

LISS DTP Overseas Institutional Visit

Australia, October to December 2022

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During my PhD, as part of the LISS DTP Overseas Institutional Visit (OIV) scheme, I had the opportunity to travel to Australia between October and December 2022. I spent time in two leading addictions research centres in Australia (University of Queensland and the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre based in the University of New South Wales), working with collaborators and sharing my PhD findings. Additionally, I was invited to present some of my PhD findings at two highly relevant conferences: the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD) conference in Darwin and the Health Services Research Association of Australia and New Zealand (HSRAANZ) conference in Sydney.

This report summarises my activities and achievements during my OIV.

Darwin

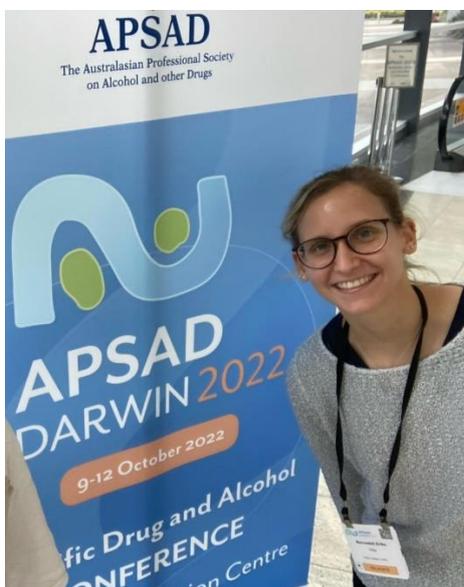
I arrived in Darwin on 7th October.

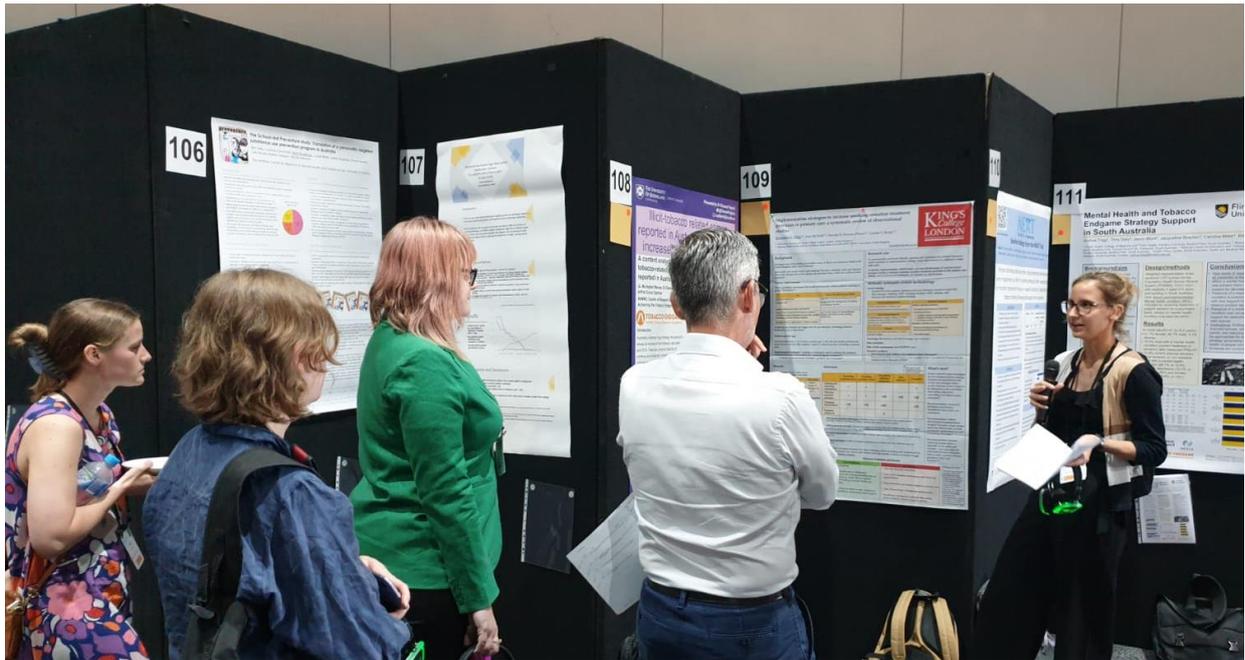
Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (ASPAD) conference 9-12th October

I attended the pre-conference workshop on Sunday 9th October, entitled “Causal inference with observational data in addiction research”. The workshop was delivered by Dr Gary Chan and members of his research team from the National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research at the University of Queensland. It was a great way to connect with Gary again (after meeting him when he visited my research group in London in the summer). The workshop featured two methods of quantitative data analysis: propensity score matching and interrupted time series analysis with controls. The former is a growing method in my field and will be useful for both my future research and in the present regarding when I am reading and appraising studies which use this technique. The latter is a technique I am closely considering using for one of the sub-studies of my PhD. It was very useful to hear more about the techniques and to be able to conduct an example of each of them, using RStudio. Gary and his team are very good epidemiologists in the field of addictions, and have conducted numerous studies in the field of tobacco and nicotine specifically.



I attended the rest of the ASPAD conference between 10-12th October. The conference was attended by researchers from the wider alcohol and other drugs field, including medical scientists, practitioners, researchers, peer workers, consumers, and policymakers. Exposure to research on a wide range of addictive substances was greatly beneficial for my research. I was selected to participate in a poster tour on 11th October, where the tour lead, Professor Hayden McRobbie, led a small audience from poster to poster, and the poster authors gave a short presentation of their work and then answered questions from the lead and the audience in a Q&A. It was great to have Prof McRobbie as the tour lead. He has worked with my supervisors in the past and now conducts tobacco and nicotine research both in New Zealand and is a Professor in Public Health Interventions at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. He gave the keynote lecture earlier that day: “Vaping Regulation: can we find the right balance for greatest public health benefit?” which was very relevant for my research and is a current ‘hot topic’ issue.





The conference was high-quality and I really enjoyed it. It was the first in-person conference I've had the chance to attend since beginning my PhD (due to Covid-19). The presentations were organised in a good format (some sessions were quick-fire 12 min presentations followed by 7 min presentations), and most of the presentations I saw were really engaging and were delivered in a passionate way. I hope I can implement some of the lessons I learnt about public speaking in my future presentations. (My highlights: Dr Hester Wilson, a research GP doing her PhD; and Dr Ben Riordan, ECR award winner, gave excellent talks.) Networking was pleasant, I met so many researchers from all over Australia and they were all interested to hear about my research and the nicotine/tobacco context in the UK. The conference was located in Darwin, traditional home of the Larrakia people. It has a relatively high population of indigenous people compared to the other cities I am visiting, and it was a really impactful way to see the stark inequality and health inequality issues that exists in Australia. At the conference, several talks mentioned how they involved indigenous people in the development of their research projects; my favourite was "Re-thinking how we ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their drinking" by Assoc/Prof Kylie Lee at the University of Sydney who co-presented with an indigenous member of their research team. On the last day, outside the conference venue at the waterfront, I got to watch a traditional saltwater ceremony which was conducted by a Larrakia Elder. Outside of the conference, I got to see some crocodiles (at Crocosaurus Cove) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards exhibit at the Museum and Art Gallery. The conference dinner was held at the tropical Darwin Botanical Gardens.



Brisbane

I flew to Brisbane on 13th October. I joined Prof Coral Gartner's team, at the University of Queensland, on 17th Oct.



On Wednesday 19th Oct, I attended and contributed ideas during a workshop for Smoke-Free Indonesia project, led by Dr Janni Leung. The project team met to discuss the project timeline and ideas about the scope and implementation of the toolkit they are designing. The toolkit is aiming to raise awareness about the harm of secondhand smoking, and to encourage people who smoke to protect others from secondhand smoke.



I presented to Prof Coral Gartner's research group at the Centre of Research Excellence on Achieving the Tobacco Endgame on Thursday 20th Oct. Coral's group gave me really valuable feedback on my presentation and PhD studies. They explained the Australian e-cigarette policy context (although nicotine-containing e-cigarettes can only be accessed if they are prescribed by a doctor, vape shops are permitted to sell nicotine-free e-liquids and e-cigarettes off-prescription) and gave me insight about what was happening on the ground regarding enforcement of this policy. When the new law regarding prescriptions was implemented, this regulation was not enforced well and currently there are a problem where vape shops are selling nicotine-containing e-liquids off-prescription and often the customer is not aware that the e-liquid contains nicotine. Additionally, there is a problem with customers buying nicotine-containing e-liquids and e-cigarettes online; again, currently the Australia government does not have optimal border enforcement of the prescription law. Also, Australia (and other countries) do not have dedicated Stop Smoking Services, like the UK has; this perspective was useful in discussing my research findings where I investigated the rate of people trying to quit smoking using different sources of behavioural cessation support (between different countries). Coral is a co-author on this paper, and we discussed some future collaboration potential too. We discussed an option for me to write a commentary paper with her and other colleagues in Australia to discuss the differing policy contexts of England and Australia – I will try to explore this towards the end of my PhD. Additionally, Coral recently won a large research grant to fund her Tobacco Endgame Centre of Research Excellence and will be growing her team. Coral is planning on gaining access to some national survey data on mental health conditions and smoking; this is a project I may have the opportunity to be involved in after my PhD. I was added as an affiliate postgraduate student member of the Centre of Research Excellence on Achieving the Tobacco Endgame:

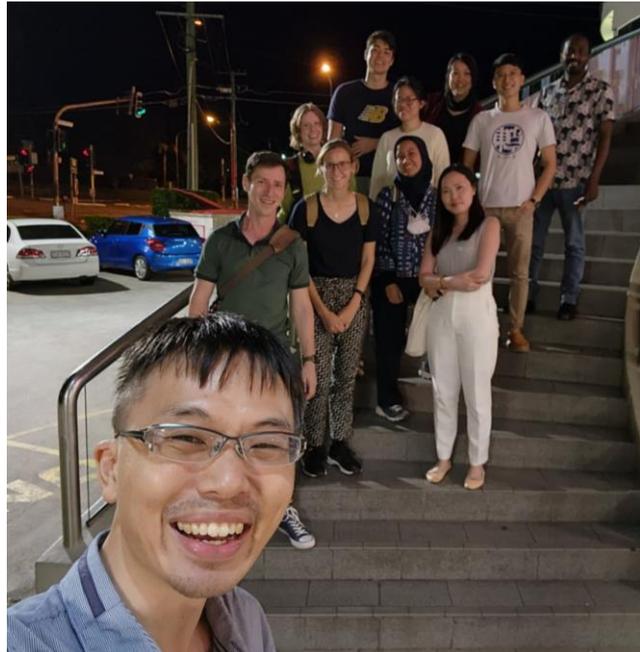
<https://tobacco-endgame.centre.uq.edu.au/our-people>



I presented to Dr Gary Chan's research group at the National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research on Wednesday 26th Oct. I also had the opportunity to attend his research group's monthly team meeting, where each member of the team gave an update about their work. It is always an interesting experience seeing how other research groups function and plan for research grants and publications. Gary and his PhD student, Carmen Lim, taught me lots about statistics and gave me advice for the analysis I was working on to make it a lot more robust.

I gained really valuable feedback on my PhD projects from Coral and Gary's team; both tobacco field specific feedback and statistical advice. Gary and Carmen are also co-authors on my current paper.





Sydney

I flew to Sydney on 19th Nov. I joined Assoc Prof Ryan Courtney's team at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) within the University of New South Wales, on 21st Nov. Ryan's team is currently conducting a randomised controlled trial (RCT) assessing whether adding a tailored text messaging intervention to participants who have signed up to the national QuitLine to quit smoking improves the rate of smoking cessation at 12-months. I got the opportunity to speak to the Clinical Trial Coordinator, Dr Kieran Patel, and his team of research assistants about the practicalities of running an RCT in the smoking field – this was really insightful because currently we are not running any RCTs in the Nicotine Research Group at KCL.

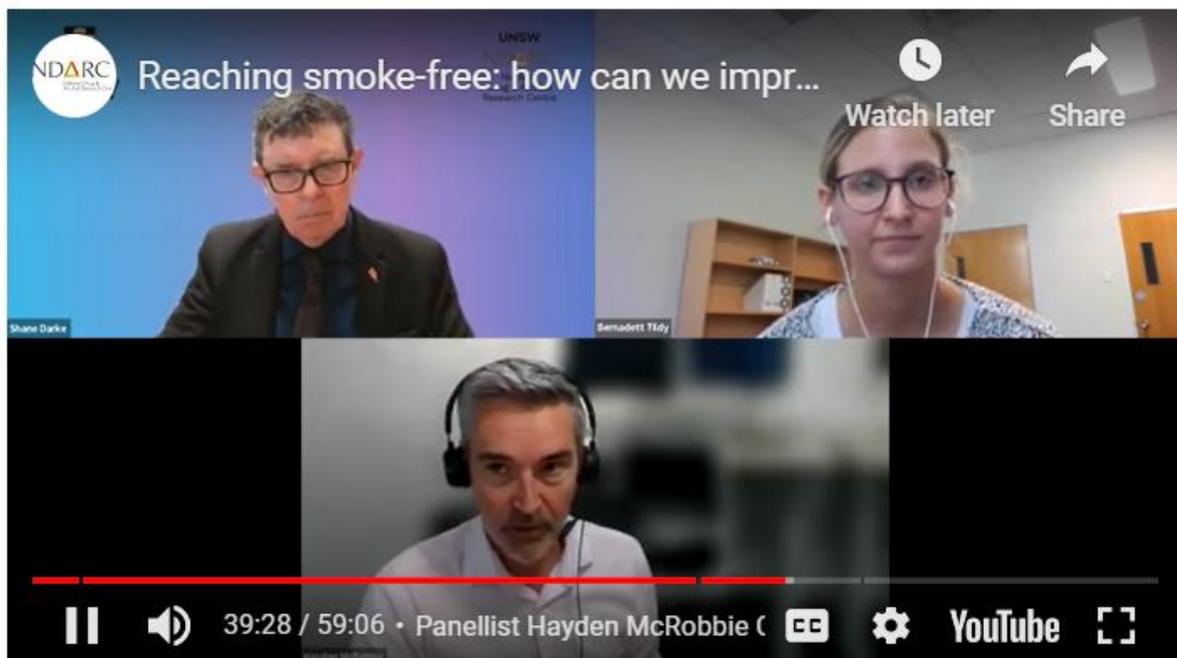


Ryan took the time to speak to me about his experience of running clinical trials, as well as his wealth of experience as a researcher. He's given me lots of food for thought about being strategic about grant writing, the importance of having a strong team of researchers, and how to choose your collaborators and mentors wisely. He introduced me to two of the statisticians he works with (Dr Daniel Barker and Dr Natasha Weaver) who spoke to me about some of the statistics behind trial designs (non-inferiority designs vs superiority designs), differences between pharmaceutical-industry-led trials and academia-led trials; and gave me some advice regarding my upcoming electronic health record research projects.

I also got to meet some of the PhD students NDARC, hear their experiences of thesis writing and conducting research during Covid, and I was introduced to researchers in the department who have done research using electronic health records.

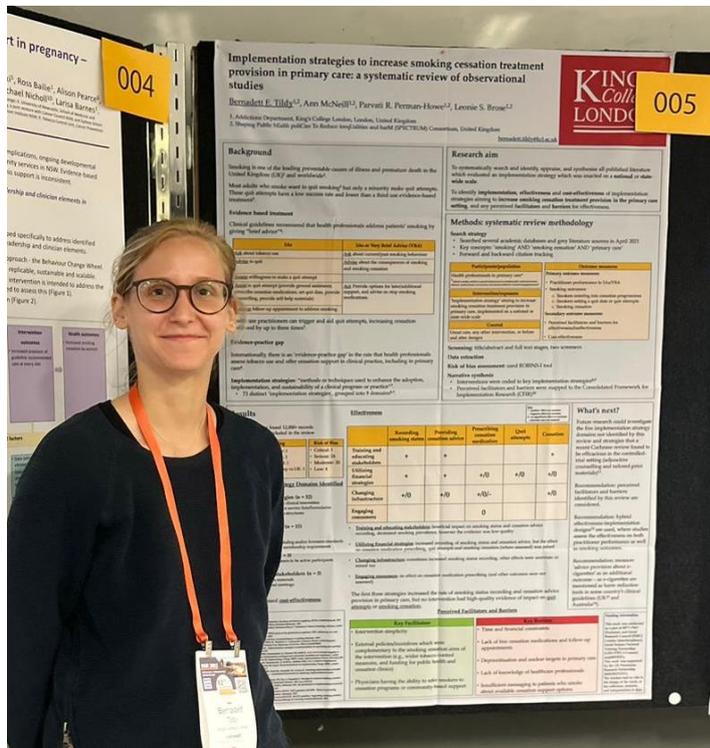


I was invited as a guest speaker as part of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) webinar series on Thu 24th Nov. The webinar series attracts an audience of 100-150 attendees on the day, with a similar number viewing over the next month. The audience is broad, comprising clinicians, treatment workers, people working in policy and researchers; the general interest is in the clinical and public health implications of research. I gave a 35-minute presentation, providing a background to the UK smoking and vaping context and my PhD studies then participated in a Q&A. The webinar was chaired by Prof Shane Darke and they invited Prof Hayden McRobbie on as a panel member for the Q&A part of the webinar. <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource/reaching-smoke-free-how-can-we-improve-smoking-cessation-treatment>



Health Services Research Association of Australia and New Zealand (HSRAANZ) conference 30th-2nd December

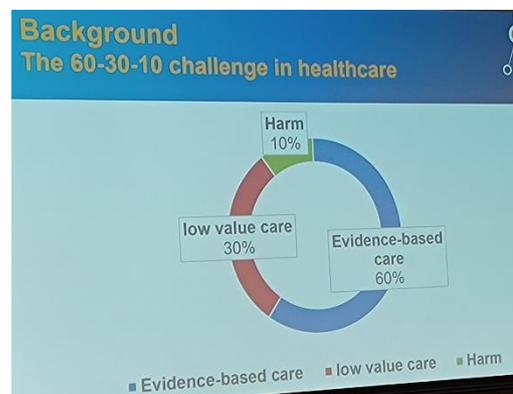
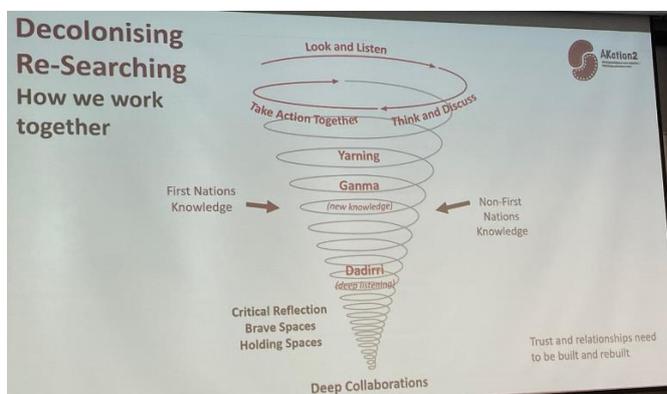
I attended the HSR 2022 conference held at the University of Sydney 30th Nov to 2nd Dec. As my PhD research is interdisciplinary, spanning public health, addiction/substance-use research, and health services research, being able to disseminate my smoking cessation-focussed findings and gain feedback on my work from a health service research audience has improved my breadth as a researcher. I was selected for a poster presentation on 1st December, giving me the opportunity to present my systematic review to a different audience: researchers focussed on health service research, implementation science and health economics.



The conference was board, covering lots of areas within health and public health. One of the keynote speakers was Professor Trish Greenhalgh from the University of Oxford – she gave a very engaging presentation about the health service metrics behind the Covid pandemic and key issues in health policy decision making – talks about how research translates to policy always make me consider my own research from different perspectives. Overall, the conference was really interesting and meeting researchers from different disciplines improves my breadth as a researcher. I made some connections with some health economist PhD students from the University of Technology Sydney.



The conference sessions were really insightful from a methodological perspective; learning about different datasets that can be used to answer impactful research questions (for example, Australia’s emerging National Integrated Health Services Information Analyses Asset, NIHSI) and the increase in use of co-design methodologies where the ‘consumers’ of health services are involved in priority setting, the design, and interpretation of research itself. There were several very engaging presentations from New Zealand in particular, where Maori communities are being increasingly involved in the research process. Involving indigenous people, and people from disadvantaged background more closely in the design of research is salient in my own field of research, in the area of addictions.



Melbourne

I flew to Melbourne on 14th Dec. I was kindly hosted for a few days by a postdoctoral researcher who I met last summer in my department, Dr Tom Norman. We spoke at length about the issues and opportunities early career researchers face. Tom currently works on a project which encompasses HIV and addiction; he informed me about some tobacco-related data he is working with currently which has potential for future research projects. During the rest of my stay in Melbourne, I had lunch with Prof Ron Borland on Tue 20th Dec, at the University of Melbourne – Ron is one of the

founding Principal Investigators of the ITC cohort project (data I am using in my research) and one of my co-authors. Ron has an international reputation for his work on smoking cessation and his development of a psychological theory about behaviour change, the CEOS theory; it was great to meet him in person. I also had lunch with Bridget Howard (RCT coordinator from Assoc Prof Ryan Courtney's team) on 22nd Dec. I was going to meet with Dr Hua Yong from Deakin University, who also works on the ITC cohort project, but he was unfortunately ill during the time of my visit.

Conclusion

The OIV gave me an invaluable opportunity to discuss my research, plan my publications, learn more about research methodologies and research careers. I was also able to raise my research profile, make connections with international researchers, and set the groundwork for future collaborations post-PhD. I would like to thank the LISS DTP for providing funding towards these activities.