



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

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Introduction

The University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health (UONDRH) is a part of the Commonwealth funded University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) program, which supports health student placements in rural and remote areas in order to build rural workforce capacity. UONDRH offers short-term (up to 8 weeks), medium-term (8 to 18 weeks) and long-term (up to one academic year) immersive placement experiences for allied health students. Students live and study in a multi-disciplinary environment with the purpose of extending their understanding of inter-professional practice, rural health issues and community engagement.

Aim

A longitudinal study is being undertaken that aims to evaluate the placement experiences and future practice intentions of allied health students completing rural immersion placements at the UONDRH.

Methods

- Commencing in 2011, the study uses mixed methods, comprising of a series of surveys and an individual in-depth, semi-structured interview.
- End-of-placement surveys and interviews are carried out, with follow-up surveys 1, 3, and 5 years after graduation.
- Students from the disciplines of Diagnostic Radiography, Nutrition and Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Speech Pathology are invited to participate.

Results

One hundred and seventy two students have completed 208 end-of-placement surveys (some students had multiple placements) and 25 students have completed the one year follow-up survey. Results to date show that:

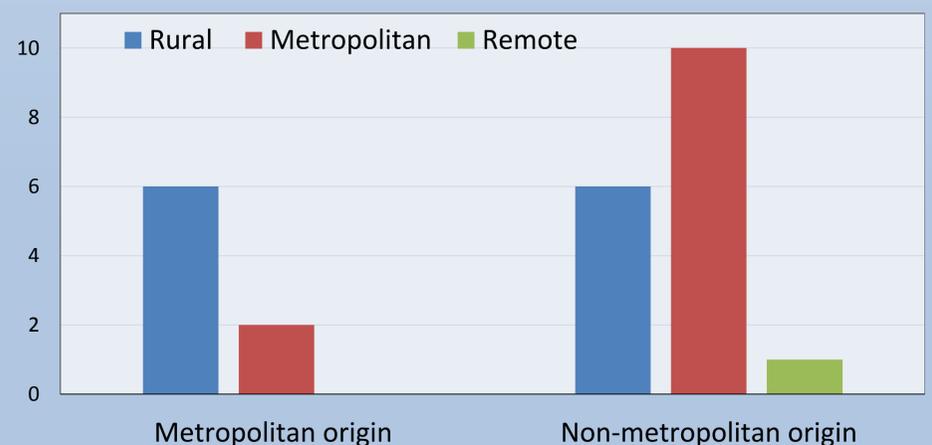
- 38% of students indicated a more positive attitude to working rurally or remotely (Table 1).
- 44% of students remained unchanged in their intention to work in a rural location irrespective of their placement experience.
- 52% of students from a metropolitan background had a positive change in their intention to work in a rural location (Figure 1).

Table 1: Change in intention to working in rural or remote location by discipline

Discipline	Positive	No change	Negative	Total
Nutrition & Dietetics	29	27	5	61
Physiotherapy	25	41	3	69
Speech Pathology	8	18	2	28
Occupational Therapy	10	14	2	26
Diagnostic Radiography	7	16	7	24
Total	79 (38%)	116* (56%)	13 (6%)	208

*92 (44%) intended to work rurally before and after placement

Figure 1: Workplace location 1 year after graduation by metropolitan vs non-metropolitan origin (n=25)



Conclusions

The results indicate that the UONDRH immersive rural placement experience impacts positively on students' intentions to pursue careers in rural practice. There is also a positive impact on the rural and remote workforce outcomes for new graduates, particularly in converting the intentions of those from metropolitan backgrounds. While long-term outcomes have yet to be determined, this research provides validation for ongoing rural placement support programs for allied health professional students.

