

Rural Health student placements

Student evaluation

January – December, 2015

The University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) aims to develop and support the rural health workforce through collaborating with health services and education providers, while giving a voice to the students we support on placement. Feedback from students is vital to the ongoing evolution of student placement programs within the region as both the UDRH and health services continue to be responsive to the needs of students who are to become our future workforce.

At the end of each practicum placement, the UDRH surveys students about their experiences using the *Rural Health Student Placement Survey*. The survey forms part of a national data collection initiative undertaken by all Australian UDRH's researching student experiences and how placements may influence students to work regionally upon graduation.

The survey collates experiences among students who have undertaken a rural health placement supported by the UDRH; be that assistance with accommodation, financial or educational support. Students respond voluntarily and anonymously to a series of questions relating to the health service, the supervision provided by staff, the opportunity for interprofessional practice as well as the day-to-day aspects relating to their rural placement.

Student responses are collected by the UDRH (either in electronic or hard copy) with some students having received a reimbursement for their time. Data is used to then provide information to prospective or future students, feedback to the health services, and to meet Commonwealth Department of Health reporting requirements.

Health services across the Northern Victorian and Grampians regions hosted many health students from multiple universities between January and December 2015. In all 396 students provided feedback regarding their placements across 35 different sites. Student demographic data is included in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Student demographics*

	Female	Male	Total
Sex	314	74	388
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	1	0	1
Age group			
– 18-24yrs	198	44	206
– 25-34yrs	78	24	102
– >35yrs	37	7	44
Placement length			
– Less than a week	6	5	11
– Between 1 to 2 weeks	88	5	93
– Between 2 and 4 weeks	104	35	139
– Between 4 weeks and 3 months	99	26	125

– Between 3 and 6 months	13	2	15
– Between 6 and 12 months	4	1	5
Level of study			
– Vocational Education Training	67	8	75
– Undergraduate	193	58	242
– Post graduate	54	8	62

Nursing students provided the highest volume of survey responses, reflective of the greatest number of students attending placements overall. Pharmacy, Physiotherapy, Medicine and Dentistry students also provided a high number of survey responses as outlined in Figure 1. In addition 64% of students were undergraduates, 20% were from the Vocational Education Training sector, while the remaining 16% were postgraduate students.

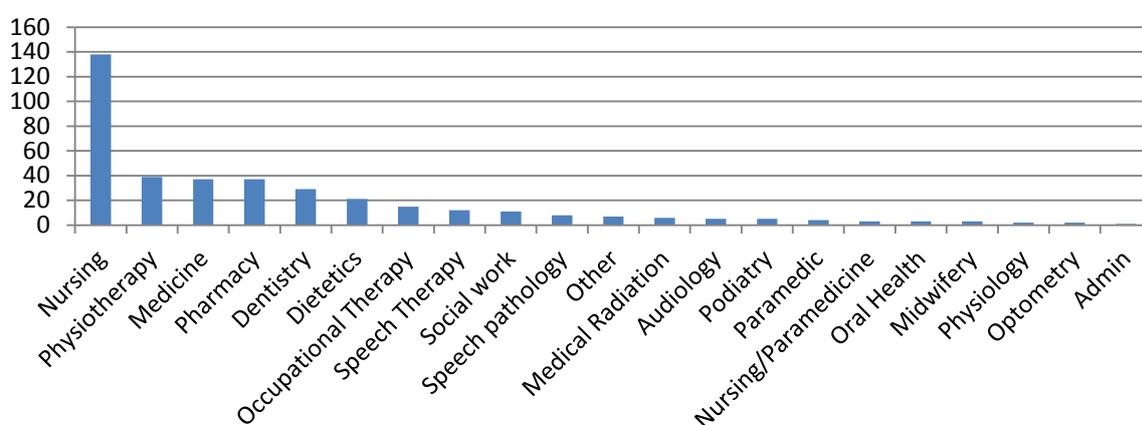


Figure 1: Student discipline

Public hospitals, followed by community health centres, rural community services (such GP and Allied Health Clinics) and residential aged care were the most common sites to have hosted students as outlined in Figure 2.

More than 35% of students were undertaking a placement between two to four weeks with nearly all student placements being less than three months. These findings may be reflective of the student cohort that undertook placements within the regions, for example many student placements are short term, such as nursing placements (usually 2-4 weeks).

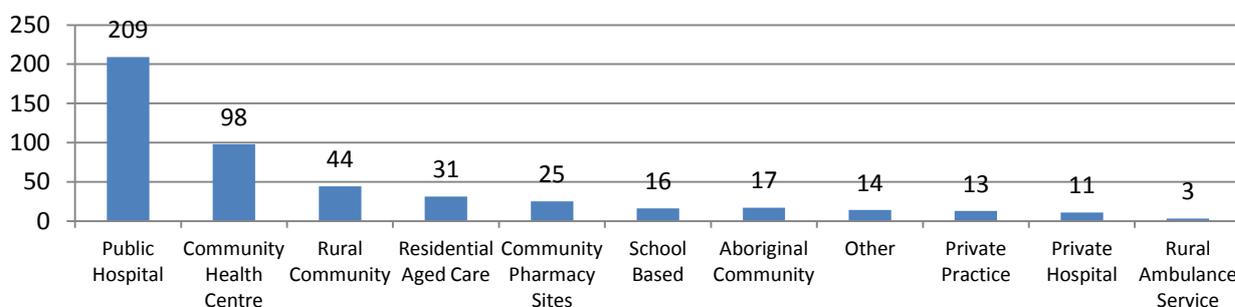


Figure 2: Where student placements occurred

The placement

As part of the survey, each student provided extensive feedback relating to the health service, the supervision provided by staff, the opportunity for interprofessional practice as well as the day-to-day aspects relating to their rural placement. Overall, 88% of students were satisfied with their placement, 86% indicated they were treated with respect by staff, while 78% felt they had received adequate orientation, and 74% felt informed and welcomed while on placement. Students provided additional comments that related to their overall placement experience. Examples are provided below to highlight the benefits and challenges of a rural placement.

"It was a great experience working in a small service with very welcoming staff members. Everyone was so willing to share information and help out, completely different to a city hospital!"

Pharmacy student at a Benalla Pharmacy

"I loved every minute I did not want to leave. The people and staff were so amazing and treated me like a staff member."

Nursing student at Rochester and Elmore District Health Service

"Completing a placement in a rural area is something I would recommend to every student as you get to understand a broad range of services and what the area offers in terms of health services."

Nursing student at Northeast Health Wangaratta

The clinical experiences and independence

The majority of students were satisfied with the clinical experiences and opportunities that were provided to develop and consolidate their skills. For example, 86% of students felt their placement was conducive to their learning, 78% had sufficient client contact, 83% were encouraged to develop professional communication skills, and 65% had an opportunity to case manage and while on placement. Various students said:

"I saw a lot of emergency cases and it was a good experience learning to work quickly. I saw a lot of patients and I feel a lot more confident in my skills with all the training."

Dietetics student at Beechworth Health service

"Rural experiences provide you with a wonderful experience to see a variety of cases as well as provide you with the opportunity to be more independent."

Physiotherapy at Northeast Health Wangaratta

"Working rural provides you with an opportunity to really grow and learn... clinical educators and organisations are more inclined to let students 'have a go', whether it be with assessment or treatment of clients."

Occupational Therapy student in a health service in Shepparton

"The placement itself exceeded all of my expectations. It was the first time that I actually felt like a Speech Pathologist. I was able to see a varied caseload and was given a high degree of independence. The team at the hospital was welcoming and inclusive."

Speech Pathology student at Albury Wodonga Health

The supervision

Although supervision varied between sites and among disciplines, there was a high level of satisfaction around clinical support with 75% of students satisfied, while 85% indicated they had received constructive and timely feedback, 60% had time allocated to debrief with their supervisors, and 75% were satisfied with the overall clinical support that was provided. Students provided very positive responses about their placement supervision, as highlighted by the following statements:

“Good studying environment, great support from my clinical educators.”

Nursing student at Seymour Health

“I had a great time as the staff were kind and willing to teach me new aspects of rural [health care].”

Pharmacy student at a Kerang Pharmacy

“It was a really great experience; I felt that I received more one to one learning contact from my supervisor than my peers in the City.”

Physiotherapy at Northeast Health Wangaratta

The interprofessional experience

Many students (66%) indicated that they had the opportunity to work across disciplines, 58% were able to participate in interprofessional debriefing while on a rural placement, and 87% indicated that health professionals from disciplines worked together as a team. It is these interprofessional experiences that helped to develop student skills as outlined by the following comments:

“Mixing with students from different professions was interesting and often a learning experience.”

Social work student at a Shepparton Health service

“I have enjoyed working this rural setting. I have found that there is a great collaboration between all health professionals of all areas.”

Nursing student at Albury Wodonga Health

“It was much different to my metropolitan placement; I feel staff worked better together as a team at this placement.”

Nursing student at Corowa District Hospital

The accommodation

Accommodation is an integral part of a student’s placement experience. Students’ feedback has indicated 73% were satisfied with student accommodation; it was both adequate and met their needs. Some additional comments included:

“Accommodation provided was excellent, well-equipped, well maintained and well serviced.”

Social work student at a Shepparton Health service

“Accommodation was excellent. It was convenient, clean and spacious.”

Nursing student at Northeast Health Wangaratta

"I loved living close to placement. Usually I'm travelling over an hour each way on public transport, so this was a nice change!"

Paramedicine student at Goulburn Valley Health, Shepparton

"The living arrangements were above expectations, the facilities provided were fantastic."

Paramedicine student at Northeast Health Wangaratta

The community

Another important element of a rural placement is the community where the placement takes place. In some cases, student may not always have a lot of choice around where they are placed, however many were pleased by the opportunity and enjoyed what the communities had to offer. For example:

"The town itself I thought was really beautiful, situated near the river, it was a nice place for walks. The liveability of the town made it more appealing to stay for work in my opinion."

Physiotherapy student at Northeast Health Wangaratta

"Enjoyable, I have thoroughly enjoyed my time working in the rural setting - especially in the relaxed atmosphere."

Pharmacy student at a Swan Hill Pharmacy

"I felt part of the place and community and really enjoyed the patient loads and staff."

Nursing student at Beechworth Health Service

"The locals were nice and I feel that it was a very close knit community."

Pharmacy student at a Kerang Pharmacy

"It was a beautiful town and everyone was so friendly - it was a real community feeling."

Social work student at Northeast Health Wangaratta

The challenges

At times a rural placement has some challenges and these were acknowledged and recognised by students. In most cases the challenge was being somewhere new, however the experiences were enriching. A number of students commented:

"Although it was tough at times, living without the usual comforts of my home, I gained much valuable knowledge and experience from this placement."

Pharmacy student at a Maryborough Pharmacy

"Living away from my family for four weeks was challenging, but overall the learning experience made up for this."

Nursing student at Beechworth Health Service

"Living in a remote town allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and embrace a world that was foreign to me... Within 3 weeks I had made great friendships with locals, explored very remote locations in near vicinity of the town. I learnt a lot about myself – I took a lot

away from the very valuable experience!"

Pharmacy student at a Swan Hill Pharmacy

In summary

Student feedback is considered vital to the success of any placement program; health services and education providers alike are always seeking new and innovative ways to develop programs and the *Rural Health Student Placement Survey* can be utilised to gather tangible and relevant information to assist such development. The challenge is that a broader representation of student experiences can only be achieved through a greater number of students completing the survey.

The UDRH is grateful to those students who take the time to complete the surveys and write comments because they make a real contribution to the ongoing development of programs that will entice students to consider a rural placement and later even perhaps, embark on a rewarding and successful health career in a regional area.

This report was prepared by the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH), The University of Melbourne. For any questions about this research please contact Dr Daniel Terry at the Department of Rural Health on 5823 4500