



Lowitja O'Donoghue Excellence in Leadership Public Sector Scholarship Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue?

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG was a highly respected Aboriginal leader, nurse, public administrator, and advocate for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A Yankunytjatjara woman from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of north-western South Australia, she became one of Australia's most influential Aboriginal leaders and worked throughout her life to improve health, education, social justice, and equality for her people.

Dr O'Donoghue is widely recognised by her peers as,

'the greatest Aboriginal leader of the modern era... the rock who steadied us in the storm'
Noel Pearson

Dr O'Donoghue passed away aged 91 years on Kurna Country, South Australia on February 4, 2024.

Learn more about her life: [About Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue](#)
View Dr O'Donoghue's [digital biographical timeline](#)

What is the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation?

The Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation is a for-purpose initiative established on 1 August 2022 by the family of Dr O'Donoghue. Dr O'Donoghue entrusted the Foundation to carry forward her legacy of courageous Aboriginal leadership and her vision of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to create meaningful change.

The Foundation is currently a program within [Lowitja Institute](#), Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health research institute, named in honour of its co-patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue. Dr O'Donoghue was the Institute's inaugural Chairperson who gifted her name to the Institute in 2010, asking it to be a courageous organisation that would match words and action to achieve real, tangible and immediate outcomes.

The Foundation created a Nursing Scholarship program in 2023. Five scholars have graduated from the program, with fourteen scholars from across Australia currently undertaking their qualifications in Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Midwifery, and Master of Public Health.

Who can apply for the Public Sector Scholarship?

The scholarship is open to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals with substantive Public Sector experience, who are currently employed or recently between roles. Eligible applicants work within the portfolios of **Health, Aboriginal Affairs, Education, and Human Services**, across Commonwealth, State/Territory, or Local Government, statutory authorities, or government-funded agencies — in roles spanning leadership development, policy, programs, governance, community engagement, service delivery, regulation, or cultural advisory.

To support broad national representation and strengthen diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across Australia, strong preference will be given to applicants from rural and remote communities, applicants residing in states and territories that are underrepresented in the applicant pool, and female; and female identifying and non-binary applicants.

In the event of a high concentration of applications from any one jurisdiction, the Foundation may consider geographic and gender diversity when determining the final scholarship recipients.

Is there a Public Sector band to be eligible?

Substantive Public Sector experience is recommended with consideration applied to the guideline of:

Equivalent to APS 6 through to Executive Level 1 (EL1).

At this level, applicants should be able to demonstrate the ability to:

- Lead through influence, not just authority.
- Balance operational delivery with strategic thinking.
- Build high-performing teams.
- Navigate ambiguity and competing priorities.
- Drive continuous improvement.

Do I have to currently be working in the public sector?

Applicants should be currently employed in the Public Sector or recently between roles, with employment experience as outlined above.

What does the scholarship involve (professional development, travel, further study)?

Each scholarship funds up to \$50,000 (excluding GST) to co-design a personalised, 12-month leadership pathway plan. Depending on what best supports your growth, this might include one-to-one leadership mentoring, executive and/or governance training, on-Country learning and cultural programs, short courses, intensives or workshops, participation in conferences, symposiums or delegations, national or international site visits or exchanges, cultural and community engagement, and creative or innovative leadership projects. Capped living costs will be considered. It is a leadership-development opportunity, not a fixed course of study or formal academic scholarship.

What does “co-design” mean?

It means the leadership pathway is shaped by you. Rather than fitting into an existing course or curriculum, you work with the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation to design a personalised 12-month leadership pathway plan of mentoring, training, and experiences that reflects your own journey, values, and aspirations — with the Foundation walking alongside you throughout.

What are the selection criteria?

Assessment reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, doing and leading — against:

Public Sector Experience and Future Leadership Pathway;

Commitment to Community;

Impact and Vision;

Alignment with the Purpose and Beliefs of the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation; Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue's achievements and impact;

Cultural Strength and Identity.

How long is the scholarship?

The scholarship period is twelve months from execution of the agreement.

What are the key dates for the application process?

Applications open on 7 August 2026 via the Lowitja Institute SmartyGrants online portal and close on 31 August 2026. Scholarship recipients are notified and publicly announced late October 2026.

Can I take up the scholarship if I am not based in metropolitan area?

The scholarship is offered and delivered nationally, so you do not need to be based in metropolitan area to apply or take part — your co-designed program is shaped around where you live and work. Rural and remote Public Sector professionals are encouraged to apply.

How many scholarships are available?

Three scholarships are awarded nationally in this inaugural round.

When will I be notified if I am successful?

Recipients are notified and publicly announced late October 2026.

What cultural safety mechanisms are there throughout the scholarship period?

Yes, this includes:

- **Cultural supervision or cultural mentorship**

Access to an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural supervisor, mentor, or Elder that the recipient can debrief with, separate from whoever manages their assessment or contract. This gives recipients somewhere to raise cultural concerns without it affecting how they are evaluated.

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and staffing**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in designing and delivering the program, not just assessing applications, so recipients are not navigating a majority non-Indigenous structure on their own.

- **Recognition of cultural load**

Acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals often carry extra, often invisible work — being asked to speak for community, educate colleagues, sit on committees — and building flexibility into timelines and expectations rather than treating the 12-month program as if that load does not exist.

- **An independent complaints or grievance pathway**

A clear way to raise a concern about racism or feeling culturally unsafe that does not run through the same people making decisions about the recipient's progress or future funding.

- **Trauma-informed practice**

Program staff are trained to recognise and not inadvertently retraumatise, and that difficult personal or family circumstances are met with flexibility rather than penalty.

- **Family and community obligations**

Allowing space for kinship obligations, Sorry Business, and community responsibilities to be part of the program rather than competing with it.

- **Confidentiality and psychological safety**

An explicit assurance that raising a struggle or a concern will not be held against the recipient in reporting back to the Foundation.

- **Regular, relationship-based check-ins**

A named point of contact responsible for pastoral wellbeing, not just milestone and reporting administration.

Will I be assigned a mentor?

You are welcome to find your own mentor, and we will ensure recipients receive culturally safe support throughout their scholarship that enables them to thrive.

Is there support when I complete my scholarship period?

You will become a member of the Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue Legacy Circle, a growing community of Blak excellence in leadership comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who completed their scholarship with support from the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation. We invite you to step into a circle of courageous leadership who are committed to carrying Dr O'Donoghue's legacy forward. We will facilitate a continuum of leadership development opportunities that connect current and future leaders and provide opportunities for intergenerational transfer of knowledge and learning around leading with cultural integrity.

What is the theory of change?

Yankunytjatjara woman Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG was a trailblazing leader who championed the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and of Indigenous peoples internationally. Our theory of change is inspired by the example of her life.

Can I donate to the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation?

We will continue to need your support to create the most impactful opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander emerging leaders and change makers.

Find out more about how you can support our work [here](#)

Find out more about the Lowitja O'Donoghue Excellence in Leadership – Public Sector Scholarship [here](#)



www.lowitja.org.au

www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-foundation/