6. Encouraging human services and social work students to 'go bush' for clinical placement and employment

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging and supporting students to undertake rural or remote placements can provide significant learning experiences and opportunities for students, while also responding to the social justice and equity needs of rural and remote communities. However, there are several barriers that deter students from engaging in rural and remote field placements. Consequently, using an online education tool, the project team sought to: (i) educate students about the economic, social and health issues of rural and remote Australia; (ii) maximise student engagement and learning in rural and remote practice and; (iii) inform students about opportunities to ‘go bush’ to work both as a student and professional. It was hoped that enhanced knowledge in this area would lead to an increase in the number of students on rural and remote placements. Findings from a range of measures indicated that the tool increased student interest in rural and
remote practice, with more students undertaking rural and remote placements in the 12 months following the launch of the tool. This paper reports on the project design, implementation and evaluation.

**Keywords:** Australia; field education; social work; rural health; rural practice.

**INTRODUCTION**

Field education in rural and remote areas of Australia provides personal, professional and educational learning opportunities for students (Webster, Lopez, Allnut, Clague, Jones and Bennett 2010; Lea, Cruikshank, Paliadasis, Parmenter, Sanderson and Thornberry 2008). However, many myths surround rural life and few students opt to 'go bush' and experience life in remote parts of Australia (Chenoweth 2004). Further, a number of barriers deter students from engaging in rural and remote practice, including ambivalence, lack of knowledge amongst students about rural life (McAuliffe, Chenoweth and Stenhlik 2007) and significant financial disincentives to completing rural and remote clinical placements (Schofield, Keane, Fletcher, Shrestha and Percival 2009; Turner and Lane 2006). Rural students, who typically have a greater commitment to working in a rural or remote community (Smith, Edwards, Courtney and Finlayson 2001; Walker, DeWitt, Pallant and Cunningham 2012), also face extensive barriers to completing tertiary education, resulting from relative rural poverty and rising education and relocation expenses (Bowles and Duncombe 2005).

Encouraging and supporting students to undertake rural or remote placements not only provides significant learning experiences and opportunities for students, but also has the potential for important social justice, equity and inclusion outcomes. As Australian rural and remote communities face economic and social decline (Alston 2005) and resulting high levels of health and social disadvantage (Healy 2004; Ife 2000; AIHW 2008), it is imperative that students are educated about — and prepared and supported to work in — rural Australia. Poor recruitment and retention in rural communities has been connected with, *inter alia*, poor preparation of students to work in this field (McAuliffe, et al. 2007; Gibbs 2002; Lonne and Cheers 2000). Educating students about rural issues and the nature of rural communities is critical for students' professional development and readiness for practice (Chenoweth 2004; McAuliffe, et al. 2007) and important for retaining practitioners in these areas of high need (Lonne 2004). Students who undertake a rural or remote placement are exposed to wide-ranging and significant health, economic and social issues, thus enhancing their professional knowledge, ability to work in challenging situations and often their intentions to work in rural or remote areas (Allen 2005; Playford, Larson and Wheatland 2006; Webster et al. 2010; Young, Kent and Walters 2011). There is growing recognition of the need for universities to improve the support afforded students considering and undertaking rural and remote placements (Brown and Green 2009). This support could include increased funding assistance for students in nursing and allied health disciplines (Schofield, Keane, Fletcher, Shrestha and Percival 2009; Turner and Lane 2006) and improved models of supervision, such as the satellite model where a local senior practitioner is employed as the university liaison and support person (Bowles and Duncombe 2005). This enhanced support is important considering the potential rewards to students in experiencing rural life and practice and the benefits of increasing access to skilled practitioners for rural and remote individuals, families and communities.

Considering the need for increased rural and remote student placements, the idea of a website arose out of a 2009 consultation with human service professionals, managers and human resources personnel committed to overcoming the barriers to field education in rural and remote areas. Attendees came from Centrelink, QLD Health, Department of Communities, Early Childhood Australia, Drug ARM, Disability Services, Community Development Services, Australian Institute for Welfare and Community Workers, Centre for Mental Health Learning, the University of Sydney and the Griffith University Work Integrated Learning unit. The aims of the website were to (i) educate students about the economic, social and health issues of rural Australians and (ii) inform students about opportunities to 'go bush' to work both as a student and professional. It is hoped that
enhanced knowledge in this area will lead to an increase in the number of students on rural and remote placements as well as qualified professionals seeking work in rural and remote areas. This paper reports on the project design, implementation and evaluation, with the aim of informing future projects focused on rural and remote student placements.

METHOD

Using a modified intervention research approach (Rothman and Thomas, 1994) – which is a practice-based methodology for designing social interventions, educational tools, policies or programs – the project involved the design, implementation and evaluation of an educational website. The strategy comprised of five key phases:

1. Knowledge Development and Utilisation (literature review and ethics approval);

2. Design and Development (interviews, focus groups, practitioner and community consultation, web development support);

3. Implementation and Monitoring (trial and monitoring of the website with undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Griffith University School of Human Services and Social Work);

4. Evaluation (evaluation through qualitative [informal and anecdotal evidence] and quantitative methods [email questionnaires, web-tracking]);

5. Reporting and Dissemination (poster presentations, student information sessions, practitioner symposiums, journal article submission).

Overall, the intention was to develop a website, which can be integrated in courses across health disciplines, that maximises student engagement and learning in rural and remote practice. The website, accessible to students on the Griffith University intranet, includes diverse information on:

1. rural life - including filmed interviews with rural and remote practitioners and students - case studies, articles and a section on de-bunking myths about rural life

2. placement and professional opportunities in rural and remote communities;

3. scholarships and support available for rural and remote placements across Australia;

4. placement planning advice and tips, including cultural sensitivity information;

5. helpful links;

6. a discussion board and;

7. site feedback survey.

The site was officially launched in February 2011 at an orientation week function. The launch included a welcome to country from an Indigenous Elder and a Skype presentation with a student on a remote placement. The response from students and staff was overwhelmingly positive.

Data Collection

Data collection involved various methods, including focus groups with undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Griffith University School of Human Services and Social Work and with rural and remote practitioners. These were particularly used in the development phases to elicit suggestions for content and structure of the website. Existing networks and relationships with human service practitioners in rural and remote communities were utilised, and these practitioners engaged in a forum where the idea for the website initially emerged. They were later interviewed for the website, participated in a group meeting regarding the website, and provided feedback to the project team. Students who had completed, or were completing, a rural or remote placement were interviewed as an audiovisual resource for the website and were asked for feedback on their own placement preparation and the types of support that would have been helpful. Additionally, the research assistant and a team member facilitated a focus group with students in a preparation for placement course, using a focus conversation format to record their ideas and suggestions for the site (Stanfield 2000).
Several methods were used in the monitoring and evaluation phases of the project to assist the ongoing development and improvement of the website. These methods included: email questionnaires to students requesting their feedback on the site; recording of formative feedback from staff in meetings and in email communication; collection of site-tracking statistics; feedback gathered from the website’s online survey; and collection of rural and remote placement data from the School’s placement team in order to compare this with baseline data from the previous five years.

RESULTS
Development phase
In the focused conversation group, facilitated with 27 final year human services and education students, only four students were considering a rural or remote placement, and two of these students were originally from rural or remote regions. Several key themes emerged within the discussions regarding concerns about rural and remote placements, including considerations about: career; personal wellbeing; finances; commitments (university and family); and environment/location. The group proposed several strategies, including the provision of scholarships and assistance with accommodation, to improve interest in, and access to, rural and remote placements, and these findings were used to inform the website’s content areas.

A similar process was applied to the meeting with rural and remote practitioners, in which their experience with field supervision and suggestions for the promotion of rural and remote placements were recorded and utilised in the development of the website. Key themes from this meeting included: challenges of rural and remote practice, such as limited outreach services and referral options, and higher travel requirements and associated costs; the need for early establishment, and ongoing management, of professional and privacy boundaries due to the likelihood of dual relationships in smaller communities; the many similarities of rural and remote practice with regional and metropolitan practice; benefits of rural and remote practice, such as greater diversity of caseloads, increased autonomy, immense opportunities for broad learning and career development, and experiencing a sense of ‘professional adventure’, fun and social connectedness in rural and remote communities. Practitioners also offered placement planning advice and information, including seeking support with accessing accommodation, financial subsidies and social support networks, and spoke emphatically that the perception of rural life as social isolating is a myth. These findings were incorporated and addressed in the development of the website.

Monitoring and evaluation phases
The collection of more formal evaluation data informed improvements to the website. Six students provided feedback via an email questionnaire. While they generally found the site “easy to navigate and engaging”, chief among their suggestions for improvement was the need for more scholarship information to assist them to overcome barriers to rural and remote placements associated with relocation costs and loss of earnings whilst away from home. Students felt that having greater financial support would be the most significant incentive to complete a rural or remote placement, with one student stating: “By having enough funds to support yourself whilst away, rural placement would be a more attractive proposition”. In response to this feedback, the scholarships section of the website has been upgraded and now includes information on a range of national and state-based rural clinical placement scholarship schemes. Further, students suggested the site needed to be promoted more as they felt the option of rural and remote placements was largely unknown amongst students. In response, a professionally created postcard style flyer was created to assist the promotion of the site to students and practitioners. It is hoped that by promoting the site to practitioners, they may choose to advertise placement opportunities on the site.

A section of the website is now available for this purpose and existing opportunities are posted there.

Site tracking statistics indicate a positive ongoing interest in the site since its launch. Between the launch in February and the end of semester 2
2011, there were 163 visits to the content areas of the website. While most visits were following the launch of the website, visits to the site have continued every month since the launch. Of these, 30 people viewed the discussion board. Consequently, the research team plans to develop this section of the website to reflect the interest in discussion of rural and remote placement and practice and to further engage students in this learning opportunity. An online feedback survey is available to users, which consists of questions regarding the look and layout of the site, its usefulness and its impact on decision making in relation to rural and remote placements. Unfortunately, the response rate to date has been poor (n=1). This may suggest the provision of an online survey as the sole evaluation method is inadequate in gathering sufficient information on the relevance, impact and user-friendliness of a website.

Using placement data it was discovered that a total of three students undertook a rural or remote placement in 2011, which is an increase from two students over the previous six years. Anecdotally, a number of students have expressed interest in undertaking a future rural or remote placement and have met with their field education convenors regarding necessary arrangements. It is hoped this interest will continue to grow and result in an increase in rural and remote placements in coming years.

DISCUSSION

The project appears to have increased student interest in rural and remote practice and improved understanding of opportunities to ‘go bush’ for their placement. Through the use of email questionnaires, statistics and anecdotal evidence (informal communication and correspondence within the School), students have provided positive feedback on the website and have indicated increased interest in rural and remote placement and professional opportunities. The website has been embedded in a number of courses and programs across the school; however, there is certainly scope to increase its integration further, ensuring its broader impact and long term sustainability. At the School level, the project has raised awareness of rural and remote health issues and inequalities, as well as the many opportunities to expand one’s practice experience by working in these communities. The project team will continue to meet with academics from other Health schools to further disseminate the project findings and encourage its adaptation in their areas of teaching.

There were indeed challenges in the development of the website that others considering developing such a tool should be cognisant of. These were due, in part, to the research team’s limited experience in web development and production of audiovisual material. This led to extended timeframes in the completion of some tasks and affected the readiness of the site to go ‘live’ with fully functional materials. This experience highlights the need for expertise and training.

Good relationships with practitioners in the field in rural and remote areas have been pivotal to developing meaningful and engaging resources for the website. As a result of the project, collaborations have been fostered between academics and practitioners in rural and remote communities. The project team have been working with industry partners in rural and remote areas on a number of projects. As well as being closely involved in the development of the website, through interviews (which appear on the site) and a focus group forum (to be uploaded to the site), rural and remote practitioners have given presentations at the university on rural and remote practice and have disseminated information regarding rural and remote scholarships.

CONCLUSION

This project report provides one example of how to promote rural and remote interest, practice and knowledge amongst university students. Although not systematically evaluated, the data would suggest that an online education tool is beneficial in promoting rural and remote practice, particularly when embedded across a range of programs and courses. Undertaking a placement in a rural area not only has numerous benefits for students, universities and residents, but is important in promoting social inclusion and access to services in rural and remote areas.
REFERENCES

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