

Student Placement Survey Report: January-June 2020



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

going
rural health

Introduction

Going Rural Health (GRH) is a student program that supports nursing and allied health students to complete rural clinical placements. At the end of their placement, GRH students are invited to complete a placement evaluation survey. This report is a brief summary of the survey responses from students who completed a placement between January and June 2020.

The COVID-19 Context

Many regional and rural health care services ceased all clinical placements between April and June, and/or cancelled aged care placements. There were reduced numbers of students of metropolitan origin as metropolitan-based universities and allied health disciplines in particular kept students closer to home for placements, or stopped them altogether during at least part of this time.

GRH offered more accommodation support to ensure placements continued safely where possible, as the university's accommodation was closed for a short period, and most sites opened again only at limited capacity. Creswick still had not reopened by the end of June.

GRH staff have been working from home since the end of March. Significant work has gone into developing and running innovative virtual rural placements in all three regions, often with GRH staff supervising and/or mentoring the students to provide support for these placements to go ahead. Online student engagement events were also offered.

The ever changing landscape in this space has provided some challenges, but GRH staff have risen to the challenge, and stepped up to give extra support and develop new placement opportunities to adapt the program as required.

Student Demographics

Approximately 250 survey responses were collected; significantly lower numbers than the same time in 2018 and 2019. Of the 250, 85% of students were female.

Student age ranged between 19 and 57 years. 2% of students identified as Aboriginal. 3% were international students. 55% of students had lived in a regional or rural area previously. 70% were nursing students, probably a higher proportion than usual due to the number of cancelled or interrupted allied health placements. Ten allied health disciplines were represented. Students came from 18 different education providers. 70% of placements were located in a public hospital.

Placement Satisfaction

91% of Going Rural Health students were satisfied with their overall rural placement experience

Going Rural Health students in general reported very positive rural placement experiences. Positive aspects reported by students included:

- Welcoming and friendly staff, patients and community (60%)
- The variety of patient presentations and learning experiences (35%)
- Staff time given to support learning (21%)
- Teamwork, within and across teams (12%)

COVID-19 would definitely have affected the student experience to an extent. Even allowing for this, there were very few criticisms of the placement that were of merit. Some comments from students about their experience included:

'It has been a great experience to be a part of rural health care Industry.'

'The staff involved were very helpful, caring and supportive. I liked living in a rural environment too. Families and clients were more approachable.'

'This was a fantastic opportunity and I would not mind going rural on placement again!'

'I feel rural placements gives a lot of experience in terms of cultural mix.'

'I didn't get to experience the "rural lifestyle" as such because of COVID-19. There was much I had planned that I didn't get to do outside of the hospital life. Despite this, I had a grand time and I would recommend it to everyone!'

'Rural placements aren't as scary as they sound.'

Student Learning

Students were asked what they thought contributed most to the education experience on their rural placement. Three main themes emerged:

- Great preceptors and supportive environment (59%)
- Hands-on experience and independence (25%)
- Broad range of learning experiences (24%)
- Living rurally and experiencing differences in rural health (6%)

91% of students felt that their rural placement improved their work readiness.

55% of students had inter-professional education provided during their placement.

Some comments from students about their learning experience:

'It has been a great learning experience... especially of learning practical skills.'

'I was surprised at the different types of medical patients that were in the hospital. This greatly increased my knowledge about them. I saw more different cases in rural placement than my previous metro.'

'Working in a rural hospital allowed us to be exposed to a range of different illnesses, and also working with a larger patient ratio, I feel like I learnt a lot.'

'Educators and staff are amazing resources.'

Supervision Satisfaction

89% of students were satisfied with their rural placement supervision

Most students reported that they received good supervision from their preceptors on rural placements. The most common reason for dissatisfaction surrounding supervision was that students wanted more time with their clinical educator. Unpacking this further, students suggested that clinical educators and education managers who did not spend extensive periods with individual students were not informed on how student learning was

progressing. This issue may be best addressed with students directly while on placement.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Students

2% of students completing the survey identified as Aboriginal, and all were studying nursing - three quarters of which were at Bachelor level.

Without exception, these students found their placements to be extremely positive, praising their preceptors, the placement sites, and the communities.

Cultural Training

54% of students had received cultural training prior to their rural placement. Unfortunately, 37% of students did not receive cultural training prior to, during, or after their rural placement. With Going Rural Health recently supporting an online training package to be developed for students, hopefully the promotion of this will lead to higher training rates amongst students.

Only 74% of students felt that the cultural training they were provided was adequate. This is definitely an area in which universities and regional and rural health services can improve. Regional and rural communities generally have larger Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander populations, and equipping students to be culturally competent is essential when working with these communities effectively. It will also enrich the student rural placement experience.

International Students

Only 3% of respondents were international students. Overall these students enjoyed their placements. Two of these students reported 'Strongly Disagree' to placement satisfaction, however all of their comments mentioned that they enjoyed their placements. One student was extremely dissatisfied by the lack of funding provided to support their travel and accommodation expenses, compared to that of domestic students, but this did not seem to colour their placement experience.

Student Accommodation

It is difficult to comment with any specificity about student accommodation, as we cannot determine from the survey whether the student stayed in University of Melbourne accommodation, hospital accommodation, private accommodation supported by GRH or elsewhere. Some of the comments from students about their accommodation are not able to be addressed, for example a student was unhappy that all contact with a hotel provided to them was by email., Some actionable items were raised:

- Providing more information about the accommodation prior to arrival, such as what is provided and what is not (more specific than just linen and towels)
- Providing timely information about the above
- After hours services provided as stated

GRH Support

Financial assistance, subsidised accommodation, hotel accommodation sourced and funded (when university or hospital accommodation closed), virtual education.

45% of students had direct contact with GRH for their rural placement. While this might seem low, Federation University – whose students make up a large proportion of those we support - distribute funds to their own students directly, so students who may otherwise have contacted us to apply for support had no need to. Of those students we did have contact with, 86% felt that the support they received from GRH positively added to their placement experience.

GRH provided extra support to many students during the COVID-19 restrictions, which many students have appreciated greatly. Students said:

‘Going Rural Health was amazing to work with; resources were always readily available as necessary & everyone was very accommodating and flexible’

‘I appreciated the assistance I received as when I began placement COVID 19 had shut down shared accommodation and (Going) Rural Health didn't leave me in the dark, they were very helpful in finding alternative accommodation.’

‘Having financial support really helped me emotionally and it allowed me to focus on learning at the placement rather than a tight budget. Thank you for the grant.’

‘Thankful for the opportunity and the help provided by Going Rural (Health).’

‘This placement went smoothly because of the accommodation facility provided by (Going) Rural Health. I am very thankful and happy that I got stay stress free and continue my rural placement.’

Some students did comment that they would have liked access to the funding prior to the placement, or to know how much they would have been eligible for to prevent financial stress. Since it is possible to apply for GRH funding pre-placement and find out what they are eligible for, some additional targeted marketing of what GRH offers would be useful to prevent this occurring. As to up-front payments, this is difficult since placements are not always completed. GRH have always been open to discuss this however, in situations of financial hardship.

Virtual Placements

GRH have developed and run many virtual placements, to prevent many cancellations and enable students to both

support the local community and learn in a unique environment. Settings have included disability organisations, schools, aged care, non-government community service organisations, community health, and the university's Department of Rural Health campuses.

Often, GRH staff have supervised these students themselves. GRH staff have provided discipline specific and interdisciplinary online education sessions, as well as simulated patients (also GRH staff) for assessments and therapy demonstrations. Mentoring was provided to students in addition to supervision support.

Online student engagement events have also been provided when in-person sessions were not possible, like this online quiz (below).



Some of these innovative placements have been written up in the National Rural Health Alliance's 'Partyline' online issue 71. See this link (below) for the article details: <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/partyline/article/adapting-rural-physiotherapy-placements-covid-19>

Conclusion

All in all, this has been a challenging six months, but GRH continued to organise and support student placements innovatively. Students have been happy with the extra support provided by GRH to ensure placements have continued, and GRH have, with placement providers, continued work providing excellent rural placement experiences. We thank all our partners and sites hosting students for their partnership and continuing education in these challenging times.

Acknowledgements

GRH would like to thank our health service and placement partners for continuing to support students at such a challenging time, particularly hospitals hosting nursing students, as many services have been stretched.

