Community–Campus Partnerships and service learning: harnessing untapped potential for rural Australia

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Introduction: Far western NSW experiences poorer outcomes across the social, economic and health determinants. Discreet health activity alone is not enough to address the complex inequities experienced across the region. Regional communities are becoming involved in critically appraising existing services and designing more sustainable ones.

Aim: This paper aims to describe the evolution of Community–Campus Partnerships in far western NSW.

Method: The project used developmental evaluation to conceptualise the issue and applied an iterative process to generate options, test them and refine the innovation.

Relevance: Community–Campus Partnerships and service learning are well represented in the community engagement and higher education literature across many western countries. The approach draws on the educational pedagogy of service learning and value of place-based solutions. Partnerships seek to enhance regional development and sustainability while endeavouring to address the broader social and economic determinants of health and wellbeing.

These relationships provide fertile ground for student and academic learning, teaching and research while establishing an ethos of service and enhanced understanding of rural communities. Rural communities are empowered and actively engaged in providing leadership and direction of activity.

Results: The far west region, in collaboration with the University of Sydney, has established a Community–Campus Partnership to extend the current Broken Hill University Department of Rural Health engagement from health to non-health disciplines.

To date students and academics from across the disciplines of business (n=17), architecture (n=11), agscience (n=1) and education (n=12) have engaged in service learning activities within the region. Engagement has focused student and academic knowledge, skills and enthusiasm on ‘real world’ problems and opportunities for remote communities.

Participants have worked in partnership with local councils, businesses, health, Indigenous and community agencies, providing much needed human capital. Additional partnership programs are currently being negotiated in the areas of social justice, law and engineering.

Conclusion: There are potential workforce benefits in attracting new graduates from across multiple disciplines back to the region. In addition, there are benefits from participating academics providing support to existing professionals working in isolated communities. Community–Campus Partnerships bring with them great potential that can draw on the
wealth of knowledge, skills, and human capital within academic facilities and integrate this with regional expertise, resilience, innovation and commitment.