Outcomes of positive rural and remote student placements in East Kimberley Dietetics

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Background

Rural and remote student placements offer a wide range of benefits to students, their supervisors and the local community. Rural and remote settings expose students to a diverse range of new experiences, and enhance learning and confidence in new areas. Student placements can also equate to community gains through ongoing student projects targeting areas such as community education, staff training and resource development.

It is well known that staff recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas is often difficult. Unfamiliarity with the local geographical environment and potential geographical isolation are often major barriers. However, it has been shown that students who experiencing a positive rural or remote placement experience are more likely to take on a rural/remote post following graduation.1, 2

In the East Kimberley region of Western Australia (covering approximately 121, 000km²), the Kimberley Division of General Practice (KDGP) currently employs three dietitians (2.5 full time equivalent) with two of these positions based at the Ord Valley Aboriginal Health Service (OVAHS) in Kununurra.

Students in the Postgraduate Diploma of Dietetics at Curtin University are required to complete a community placement to meet professional competencies and course requirements. The Dietetics program has identified Indigenous health and diabetes as key areas to be addressed. Most student community placements are undertaken in regional, rural or remote areas to achieve these goals. This paper will outline the supporting factors as well as the barriers contributing to student placements, focusing on the example of successful dietetic student placements in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia.

What worked well?

In the East Kimberley, the co-location of placements at an Aboriginal Health Service has been integral to placement success. Co-location has enabled student interaction with local Aboriginal Health Workers, facilitating a two-way learning process of sharing of local knowledge, culture and skills. For many students coming to the East Kimberley from an urban setting this is a new experience. From this valuable interaction, students gain an appreciation of the significance of the role of the Aboriginal Health Worker in providing health care to Indigenous communities.

Keeping the placement engaging and relevant to the student is key to making it successful. Students who are open to learn in varied and new environments often excel in the placement, making the most of opportunities and being self-directed in their learning approach. They also have skills and time to undertake projects that may not otherwise be possible due to time constraints, and help organisations reach their strategic goals. For students, it is a more positive experience to contribute to a project that will be used and relevant to the community.

National Competency Standards for Entry-Level Dietitians by the Dietitian’s Association of Australia are used as a guide for planning a variety of defined activities, and opportunities for students in the East Kimberley.3 They are also used as the basis of assessment for the placements.

These standards define the requirements of cultural competencies, cultural sensitivity and food security competencies. Building placement activities based on these competencies has facilitated wider learning opportunities for the students whilst keeping them engaged and enthused. To quote one student:

Kununurra is a placement I will never forget. We were fortunate enough to work on some projects that provide unbelievably valuable experience. The people were genuine country people – friendly, easy
going, helpful, receptive and in no rush at all! The Dietitians were fantastic and have lots of experience. We did teleconferencing, videoconferencing and also went to Wyndham and Halls Creek. …The opportunity to work with (the local Indigenous) people is invaluable. In Kununurra terms like cross culturally appropriate become personal experience and something that I will be including in job selection criteria.4

Supporting factors to a successful placement

It is important to recognise that student supervision would not be possible without support from KDGP management, local and other organisations.

WA Country Health Service (WACHS) contributes much needed financial support through the Rural Student Placement Program by supplementing travel costs. Funding provided is dependent on the distance travelled from Perth and can range from $100 to $550. This program is jointly funded by the WA Country Health Service and the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) and is administered by the CUCRH.

Within the East Kimberley the KDGP supports staff in supervising students by including student supervision in allied health work plans. This assists staff in managing student supervision within their daily work load. However student supervision is not a requirement of the position and participation depends on the capacity of the individual practitioner.

Support has also been received from local organisations. OVAHS the local Aboriginal Health Service in Kununurra provides assistance to student placements through the provision of office space and Aboriginal Health Worker time. Additional support is received through Kununurra District Hospital facilitating access to low cost accommodation at the nursing quarters. This assists students significantly in managing the financial burden of their placement. Without these incentives and support students simply would not be able to undertake the placements.

Supervisor enthusiasm can impact significantly on a placement, and may depend on a number of factors including prior supervision experience, confidence level and established daily workload. CUCRH offers regular supervisor training video conferences for supervisors in rural and remote areas. This training provides an opportunity to learn and discuss expectations, methods for providing effective supervision, principles of adult learning and problem solving strategies. Ongoing individual support is also provided from the Placement Coordinator at Curtin University. Such support systems facilitate supervisors to develop their confidence and expertise in student supervision.

What are some of the challenges?

Despite the benefits there are some factors that can make a rural or remote placement challenging, including financial considerations, Information Technology (IT) issues and supervisor workload.

1) Financial considerations

For most students the financial considerations of a rural and remote placement are significant. Many students work while studying at University with a low income.5 Due to the expense of flights to rural and remote areas students have to seek further support to pay for airfares.5 In the East Kimberley, return flights from Perth to Kununurra can cost anywhere between $1 000 and $2 000 (potentially more than three times the cost of a return flight from Perth to Melbourne). With support from CUCRH the financial burden is lessened to around $600, yet this is still a substantial sum of money for those students on low income.

Additionally time away from home can add to significant financial pressures. In Western Australia dietetic students are away from home for the community placement for four weeks. This often equates to a further loss of income as students are unable to work in their usual jobs during this time.

2) Information technology

As in most other remote areas access to adequate and timely information technology (IT) support within the East Kimberley region is a significant issue. Supporting organisations have not always had the
capacity to supply the IT equipment students need to efficiently complete their placement (e.g. for the development of resources, reports, lesson plans, literature reviews etc.). Past students undertaking placement in the East Kimberley have been asked to supply their own laptops/computers as none were available through supporting organisations. This has restricted students from completing their required tasks in a timely manner.

3) Supervisor workload

Time management can often be made a difficult task when supervising student placements. The role of the supervisor involves developing and facilitating student activities as well as ongoing and timely observation, management, evaluation and feedback to the student. This is often on top of the supervisor’s usual workload. As mentioned previously management can support staff in student supervision by incorporating it into work plans provided the supervisor has the capacity to do so.

Recommendations

1) Increased availability of financial support for students undertaking rural and remote placements

It is apparent that there is an increased need for financial support for enthusiastic students to undertake placements in rural and remote areas. Whilst the existing financial support offered through organisations such as CUCRH AND WACHS certainly assists in compensating for some placement costs encountered by students, it is evident that increased financial support for students is needed. Increasing financial support to students attending placements in rural and remote areas would reduce the financial burden placed on these students to cover of costs such as airfares, accommodation and food, as well as limit the loss of income incurred through undertaking the placement.

 Ideally, supports for allied health students undertaking rural and remote placements should mirror the support received by medical students. Continued lobbying of government in this area by both the tertiary education sector and the health sector is recommended.

2) Allied health supervisor training and mentoring

The need for accessible support for rural and remote supervisors is also acknowledged. In Western Australia there are supervisor support systems available including training through CUCRH and individual assistance via Curtin University. We recommend allied health supervisors undertake training programs which encourage mentoring with other health professionals particularly for new supervisors in sole rural and remote positions. As part of their training we recommend that University expectations and those of the relevant professional body such as the Dietitian’s Association of Australia are clarified.

3) Inclusion of student supervision in allied health job description forms

At an organisational level, managers can support staff by including student supervision in all Job Description Forms (JDF’s), thus acknowledging the time commitment required when supervising students. This in turn has the potential to assist the supporting organisation, through the completion of projects that meet the organisations strategic objectives. It is also important to note the capacity building potential of student supervision, with students more likely to return following a successful placement. Therefore inclusion of student supervision in staff JDF’s can ultimately influence workforce and staff retention in rural and remote areas.

References

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Presenters

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**Tracy Leon** has been employed as a dietitian with the Kimberley Division of General Practice since 2002, based at the Ord Valley Aboriginal Health Service, Kununurra and providing dietetic service to communities within the East Kimberley. Tracy has recently commenced a position as Antenatal and Paediatric Nutrition Program Coordinator, supporting Kimberley Health Professionals to promote positive nutrition for these target groups. She has a particular interest in cross-cultural health promotion, diabetes, child health and preventative health. Tracy is a Credentialed Diabetes Educator, completed a Master of Public Health in 2002 with a focus on cross-cultural health promotion, and a Graduate Certificate in Paediatric Dietetics in 2006.