The University of Western Sydney Schools Engagement Program provides primary and high school students with opportunities to not only improve their academic performance, but also to expand their horizons.

Young Indigenous students get a taste of life as a health professional through Heartbeat. Joining the program aged eight or nine, they visit UWS and have fun exploring health, medicine and related sciences. They learn about the importance of eating well and regular exercise, as well as healthcare strategies and the effect of influences like advertising. Returning each year, students benefit from activities that build upon the knowledge gained earlier. Illustrated workbooks linked to each activity reinforce key concepts.

Every event features Indigenous UWS students from relevant degrees – for example Medicine, Nursing, Health Science, Sports Science, Exercise Science, Physiotherapy – acting as guides and role models.

Heartbeat aims to raise students’ awareness of health issues, inspire some of them to aspire to careers in medicine or health-related fields, and present university as a place for them. Parents and carers are invited to events and some attend. They too become better informed about health factors and university opportunities, and their participation strengthens community links.

Indigenous culture and historical experience are incorporated through the involvement of Indigenous elders and educators in all the events.

Early partners were the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association and the Tharawal Aboriginal Medical Service. St John Ambulance Australia became involved in 2012.
Indigenous Australians have a lower life expectancy than non-Indigenous Australians and their health status is not as good across a range of indicators. This is due to many factors, and is compounded by their being under-represented in nearly every health profession. It is hoped that in the longer term Heartbeat will contribute to better health and education outcomes for Indigenous people.

The program began with Campbelltown region schools in 2010 and by 2012 had thirty-five schools and around 450 students participating, from Campbelltown and also from the Blacktown/Penrith region.

A principal said “Events like this show the students where they can head in education. Also the kids were talking afterwards about doing healthy activities eg. washing hands, eating healthy food”. An assistant principal reported “Our parent who attended was most impressed. She thought the activities were engaging and the whole program very positive, encouraging Aboriginal kids to achieve their potential while also promoting Science and Medicine”. Other feedback from school staff has included “A great day, students were motivated and enthusiastic, learnt a lot and were keen to return” and “The children really enjoyed the day and the people they met. They got an insight into the university and the doors it opens. They were all interested and want to go back”.

Assisted by the Australian Government, it is planned to develop additional Heartbeat educational resources linked to the NSW school syllabus.

The oldest students were in year 6 by 2012. Further activities will be designed for them once they reach high school age in 2013.

For more information, please email SchoolsEngagement@uws.edu.au