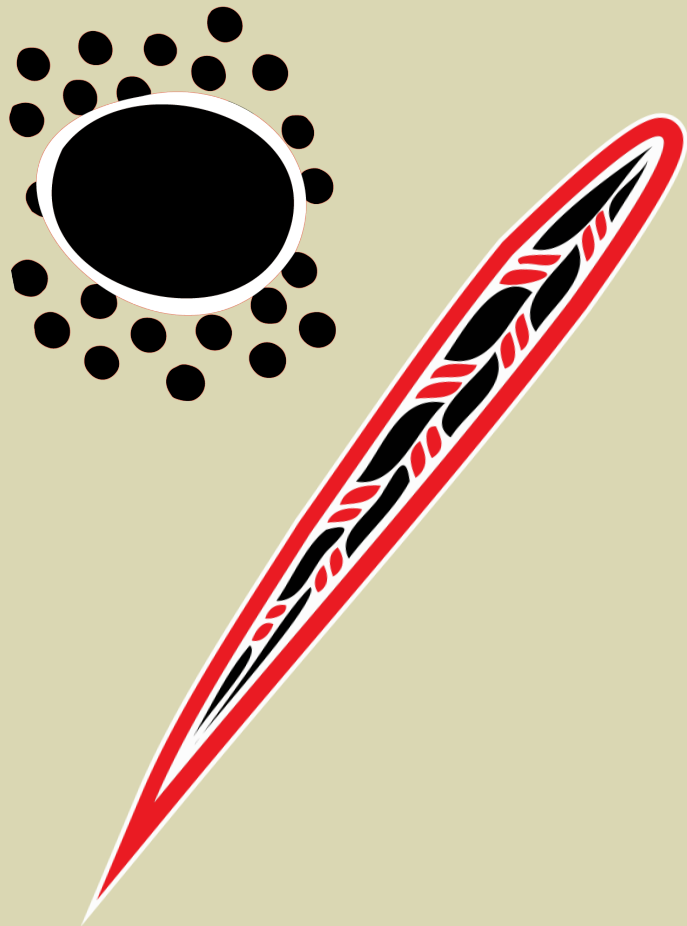


In the spirit of respect, we acknowledge the Lands, Skies and Waters wherein we meet as belonging to the First Peoples of these places and we acknowledge their Elders past and present.

These Lands, Skies and Waters are the only place in the world where the First Peoples of Australia belong, and there is no place in Australia where this is not true.



# Overview



## Introduction

What was our intention?

What did we find out?

What are the implications?



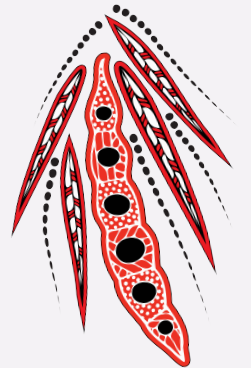
# Introduction



This presentation draws from case study research completed in 2023 by Sally Fitzpatrick for the award of a Professional Doctorate in Public Health within UNSW's Future Health Leaders Program. Lois Meyer co-supervised Sally's thesis and is the past Director of the Professional Doctorate program.

We are two non-Aboriginal settler Australians privileged to have worked closely with the Indigenous-led Muru Marri Health Unit in designing and delivering the UNSW School of Population Health's MPH Specialisation in Aboriginal Health & Wellbeing.

Muru Marri believed in nurturing the strengths of postgraduate students, to lead change in Indigenous health, health service delivery, and environmental health.



# What was our intention?



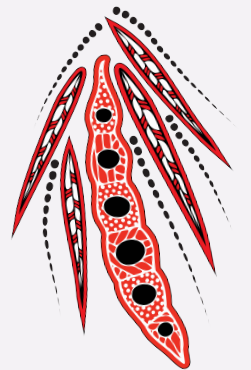
To achieve real change by educating the public health workforce of tomorrow

## *MPH specialisation in Aboriginal Health & Wellbeing:*

- Targeted students ‘with specific interests in primary health care, public health, allied health, community development and the broader sector workforce to cohesively *address the physical, psycho-social, cultural and environmental determinants of health and wellbeing for all people*’ (SPHCM, 2013)
- Aimed to *transform the attitudes and behaviours of non-Aboriginal students* while at the same time provide specific knowledge and skills to strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce (SPHCM, 2011).

## *Lifespan - Core course:*

- To introduce students *to theories of multilevel empowerment* shown to resonate with the experience of Aboriginal people and so, stimulate new practices, perspectives and knowledge to contribute to the improvement of the social conditions of Aboriginal peoples (Norman, 2014, p. 47)
- Particularly, to stimulate students’ critical consciousness of the forces in their lives that were disempowering *and*, through an experientially based approach to learning (Boud, 2008), generate a sense of empowerment and wellbeing, whereby students would feel whole and strong, and have new skills and resources to be able to exert control to enact change personally and professionally.

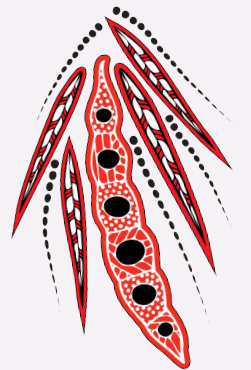




## Edmund O'Sullivan's ecological transformative education vision

“Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. **It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world.** Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.”

Morrell & O'Connor, 2002, p. xvii, emphasis added

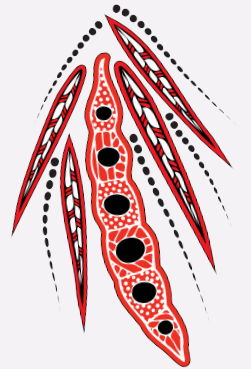


# Embedding an Aboriginal empowerment program in the MPH



## The Lifespan course: centres Family Wellbeing program (FWB) - an evidence-based Aboriginal empowerment program in a phased, blended learning curriculum

- FWB is a highly researched empowerment and healing program developed by Stolen Generations survivors in Adelaide. Its known effectiveness in community settings gave us good reason to believe it would also elicit transformation in postgraduate public health students.
- We sought to test FWB's feasibility and acceptability as a mandatory 3-day, face-to-face workshop within the MPH specialisation context – and to measure the impacts of coursework that systematically incorporated FWB as part of its blended learning curriculum – the Lifespan course.



# The Lifespan course

## Family Wellbeing Workshop

Post-workshop Online Landing Space

1. Concepts of Wellbeing: Empowerment, Resilience and Healing

2. Indigenous Identity, Connection and Spirituality

3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

4. Healthy Start to Life: Infancy and Childhood

5. Youth Perspectives and Challenges

6. Transitions to Young Adulthood

7. Pregnancy and Growing Family

8. Challenges to Adult Health

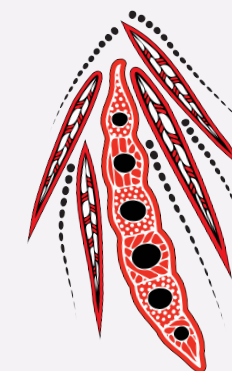
9. Retaining Health into Older Ages

10. Wellbeing, Primary Health Care and Health Promotion

Facilitated,  
3-days,  
face-to-face

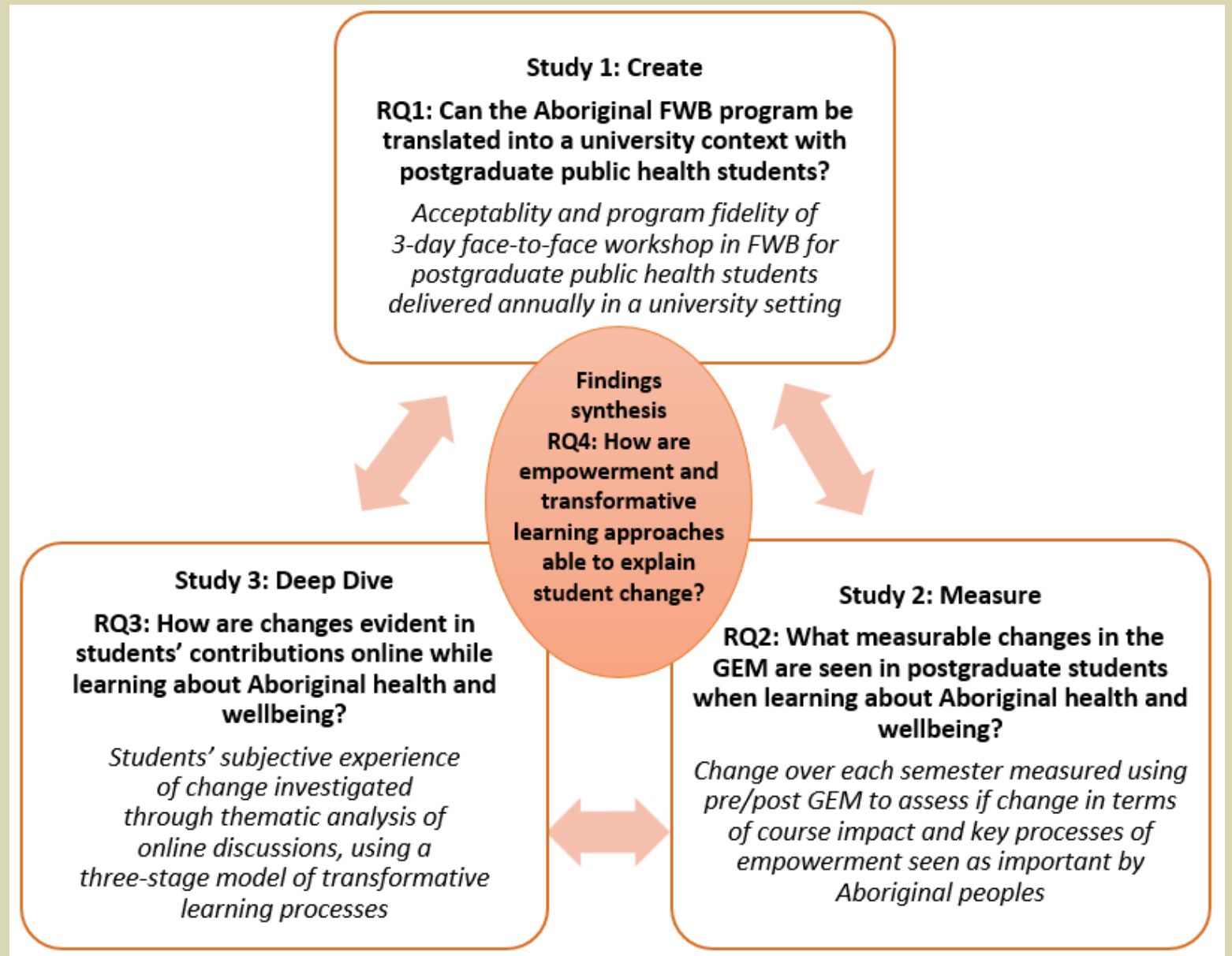


10 weekly  
semi-structured  
online  
discussions





# A sequential, explanatory, mixed methods case study



# What did we find out?

## **Create Study 1: Acceptability and program fidelity of FWB**

- The 3-day immersion in FWB was found to be both acceptable and effective to a diverse cohort of our postgraduate students
- Students began the course with low starting points in feeling connected and calm as measured using the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM). Workshop feedback showed promising signs of empowering change
- These signs were congruent with recently published FWB studies involving students (Perera et al., 2022; Whiteside et al., 2017, Yan et al., 2019)
- Among signs of cultural humility, students appreciated the importance of self-awareness to working effectively in Indigenous health
- While study used an FWB empowerment program logic, it arguably adds to the small literature on transformative learning in postgraduate Indigenous public health (e.g., Jackson et al., 2013).

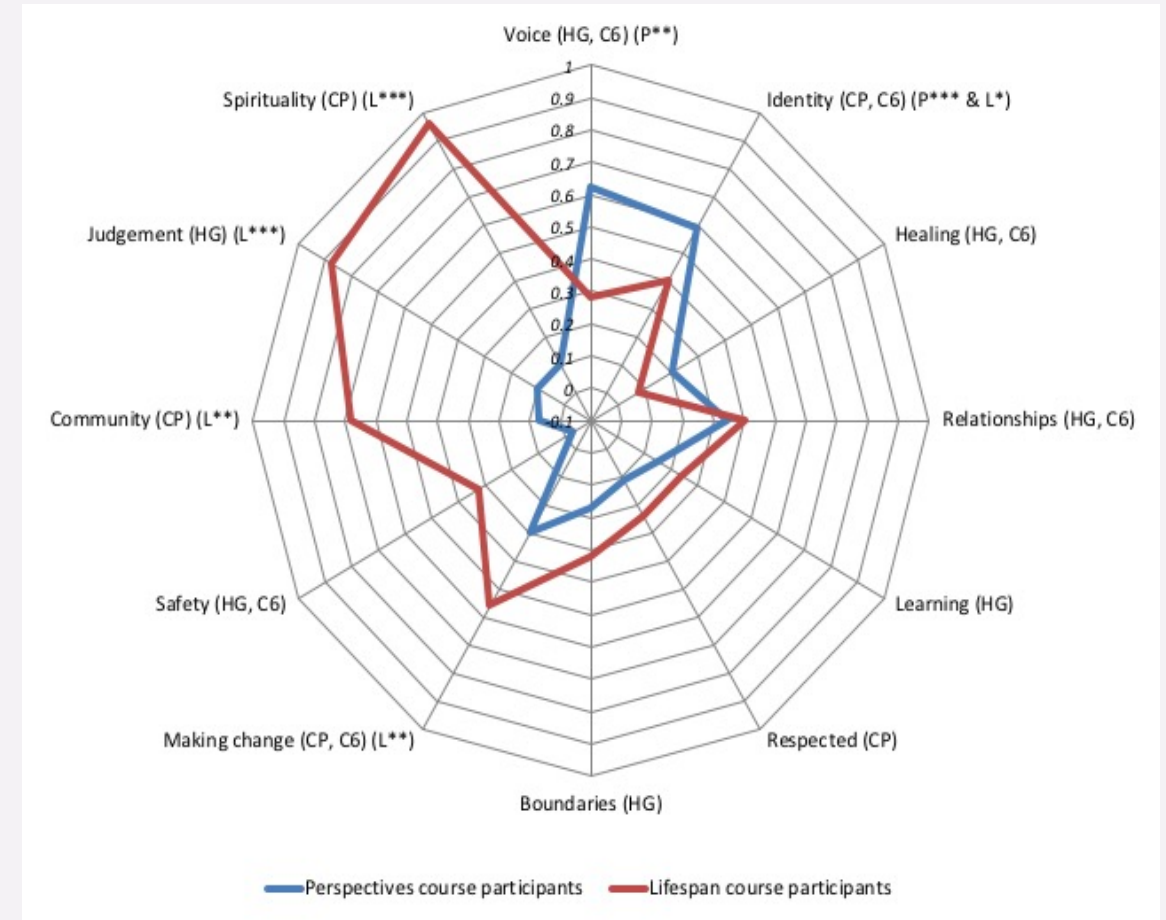
- 72/85 postgraduate public health students in the Lifespan cohort (2011-2015).
- Mostly female. Age range 21-77 years. Median 34 years (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019a).
- It analysed mixed method data collected over five years including measures of students' baseline levels of empowerment, satisfaction surveys and workshop feedback.

See: Fitzpatrick, S., Haswell, M., Williams, M., Meyer, L., & Jackson Pulver, L. (2019a). Change starts from within us. *LIME Good Practice Case Studies*, 5, 20–34

# What did we find out?

## Measure Study 2: The GEM Study

- Aimed to quantitatively and systematically *measure change* in postgraduate public health students learning about Aboriginal health
- Uses an empowerment lens to understand change
- The GEM's two scales were shown to be sensitive to change in this largely non-Indigenous cohort (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019b)
- Strong growth in Lifespan students' positive emotions and view of self – aligned with and added to what is known about FWB's impact (Perera et al., 2022).

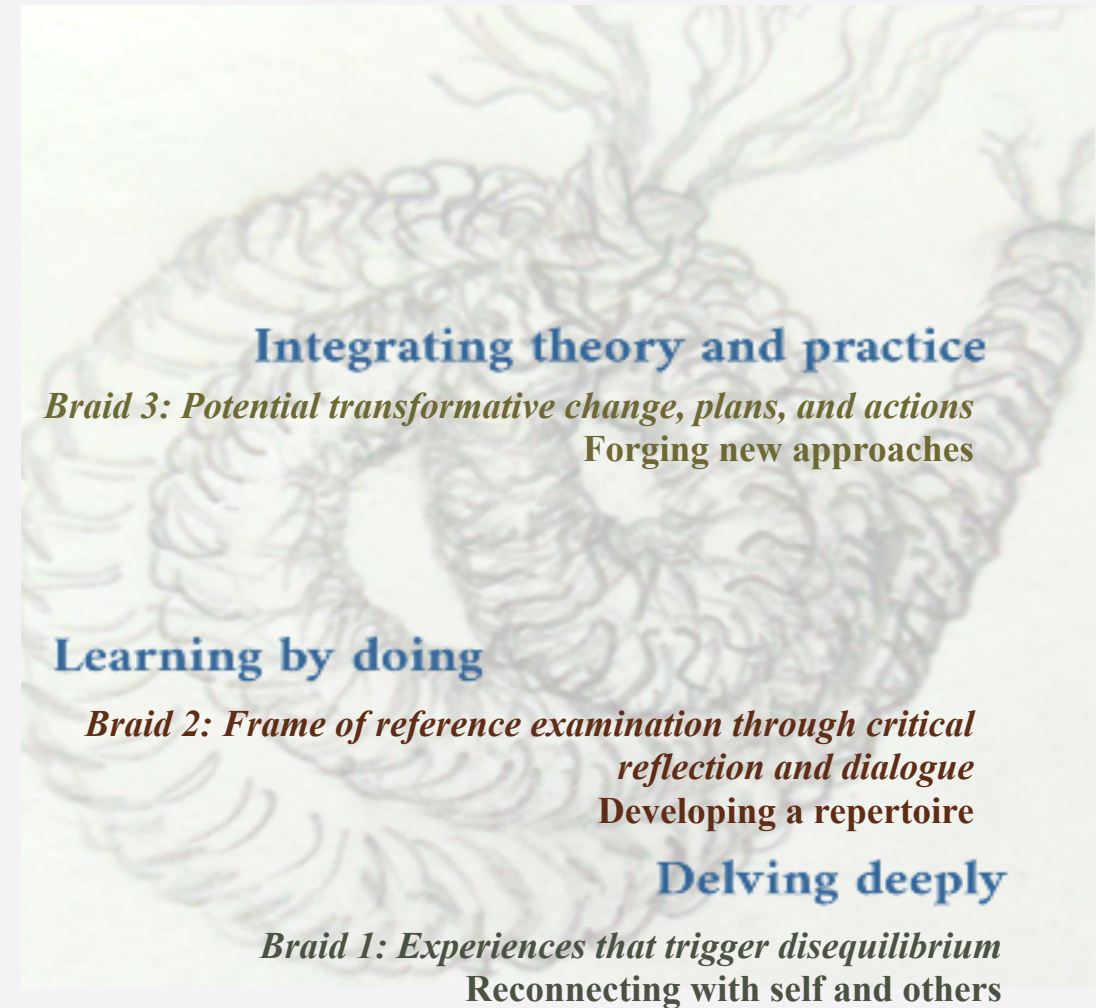


See: Fitzpatrick, S., Haswell, M., Williams, M., Nathan, S., Meyer, L., Ritchie, J., & Jackson Pulver, L. (2019b). Learning about Aboriginal health and wellbeing at the postgraduate level: novel application of the Growth and Empowerment Measure. *Rural and Remote Health*, 19(2), 4708

# What did we find out?

## *Deep Dive Study 3*

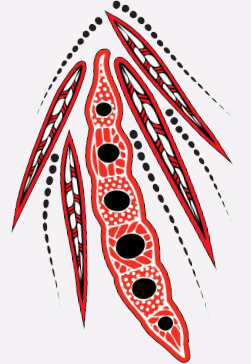
- Aimed to qualitatively trace students' change through the voices of the students themselves as they engaged online
- Used empowerment and transformative learning lenses
- Sensitising concepts from GEM results, and a recursive three-stage model of transformative learning processes (Addleman et al., 2014, p. 190)
- Weaves together individual stories and threads – the coiling braid illustrative of empowerment's collective and relational dimensions, as well as its dynamic ripple effect
- Movement along the braid was fluid and recursive, as well as cumulative, as students revisited personal and professional dilemmas and insights
- A dialectical relationship between empowerment and transformative learning (Fitzpatrick, 2023).



# What are the implications for strengthening public health education and the workforce?



- There is value in embedding FWB in MPH coursework (or workforce program) for strengthening participants' emotional empowerment skills through critical reflection. Having time to reflect was important.
- An empowerment approach was shown to be important in changing how students generally made sense of what they were learning about Aboriginal health through a prism of strengths, self-determination, community control, willingness to collaborate, and early signs of cultural humility.
- Provides a case study and template that can inform others who may like to consider adapting FWB as part of their higher education teaching program or workforce development strategy.
- Program fidelity was promoted through qualified Aboriginal facilitators – a unifying characteristic of FWB credibility (McCalman, 2012). The Aboriginal facilitators offered students, perhaps for the first time, a chance to sit down and 'hear each other's stories and discuss sensitive issues' (Whiteside et al., 2006, p. 424).
- Funding had to be approved each year. It required ongoing, supportive leadership, including investing in training the next generation of FWB facilitators.
- Universities and health systems have clear obligations that public health professionals have capabilities to contribute to and provide conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural safety.



# Acknowledgements and thanks



To our students!

The UNSW Future Health Leaders Program (2014-2023)

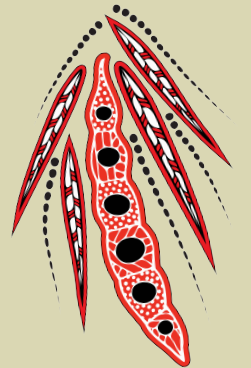
UNSW Medicine's Elder-in-Residence  
Aunty Ali Golding (Birpai)

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## Keep in touch!

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and to find out more:



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