

## Building an allied health workforce in mental health

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There is a recognised need to increase access to mental health services for rural Australians. This paper will outline the strategies used to promote mental health as a career option to graduating occupational therapists and capacity building initiatives to increase placement opportunities for students. A regional occupational therapy program with the major aim to supply a rural workforce commenced in 2009 following consultation with local occupational therapists and health services. As part of the business case to establish the course, it was identified that there were long standing occupational therapy workforce shortages in mental health.

The new course aimed to recruit rural and regional students through ATAR bonuses and direct marketing to secondary schools. This has been achieved with above 95% of graduates from the program coming from non-metropolitan areas and almost all graduates commencing employment in rural and regional Australia. Initially it was difficult to obtain practice education or placements within practice areas such as mental health, therefore University staff decided to undertake a range of strategies to increase opportunities for students and graduates.

The profile of occupational therapy within local mental health services was low due to the small number of therapists working in local services. To improve the profile of the University within the regional mental health community, a public lecture by Professor Patrick McGorry, a leader in youth mental health was organised in November 2012, inviting local mental health clinicians and secondary school staff with over 150 attending. To increase mental health opportunities for students, discussions were held with the management of the local regional mental health service to establish occupational therapy student project placements in mental health enabling over half of the cohort of final year students to work directly with mental health services. A number of role emerging placements within rural mental health were also organised. The University staff provided assistance with supervision and guidance where there was not an occupational therapist working within the service with the students educating staff and clients about the potential role of occupational therapy.

While a number of graduates from this regional program are now employed in mental health services, in both occupational therapy and generic positions, there are still insufficient graduate positions for allied health professionals. It is recommended that career pathways for allied health professionals need to be established by rural or regional mental health services.