

Physios knock it out for Indigenous health

1. Summary of impact

Thirteen students from the UTS Master of Physiotherapy program travelled to Nowra on the NSW South Coast to volunteer at the 2022 Koori Knockout, an annual Indigenous rugby league event that brings together more than 150 teams from across NSW.

The impact was twofold: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players and community members gained access to free, supportive physiotherapy services that offered potential to improve their current and future wellbeing. UTS students gained hands-on experience working with Indigenous communities, putting the cultural competencies they'd been learning about during their studies into real, person-centred practice.

2. The problem

Allied health care services like physiotherapy are an important part of a holistic approach to care. Specifically, physiotherapy can help prevent and manage pain, including sporting injuries. Despite these benefits, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have [limited access to physiotherapy services](#). Creating opportunities to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to physiotherapy in culturally appropriate contexts could play an important role in expanding access to this vital health care discipline.

Simultaneously, at UTS, the Faculty of Health has committed to equipping students with the cultural capabilities to positively influence the health and wellbeing outcomes of Indigenous peoples. However, limited opportunities exist for Master of Physiotherapy students to apply their theoretical Indigenous health knowledge in practice-based contexts.

3. Beneficiaries

This project offers current and future benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sportspeople and spectators at the Koori Knockout, as well as for the UTS Master of Physiotherapy students who volunteered at the event.

4. Approach to impact

In 2019, the first cohort of UTS Physiotherapy students attended the Koori Knockout, delivering free physio services to players and spectators. The trip was organised by Danielle Manton, the Faculty of Health's Indigenous Student Liaison Officer and a lecturer in Indigenous Health. The experience was such a success that Koori Knockout organisers invited the UTS students to return the following year.

Manton applied for a Social Impact Grant to fund accommodation and equipment costs for 2020, but COVID-19 lockdowns led to the competition being cancelled in both 2020 and 2021. In 2022, a group of 13 students was finally ready to make the trip, which took place in Nowra over the October long weekend.

For three days, students delivered basic physiotherapy treatments to players and members of the public, engaging in informal conversations about their work and gaining first-hand experience working with Indigenous people.

"The community leaders invited us back, so it was on their terms. Students were there to provide the service to the community as the community decided," Manton says.

"That's a strong element for the development of the students, to be able to learn in that environment and in that cultural way."

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

The Koori Knockout participants and spectators had the opportunity to access physiotherapy services, as well as to learn more about physiotherapy as a tool for holistic wellbeing, and how to talk about it with their own health care providers.

Volunteering at the Koori Knockout exposed students to the realities of working with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community and challenged them to think about the translation of their Indigenous health care knowledge into practical, people-centred action.

“We talk a lot about Indigenous health, we talk a lot about working with Indigenous people, but it doesn’t really mean much until [students] get the opportunity to do that,” Manton says.

“Once they have this experience, they’re better practitioners for it.”

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The Social Impact Grant funding covered accommodation costs for Manton and the UTS volunteers. It also enabled the students to purchase all their own physio supplies, such as strapping tape, without having to request additional financial or in-kind support. Further, the relationship that was established between UTS and the competition organisers in 2019 meant that students attended this year’s competition at the invitation of the Knockout team and local community, ensuring that their services were delivered on community’s terms.

7. Challenges

COVID-19 delayed the project for two years, resulting in a cohort of Master of Physiotherapy students missing out on the opportunity to participate. A lack of ongoing funding and limited capacity within the faculty may limit future opportunities for students to volunteer at the Koori Knockout.