



Early Career Researcher (ECR) Training Program Handbook

Training the future leaders of mental health and
substance use research



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
—
Matilda Centre

Table of Contents

Overview and aims.....	3
Objectives and benefits.....	3
Who are our members?	4
PREMISE CRE Early Career Researchers	4
Program structure.....	4
<i>Meetings.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Mentoring</i>	<i>4</i>
Grant writing and workshops	6
Achievements of current and past members	6
Communication	7
Annual Feedback Survey	7
Contact us.....	7
Members and contacts	8
<i>Coordinators.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Early Career Researchers.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Dr Louise Birrell.....	9
Dr Katrina Champion.....	10
Dr Alana Fisher	11
Dr Lauren Gardner	12
Dr Erin Kelly	13
Dr Steph Kershaw	14
Dr Natalie Peach	15
Dr Katrina Prior.....	16
Dr Mieke Snijder.....	17
Dr Louise Thornton	18

Overview and aims

The Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use (the Matilda Centre) delivers research programs to prevent, treat and reduce substance use and mental disorders. While the Matilda Centre covers the whole lifecourse, a key focus of our research is on youth. The work of the Matilda Centre is built upon the success of the formerly-known NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use (CREMS).

With a focus on prevention, treatment and epidemiology, our research streams facilitate knowledge exchange and develop strategic partnerships with the aim of increasing the knowledge base around the effective prevention and treatment of mental and substance use disorders.

The Matilda Centre recognises the importance of providing early career researchers (ECRs) with the necessary training and skills to develop as the future leaders of substance use and mental health research. To this end, the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program builds on the CREMS ECR program which was established in 2013.

The Matilda Centre ECR Training Program provides early career researchers with the necessary training, skills and support to develop as the future leaders of substance use and mental health research

ECRs within the Matilda Centre have world-class specialised training in the prevention, treatment, and epidemiology of mental health and substance use disorders. The Matilda Centre ECR Training Program provides ECRs with the foundations upon which to build their own successful programs of research. Working alongside peers and internationally recognised research leaders in seven different research institutions around the world, ECRs receive training in a variety of methodologies used to undertake comorbidity research. In addition, ECRs will enhance their leadership, management, and research skills in a supportive and collaborative group.

Objectives and benefits

The **objectives** of the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program are to:

- Expand research skills and knowledge
- Improve management and leaderships skills
- Provide mentorship opportunities
- Improve grant writing skills
- Provide opportunities for networking and collaboration with senior academics, peers and service providers in the community
- Provide professional and personal development support
- Provide opportunities to share new ideas, skills, and the latest research on comorbidity
- Promote of a collegial and supportive workplace

The **benefits** of the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program include:

- Development of a strong professional profile and career trajectory
- Increased confidence as researchers and clinicians
- Increased confidence and skill in mentoring and leadership skills
- Ongoing professional and personal development support
- Facilitation of collaborations with senior academics, peers and service providers in the community
- Opportunities to share new ideas, skills and the latest research on comorbidity
- Promotion of a collaborative and supportive workplace

Who are our members?

Matilda Centre ECRs are researchers at academic Level A and Level B, who have been awarded their PhD. This includes Postdoctoral Research Fellows and Research Fellows, Research Associates, Associate Lecturers and Lecturers. Our members are passionate about mental health and substance use research, interested in developing their career and enhancing their leadership, mentorship, grant writing skills. For more details on our members and their research interests, see the Member Profiles at the end of this Handbook.



PREMISE CRE Early Career Researchers

The Matilda Centre hosts the Centre for Research Excellence in Prevention and Early Intervention of Mental Health and Substance Use (PREMISE; 2018-2023). An important element of PREMISE is providing support for PREMISE ECRs working in comorbidity. In order to facilitate this, The Matilda Centre also organises quarterly events for ECRs that are working on PREMISE-related projects at collaborative universities and research centres. PREMISE ECRs who are provided with this opportunity are academics employed on level A or B who are either paid by PREMISE, receive funding from PREMISE (seed/travel grants) or an associate investigator on PREMISE.

Program structure

The Matilda Centre ECR Training Program is organised and run by two coordinators on a two year rolling term ([Dr Mieke Snijder](#) and [Dr Steph Kershaw](#)) and is overseen by a member of the Matilda Centre senior leadership advisory group ([A/Prof Katherine Mills](#)). The structure is designed to provide our postdoctoral researchers with requisite support for both their professional and personal development, and is delivered through; i) meetings tailored specifically to the needs of its members, ii) formal and informal mentoring, and iii) the Matilda Centre Grant Development Workshops.

Meetings

Monthly meetings occur on the second Friday of each month and provide members with the opportunity to meet, share ideas, and to openly discuss any issues they may have. To cater for the unique needs of external or overseas postdoctoral members, there is the opportunity to join in via Zoom.

Mentoring

At the Matilda Centre we believe mentoring facilitates supportive relationships that are integral for guidance and research career development. As such, the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program provides opportunities not only to receive mentoring, but also to provide mentoring to others.

Mentoring offers a number of benefits. For the mentee, mentoring can increase self-confidence and ability, help clarify career paths and goals, enhance skills and knowledge and broaden research collaborations. For mentors, such relationships can also broaden research collaborations, increase research profile, and assist in developing leadership skills. For Matilda Centre, mentoring promotes



collegiality, and increases productivity and staff commitment. Members are assisted in accessing and providing mentoring (both formal and informal) through two complimentary processes:

1. Mentoring provided by the Matilda Centre Executives

As a main aim of the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program is to provide world class specialised training in the prevention, treatment and epidemiology of comorbidity, members have unique access to support from the Senior Matilda Academic Group comprising academics level C – E (Prof Maree Teesson, A/Prof Cath Chapman, A/Prof Katherine Mills, A/Prof Nicola Newton, A/Prof Tim Slade, Dr Emma Barrett, Dr Christina Marel, Dr Lexine Stapinski, Dr Matthew Sunderland).

We have strong collaborations with leading comorbidity researchers nationally and internationally including Prof's Paul Haber and Andrew Baillie (University of Sydney), Prof Frances Kay-Lambkin (University of Newcastle), Prof Helen Christensen (Black Dog Institute & UNSW), Prof Pat McGorry, A/Prof Eoin Killackey, and Dr Sarah Bendall (Orygen & University of Melbourne), Prof Leanne Hides and A/Prof Vanessa Cobham (University of Queensland), Prof Steve Allsop and Dr Nyanda McBride (Curtin University), Prof Cathy Mihalopoulos (Deakin University), Prof Bonnie Spring (Northwestern University, US), Profs Kathleen Brady & Sudie Back (Medical University of South Carolina, US), Prof Bob Krueger (University of Minnesota, US), Prof Patricia Conrod (University of Montreal, Canada), Prof Kevin Gournay (Emeritus Kings College London, UK).

Our collaborations span multidisciplinary international experts in the field of comorbidity and offer extensive research and clinical experience in the mental health and drug and alcohol arenas. There are also a number of external mentoring opportunities available through professional societies (such as the Society for Mental Health Research, Franklin Women). ECRs can speak to their supervisors about facilitating links with our collaborators and other mentoring opportunities.

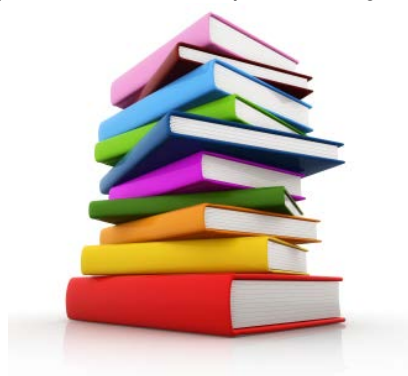
2. Mentoring drug and alcohol and mental health workers in the field: The CMHDARN Community Mentoring Program

The Matilda Centre and the Community Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Research Network (CMHDARN) are working in partnership to implement an exciting CMHDARN Community Mentoring Program. This opportunity recognises a shared interest in improving comorbidity research and practice, as well as a commitment to optimising the translation and impact of research findings.

This Mentoring Program aims to provide workers in community managed organisations with an interest in research with academic mentor support to develop their research knowledge and skill development. Matilda Centre ECRs offer support to individuals and organisations in developing their research practice, skills and knowledge. Short-term informal mentoring (3-6 months) and/or longer-term formal mentoring (6-12 months) will be delivered based on the specific areas indicated by the mentees. This is a unique and highly beneficial opportunity for the Matilda Centre ECR members to gain valuable mentoring experience, increase research knowledge and skills, enhance understanding of community managed organisations, and engage with the community. The Mentoring Program also promotes capacity building and facilitates the development of a collaborative research culture between Matilda Centre and service providers to promote practice-based research. More information can be accessed via the [**CMHDARN website**](#).

Grant writing and workshops

Members have a valuable opportunity to attend annual Grant Development Workshops designed to provide continued support with grant applications throughout the year. These workshops are designed so that senior academics and ECR researchers can provide and receive targeted advice in the planning, development, and revision of grant applications. Moreover, these workshops provide the opportunity for ECRs to review other grants and be spokespersons during the workshops (as reflected by the NHMRC model of grant review). This is a valuable opportunity for members to experience the grant review process.



Workshop topic	Date
Brainstorming and grant review	April (1 day)
Brainstorming and preparing rebuttals	August/September (1-day)
Developing and reviewing grants	November/December (2-days)

Achievements of current and past members

The Matilda Centre ECR group is supportive and collaborative environment, with strong and active links with the Senior Matilda Academic Group. Since the group was first established in 2013, members have achieved success in grant funding and been the recipients of numerous awards. Although these have been obtained in partnership with the Matilda Centre Senior Leadership Advisory Group and other Matilda Centre members, all have been led by Matilda Centre ECR members. Some of these include:

- Australian Drug Foundation Excellence and Innovation in Research
- Australian Drug Foundation Innovation in Prevention and Education
- Australasian Professional Society for Alcohol and Drugs (APSAD) Early Career Researcher Award
- Australian Rotary Health Bruce Edwards Postdoctoral Fellowship
- Australian Rotary Health Knowledge Dissemination Award
- Australian Rotary Health and Alliance for the Prevention of Mental Disorders Award for Research Excellence
- Fulbright Postdoctoral scholarship
- Mental Health Matters Mental Health Promotion and Wellbeing
- National Council of Women of NSW Australia Day Award
- NHMRC Early Career Fellowship
- NSW Health Early-Mid Career Fellowships
- Society for Mental Health Research (SMHR) Early Career Researcher Fellowships
- TheMHS Best Practice Award: Highly Commended
- TheMHS Early Career Research Award: High Commendation
- Public Health Association of Australia NSW Branch President's award

Communication

All Matilda Centre ECRs are members of the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program and provided with a copy of this Handbook. Members communicate via email and at monthly ECR meetings, with those located off-site welcome to attend meetings remotely via Zoom. ECRs are encouraged to use email to generate informal discussions or seek advice.

Annual Feedback Survey

Outcomes of the Matilda Centre ECR Training Program are annually assessed via a feedback survey. At the end of each academic year, members are asked to confidentially respond to a short, electronic survey. This information both evaluates the annual progress of the program and informs revisions and refinements to the program.



Contact us

If you have any questions please contact the Program Co-ordinators, **Dr Mieke Snijder** (mieke.snijder@sydney.edu.au) or **Dr Steph Kershaw** (steph.kershaw@sydney.edu.au), or visit the [Matilda Centre](#) website or follow us on social media:



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Members and contacts

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We are very grateful to the previous ECR Training Program coordinators for their assistance with, and contribution to, the Program and this Handbook



Dr Louise Birrell

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney

Background

Dr Louise Birrell is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow within the Matilda Centre at the University of Sydney. Dr Birrell's research examines the links between alcohol use and mental health in adolescents. She has extensive experience trialling substance use and mental health prevention programs and conducting systematic reviews of substance use related mobile apps and app development. Dr Birrell will commence an Australian Rotary Health funded Postdoctoral Fellowship in 2019 to develop a smartphone app for adolescents to support their friends with mental health or substance use problems.

Research interests

- Anxiety disorders;
- Mood disorders;
- Adolescent alcohol use;
- Comorbidity;
- Adolescence;
- School-based prevention;
- e-Mental Health.

Methodological expertise

- Analysis of large-scale epidemiological data sets (e.g. discrete-time survival models);
- Analysis of randomised controlled trial data;
- Analysis of longitudinal data;
- Latent variable modelling (e.g., latent class analysis, parallel latent growth modelling, growth mixture models).

Potential Topics

I am available to supervise honours, masters, PhD and undergraduate student placements related to any of my research interests listed above. Some examples of potential topics are listed below:

- Examining trends and/or links between adolescent alcohol use and mental health;
- Identifying teacher-related factors associated with adolescent mental health and substance use;
- Reviewing the evidence on effective mental health and substance use programs targeted at teacher wellbeing;
- Systematic review of e-health apps.

Dr Katrina Champion

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney



Background

Dr Katrina Champion is an NHMRC Early Career Fellow/Research Fellow at The Matilda Centre, University of Sydney. She holds a PhD in Public Health and Community Medicine from UNSW Sydney (2016). As part of her thesis, she developed and evaluated the *Climate Schools: Ecstasy & Emerging Drugs module*, the first online school-based prevention program designed to prevent ecstasy and new psychoactive substance use. Katrina's research interests include the development and evaluation of innovative digital resources to improve the physical and mental health of young Australians, multiple health behaviour change and school-based substance use prevention. From 2017-2019, Katrina spent two years with Prof Bonnie Spring in the Department of Preventive Medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago to further her research in these areas.

Katrina is currently leading the Health4Life Study, a cluster randomised controlled trial of an eHealth intervention to reduce chronic disease risk factors among Australian adolescents.

Research interests

- Use of technology to address risky behaviours and improve physical and mental health;
- Health behaviours in young people (including substance use, smoking, poor diet, physical inactivity, sleep and sedentary behaviour);
- School-based interventions;
- Substance use prevention and drug education.

Methodological expertise

- Development and evaluation of preventive interventions;
- Design and coordination of randomised controlled trials, particularly in school settings;
- Longitudinal data analysis (mixed models).

Potential topics

- Evaluation of an eHealth intervention to prevent multiple lifestyle risk behaviours among secondary school students;
- Examining the prevalence and co-occurrence of lifestyle risk behaviours among adolescents;
- Understanding the relationships between multiple risk behaviours and physical and mental health outcomes.
- Optimising school-based substance use interventions to improve efficiency and effectiveness

Projects would suit undergraduate or postgraduate students with an interest in these research topics.



Dr Alana Fisher

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney

Background

Dr Alana Fisher completed her PhD at The University of Sydney in 2018. Her doctoral research investigated patient, family and clinician views and experiences of treatment decision-making in bipolar II disorder, which informed the design and evaluation of two decision-support tools (a decision-aid booklet and website). These world-first decision-aids aimed to assist patients to make more active and informed treatment decisions with their clinician and family, based on the best available evidence and their personal preferences. Alana joined The Matilda Centre in 2019 as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, where she plans to develop and evaluate a suite of decision-aids for patients with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders deciding on early intervention and treatments.

Research interests

- Clinician-patient-family communication and decision-making in healthcare
- Shared decision-making in mental health and substance use treatment settings
- Development and evaluation of patient information and decision-support resources
- E-mental health
- Comorbid mental health disorders and substance use disorders
- Anxiety disorders
- Mood and bipolar-related disorders
- Early intervention and treatment

Methodological expertise

- Qualitative research methods and analysis (interviews, focus groups, framework methods, thematic analysis)
- Design and coordination of pre-/post- studies and randomised controlled trials
- Development and evaluation of decision-support interventions (including online interventions)

Potential topics

I am available to supervise honours, masters, PhD and undergraduate student placements related to any of my research interests listed above.

Dr Lauren Gardner

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney



Background

Lauren is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. She holds a Bachelor of Psychology with first class Honours (2013) and a PhD in Psychology (2018) from the University of Wollongong. Her PhD focused on the cognitive and social factors underlying participation and dropout in organised youth sport. She is currently working on the *Health4Life* Initiative which aims to develop and evaluate the first eHealth program simultaneously targeting six key lifestyle risk factors (physical inactivity, poor diet, risky alcohol use, smoking, passive recreational screen time and poor sleep) for chronic disease among secondary school students. Lauren is also working on *Climate Schools*, a universal, online school-based program designed to prevent alcohol and other drug use and related harms among adolescents.

Research interests

- Improving health and wellbeing through sport and physical activity;
- Drug and alcohol prevention and education;
- School-based prevention;
- Internet-based interventions.

Methodological expertise

- Design and analysis of cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data;
- Structural equation modelling (e.g., mediation);
- Latent variable modelling (e.g., latent profile analysis, growth mixture models).



Dr Erin Kelly

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney

Background

Dr Erin Kelly is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The Matilda Centre, leading a program of research in the translation of brief intervention in schools for the prevention of substance use and mental disorders. She completed her PhD at the University of New South Wales in 2018, titled “Tackling adolescent bullying head on: Victimisation, perpetration and targeted intervention”.

Erin is also a practicing Clinical Psychologist (working in early intervention for adolescents) and is the lead trainer of the Preventure program in Australia, a personality-focused brief intervention for preventing substance use and mental disorders in adolescents.

Research interests

- Bullying;
- Adolescence;
- School-based prevention and early intervention;
- Comorbidity between substance use and mental disorders;
- Transdiagnostic treatment approaches;
- e-Mental Health.

Methodological expertise

- Design and analysis of randomised controlled trials;
- Design and analysis of cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data (e.g. regression, mixed models);
- Development and evaluation of interventions;
- Translation of evidence-based interventions.

Potential Topics

I am available to supervise honours, masters, PhD and undergraduate student placements related to any of my research interests listed above. Some examples of potential topics are listed below:

- Examining trends and/or links between adolescent substance use and mental health;
- Examining factors associated with adolescent bullying and associated mental health/substance use problems;
- Systematic review of e-health for bullying and associated harms;
- Innovative interventions for prevention/early intervention for adolescent substance use and/or mental health problems.

Dr Steph Kershaw

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney



Background

Dr Steph Kershaw is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use. Steph is responsible for managing Cracks in the Ice; a Commonwealth Department of Health funded project disseminating information about crystal methamphetamine in Australia via an online toolkit and mobile app.

Steph completed her PhD in 2015 at the University of South Australia, which focused on the impact of genetic predictors of opioid dependence on neuroimmune and endocrine markers in healthy adults. Following which, she undertook several appointments at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, Switzerland focusing on the impact of illicit drugs on public health, and the translation of evidence-based research into international policy outcomes.

Research interests

- Epidemiology, prevention and treatment of substance misuse
- Translation of evidence-based research
- National and international policies for illicit drugs
- Improving health outcomes for individuals and communities

Methodological expertise

- Design and analysis of randomised controlled trials
- Design, collection and analysis of online survey research

Potential Topics

I am available to supervise honours, masters, PhD and undergraduate student placements related to any of my research interests listed above.



Dr Natalie Peach

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney

Background

Natalie is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Matilda Centre, University of Sydney. She currently works as the Project Coordinator on the COPE-A clinical trial, investigating the efficacy of integrated exposure-based therapy for co-occurring post-traumatic stress and substance use disorders in adolescents. She completed a combined Masters/PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Melbourne and Orygen Youth Health in 2017. Her PhD focused on phenomenological relationships between childhood trauma, PTSD symptoms and psychotic symptoms in young people with early psychosis.

Research interests:

- PTSD
- Childhood trauma
- Adolescent mental health
- Comorbidity
- Early intervention and treatment
- Psychosis

Methodological expertise:

- Cross-sectional studies
- Regression analyses
- Qualitative research

Dr Katrina Prior
The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney



Background

Dr Katrina Prior is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow within the Matilda Centre at the University of Sydney. She has extensive experience trialling interventions for co-occurring mental health and substance use programs, among both young people and adults. Katrina completed a Bachelor's degree in Psychology (Honours) and Commerce at ANU, and a PhD in Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW (2018). Her thesis focused on the prevalence, impact and persistence of social anxiety among depressed individuals in treatment for substance dependence. Katrina commenced an Australian Rotary Health-funded Postdoctoral Fellowship in March 2019, which aims to prevent the exacerbation of co-occurring anxiety and alcohol use problems among young people through cognitive re-training, with mentoring from Dr Lexine Stapinski (Matilda Centre) and Prof Reinout Wiers (University of Amsterdam).

Research interests

- Prevention, early intervention and treatment for co-occurring mental health and drug/alcohol use disorders, particularly among young people.
- Technology-driven interventions to improve the wellbeing of young people with comorbid anxiety and alcohol use disorders
- Risk factors and psychological mechanisms that initiate and maintain the anxiety-alcohol use comorbidity
- Implicit cognitive processes involved in addiction and anxiety disorders
- The complex relationship between sleep disorders and co-occurring mental and substance use disorders

Key terms: Anxiety, alcohol and other drugs, comorbidity, prevention, early intervention, treatment, adolescent health, e-mental health, online intervention

Methodological expertise

- Design and coordination of randomised controlled trials, particularly among youth
- Development of online interventions for young people
- Design, collection and analysis of cross-sectional and longitudinal data (e.g., generalised estimating equations);
- Analysis of large-scale epidemiological data sets.

Potential Topics

I am available to supervise honours, masters, PhD and undergraduate student placements related to any of my research interests listed above.



Dr Mieke Snijder

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney

Background

Dr Mieke Snijder is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance use. She leads a program of research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and community-based drug and alcohol prevention. Originally from The Netherlands, she completed a Masters in Health and Society at Wageningen University and Research Centre. In 2017 she completed her PhD at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales.

Dr Snijder is passionate about using her research to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal Australians and other disadvantaged communities. Her national and international leadership has been acknowledged through awards and invited presentations to overseas and local research groups. She further undertakes research capacity building by supervising an Aboriginal Master student, coordinating an NGO research mentoring program and assisting in NGO research.

Research interests

- Intersectoral collaborations and community-driven research;
- Evaluation of existing services and community-based programs promoting health and wellbeing;
- Health promotion and empowerment;
- Promoting equity and reducing disadvantage;
- Substance use prevention and early intervention.

Methodological expertise

- Participatory research methodologies;
- Qualitative research methods (including interviewing, focus groups, thematic analyses);
- Analysis of large-scale administrative data sets (e.g. police data, hospital data);
- Multiple baseline (or stepped wedge) designs and interrupted times series analyses.

Dr Louise Thornton

The Matilda Centre
University of Sydney



Background

Dr Louise Thornton is a research scholar at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use. She completed her PhD in 2012 at the University of Newcastle. Her doctoral research investigated tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use, and attitudes towards these substances, among people with and without mental disorders. Louise leads a program of research investigating the ways in which mobile technologies (e.g. mobile health apps, passive sensing technology) can be used to improve health behaviours among young people and people with mental health problems, and the accessibility of effective eHealth and mHealth interventions. She also leads the communication portfolio at the Matilda Centre and has an interest in how social media can be effectively used to promote and disseminate health research and recruit participants to research.

Research interests

- Health risk behaviours including tobacco use, excessive alcohol use, poor diet and physical inactivity;
- Co-morbidity between health risk behaviours and mental health problems;
- The potential role of the Internet and mobile technologies to improve health and health research;
- How patient engagement with drug and alcohol, and lifestyle, interventions can be improved.

Methodological expertise

- Design, administration and analysis of survey research (particularly online);
- Design, collection and analysis of qualitative data;
- Development of online and mobile e-health tools;
- Randomised controlled trial development and coordination;
- Psychological intervention development and evaluation.

Potential Topics

Projects would suit an honours or post-graduate student interested in ehealth and/or health behaviour change.

- Use and quality of mobile applications to address health behaviours, mental health problems or substance use;
- Accessibility and quality of mental health and/or substance use treatments online;
- Cardio-vascular disease risk reduction among vulnerable populations e.g. people with mental health and/or substance use problems.



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