

Conversion by immersion: outcomes of short and long-term rural allied health placements

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Introduction: Commonwealth funded University Department of Rural Health programs have been developed, to support health student placements in rural and remote locations, in order to build rural health workforce capacity. There has been no published data of the workforce outcomes of these programs to date. This paper will report on the outcomes of the University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health (UoNDRH) allied health student immersion placement program. This program offers short-term to year-long immersion placement options that involve students living and studying in a multi-disciplinary environment with the purpose of extending their understanding of inter-professional practice, rural health issues and community engagement.

Aim: To evaluate the placement experiences and workforce outcomes for allied health students undertaking a rural immersion placement experience at UoNDRH.

Methods: This study is a mixed methods longitudinal study of student placement experiences and workforce outcomes. Students from the disciplines of Diagnostic Radiography, Nutrition and Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Speech Pathology undertaking immersion placements at UoNDRH sites of Tamworth and Taree were invited to participate in the study. Participants were asked to complete (i) an end of placement survey, (ii) a semi-structured interview and (iii) a follow-up survey at one, three and five years after graduation. Findings from the end of placement and follow-up surveys will be reported.

Results: End-of-placement surveys were completed by 172 students. Following a rural placement, 37% of students indicated a more positive attitude to working in a rural or remote area, while 44% remained equally positive in their intention to work in a rural area, independent of their placement experience. Of those students who had not previously lived in a rural or remote area, 52% had a positive change in their intention to work in a rural location, while 24% remained equally positive in their intention. One year after graduation (n=25), 52% of students were working in rural or remote areas. Of the eight students from a metropolitan background, six were working in a non-metropolitan area and 41% of those from a rural background (n=17) were working in a rural or remote area.

Conclusion: The UoNDRH student immersion placement program is demonstrating a positive impact on the rural and remote workforce outcomes for new graduates, particularly for those from metropolitan backgrounds. Further longitudinal data, is required to provide evidence of the longer term impact of the rural immersion placement program on the rural and remote workforce.