Developing professional competencies for rural health students through service-learning placements

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Aims: This paper aims to highlight an alternative model of professional practice education that enables students to develop generic skills and competencies that all rural health professional students require, such as cultural awareness, enhanced communication skills, teamwork, problem solving and understanding of social determinants.

Methods: Second-year occupational therapy students undertake a 13-week, part-time, service-learning placement situated in two local regional secondary colleges. In pairs, occupational therapy students spend two hours per week working with secondary school students who have a variety of issues such as mental health, school disengagement, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder or limited English. A significant number of these students are also from a refugee background. At university, preparation and ongoing workshops provide occupational therapy students with support and knowledge relating to learning and teaching, communication, professional behaviours and cultural competence. Students keep a reflective journal throughout the placement and give formal presentations on their placement experiences to academic staff and college welfare and teaching staff.

Relevance: To adequately prepare for the complexity of rural practice, undergraduate students require professional practice placements in a range of diverse settings including non-clinical services.

Results: Service-learning has provided students with the opportunity to develop generic professional skills such as communication, rapport building with clients, time management, and skills in organising, negotiation and conflict resolution. Students gain an appreciation of how socioeconomic, education, cultural and psychosocial factors impact on secondary students. Occupational therapy students also have a significant impact on the students they work with, providing them with one-to-one support, a positive role model, and lifting aspirations of rural students who have lowered self-belief and educational goals. Feedback from host organisations has been overwhelmingly positive, with requests to expand these placements.

Conclusion: Gaining essential generic professional self-management and communication skills can be achieved from service-learning placements, outside of the traditional health or human service setting. Although service-learning is well established in the US and in some parts of Europe, it is under-utilised in Australia. It is recommended that health professions view professional practice placements more broadly, particularly to acquire generic professional skills and consider innovative placements outside of the traditional settings for early year students. Service-learning placements provide universities with a vehicle for authentic community engagement to increase higher education participation for rural and regional secondary students who often lack positive roles where there are benefits for all partners involved in these placements.