Where are they now? Tracking allied health graduates after rural placement

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Introduction

The Commonwealth funded Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training (RHMT) program provides support for rural health student placements in order to help build health workforce capacity in rural and remote areas.¹ The University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health (UONDRH) offers both short-term and long-term, immersion placement experiences. Students live and study together in a multi-disciplinary environment, with the purpose of extending their understanding of interprofessional collaboration and community engagement.² The aim of this ongoing study is to track the employment outcomes of allied health students undertaking immersion placements using a longitudinal, mixed-methods study design.

Method

Allied health students participating in long-term, immersion placement experiences at UONDRH in the disciplines of Diagnostic Radiography, Nutrition and Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Speech Pathology are invited to participate in one or more components of the study. These include:

- an end-of-placement survey
- an end-of-placement semi-structured interview
- follow-up surveys at one, three and five years after graduation.

Statistical analysis was undertaken using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 24 (IBM Corp.). Descriptive analysis conducted using counts and proportions. Chi-square analysis was performed on categorical variables and independent t-tests performed on continuous variables. The significance level was a p value less than 0.05. Odds ratios (OR) was calculated for particular variables, together with 95% confidence intervals (CI).

Results

One hundred and twenty-nine students have completed follow-up surveys at one year (response rate 57%) and three years after graduation (n=24, response rate 53%). Follow-up surveys indicate that 48% of graduates were working rural (RA2-RA5) after one year and 38% after three years. Rural origin was a significant factor in choosing a rural work location after graduation (p = 0.030). Rural placement experience also had a significant influence (p = 0.01) on graduates’ decision to enter rural practice. Graduates of urban origin who chose a rural workplace location were 3.938 times (95%CI 1.573–9.854) more likely to have been influenced by their rural placement experience than those who took work in a metropolitan location. Meanwhile, 22% of those based rurally indicated ‘no plans to leave’ their current position.
Conclusions

This study provides insights into the influence of rural placements on future workplace location and the external factors that impact on intention to stay or leave a rural area. Ongoing support of rural placements for students of rural and urban background will continue to help address rural allied health workforce shortages. Ongoing longitudinal data is required to determine the longer term workforce outcomes and barriers to retention.

References


Presenter

Dr Leanne Brown is a Senior Lecturer and Academic Team Leader at the University of Newcastle, Department of Rural Health, where she has been based since 2003. She is an Advanced Accredited Practising Dietitian with more than 20 years’ experience in the dietetics profession. She graduated from the University of Newcastle in 1994 with an undergraduate degree in Nutrition and Dietetics and worked as a clinical dietitian for eight years in a number of metropolitan hospitals, gaining a broad range of dietetic and management experience. Dr Brown completed her PhD (Nutrition and Dietetics) at The University of Newcastle. Her doctoral research investigated the barriers to the provision of a best practice dietetics service in rural areas. Ongoing research interests include dietetic workforce, rural dietetic services, sports nutrition, body composition and best practice dietetic services for rural areas.