

SSA Travelling Scholarship

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Lindsey Hines

National Addiction Centre
Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology
and Neuroscience
King's College London



Purpose

I applied for and obtained the SSA Travelling Scholarship in order to meet and spend time with research teams at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), University of Melbourne, and the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), University of New South Wales (UNSW). At the time of applying for the Travelling Scholarship I was entering the final year of my PhD, which focuses on early transitions in drug use and uses data from the Australian Twin Registry for part of the analyses. Consequently my aims for this trip were to:

- 1) Gain understanding of the Australian context of the sample I have been studying, and disseminate my findings to an international audience;
- 2) Broaden my understanding how my research fits with the wider field;
- 3) Gain knowledge of different research techniques which I can use to progressing the research I have been doing;
- 4) Identify opportunities for future collaboration.

Melbourne



I visited Professor George Patton and the Child and Adolescent Health research team at MCRI, Melbourne from 18-22 May 2016. This department conducts a number of high-profile longitudinal research studies focusing on adolescent health.

- Methodology of for longitudinal studies I met with Dr Williams to discuss the methodology of longitudinal research, and the considerations around analysis, comparison groups, ethical approval, data quality and the representativeness of the data. Discussing this with a researcher who had extensive first-hand experience of these processes was very educational. I also attended a seminar on multiple imputation techniques, a subject with which I was previously unfamiliar, and gained insight into the considerations required when applying these techniques and when to apply them. I was also invited to attend a meeting of the project team on the 2000 Stories study, which focused on the logistics of recruitment and maximising participation in an on-going multi-generational longitudinal study.
- Presenting my research (1) I was invited to present my research to the Child and Adolescent Research Team and other members of the MCRI research staff. My presentation was entitled “From Opportunity to Dependence: What Can the Early Stages of Cannabis Use Tell Us About the Development of Addiction?”, and was based on data from the Australian Twin Registry. It was great to have the opportunity to present my research to prominent researchers in the field of adolescent health, but most valuable of all were the questions and discussion at the end of the talk. These demonstrated genuine engagement with my research, and were helpful in suggesting explanations and future directions that went beyond that which is carried out within my home institution.
- Presenting my research (2) As a result of my presentation to MCRI research staff, I was put in contact with the staff at the Australian Twin

Registry from where my research participants were recruited. I was invited to meet with the team here, gave a presentation of my research findings to date, and updated them on my publications stemming from these data. Additionally, I was informed about opportunities to follow up the cohort I was studying which may be an interesting avenue for future research.

- Understanding of current research and future collaborations The team at MCRI had put together a programme of meetings to allow me to gain an overview of the research happening in the department. I met with researchers working on the International Youth Development Study (a longitudinal study of school-aged youths in the state of Washington, US and Victoria, Australia), the 2000 Stories Study (a longitudinal cohort of Victoria, Australia youths which was now becoming a multi-generational cohort), the Child and Adolescent Transitions Study (a cohort of primary-aged children who are transitioning into high school and adolescence), and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. From these conversations I discussed a number of potential collaborations that I intend to follow up in the future through secondary data analysis grants. Additionally, knowledge of the variables that were studied in these cohorts that differed from those we would consider in the UK (rural/urban upbringing, indigenous status) gave me a new understanding of the context of the data I was using in my thesis analyses.

Sydney



I visited Professor Louisa Degenhardt at NDARC, UNSW, Sydney from 9-13 May 2016. This department is a world-leading centre in drug and alcohol research, and consequently is running many research projects that fit with my interests and my own work.

- New research methods I arranged meetings with academics to understand the research methods they were using. I met with Associate Professor Tim Dobbin to learn about data linkage methods, their advantages and utility in research, and the ethical considerations therein. I met with Professor Shane Darke and learnt about the use of mortality and autopsy data to identify drug use trends. I was aware of these two methods but did not have specialised knowledge on either, and these discussions widened my appreciation of how I can incorporate them into my own research in future.
- Presenting my research Unfortunately an environmental health hazard at the site had resulted in the closure of the NDARC seminar rooms, with the result that my planned research presentation was not able to go ahead. However, I was able to present my research verbally to a number of different academics through face-to-face meetings.
- Transitions research My PhD research focuses on the speed of transitions in early cannabis and heroin use, and their relationship to later drug use outcomes. A number of researchers at NDARC are working on related research, including Dr Luise Lago and Dr Briony Larance. I was able to compare my findings with their complementary research, observe how others have approached similar questions, and gained useful insights for my own thesis write-up.
- Understanding of current research and future collaborations I met with researchers working on the Comorbidity and Trauma Study (examining the influence of environment and genetics on opioid dependence liability), the Drinking and Teens Project (studying the effect of parental alcohol supply on adolescent drinking), and the National Cannabis Information and Prevention Centre. From these conversations I discussed a potential collaboration, and learned of the Endeavour Fellowship to fund international researchers to conduct research in Australia. I hope to apply for this with a view to building upon the ideas I have developed during this trip.