



# Supportive learning delivers pathways to higher education

Chanoa Cooper is a proud Moirban, Wiradjuri and Mutthi Mutthi woman from Shepparton Victoria, and a graduate of the Specialist Certificate in Empowering Health in Aboriginal Communities at The University of Melbourne Department of Rural Health.

Developed as an entry course designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals who have worked in health and community settings, the course offers students an opportunity to pursue a university qualification based on their work experience. The course introduces students to health-related knowledges from critical social science and Aboriginal cultural perspectives; empowering Aboriginal health professionals in their place of work and allowing students to study and work in their communities.

Since graduating in 2020, Chanoa has moved into a new role, Managing Communications and Public Relations at Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative. She has also been selected to be a part of the Jawun

Emerging Leaders Program – where 13 participants have been selected from across Australia to travel and learn about Aboriginal communities and their initiatives.

“The Specialist Certificate has actually opened up a lot of different opportunities for me. It really opened my eyes in Aboriginal health,” Chanoa said.

Chanoa was previously working as a Project Officer at Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative based in Shepparton, when her manager approached her with an opportunity for further study.

“I thought, why not take up this rare opportunity where work can support me and take that time off to study? So, I went for it.”

The course is a post graduate qualification that is also a pathway into the Master of Public Health at the University of Melbourne. The teaching and learning format allows students to study remotely and remain working in their communities while receiving support and guidance from the course lecturers throughout their studies.

“I was very fortunate to have



Proud Moirban, Wiradjuri and Mutthi Mutthi woman Chanoa Cooper.

really amazing lecturers. They created a really safe space for us; there were no silly questions, they were open to everything and anything and provided constructive feedback to us. We were really lucky to have that

support.” In addition to the foundational academic skills, the course looks at the health and history of Aboriginal people, from a strength-based perspective, and considers how Aboriginal and

Western knowledge’s can be applied in the field of health. Students also work on a community-based project in their local Aboriginal community.

“Some of the projects we’ve seen from students are an Elders retreat, diabetes support packages, evaluation of a nursing pathway program, a youth mentoring program and a possum skin cloak that was gifted to the local hospital,” University of Melbourne Lecturer in Rural Aboriginal Health Raylene Nixon said.

Director of the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) at The University of Melbourne, Professor Lisa Bourke said the course opens doors.

“Upon completion many students have been offered a new opportunity in their career, or promotion, and really benefit from undertaking the course and the skills that they’ve gained”, she said “We take a small cohort who get to know each other, who support each other and work together to complete it. It’s a great environment to start your university education.”



Department of Rural Health

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