Work integrated learning: allied health in rural and remote Australia

Allied health academic Narelle Campbell
Sr. Lecturer Anna M Smedts PhD

CONTEXT
The recent increases in allied health professional student numbers, coupled with workforce shortages and changes in service delivery models, has contributed to a national shortage of work-integrated learning (WIL) placements. To address this issue, there is a critical need for improved models of training that meet educational and health systems' requirements and add value back to local communities and the healthcare workforce. The Northern Territory (NT) only offers university courses in pharmacy and social work; all other allied health professional students undertaking placements in the NT are from interstate universities. This adds an additional layer of complexity to NT allied health placements.

The nature of the current allied health (AH) workforce in the NT is poorly defined, as is the capacity and efficacy of local student training models. This study, which also contributes to the national Rural Allied Health Workforce Study (RAHWS), will provide valuable data to inform health workforce policy and training program reform.

OBJECTIVES
The objective of our study was to profile the current allied health (AH) workforce in the Northern Territory and compare the various existing models of AH work-integrated learning (WIL) placements. We collected data about student perspectives as well as health professionals’ experiences.

The outcomes of our study:
- describe the attitudes and experiences of AH professionals in regard to WIL placements in the Northern Territory,
- define factors that support and challenge the capacity for and provision of student training in the work environment,
- contribute to a national picture of the AH professional workforce, and will be used to inform policy that aligns student and workforce needs and expectations.

RESULTS
ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS
Over 200 responses were received representing a 37% return rate.

NT WORKFORCE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE
1:4 male:female ratio
Average age 40.2yrs (compared NSW average age 43yrs)
75% of respondents were in public employment
6% gained their qualification in the NT
50% undertook rural or remote placements during their training
25% reported ≤5 yrs work experience

CHURN RATE
60% of those supervising students reported a likelihood of leaving the NT within 2-5yrs. Younger respondents and those having spent less time in the NT, were more likely to report an intention to leave within 2 years, irrespective of job satisfaction. Nearly 80% reported themselves as satisfied or extremely satisfied with their current job.

STUDENT SUPERVISION
62% reported supervising students. Of these, 40% reported that they would have liked more student supervision responsibilities and only 9% reported student overload. Two factors were cited as the most important facilitators of successful student placements: Organisation and the university.

Workload and time pressures were cited as the biggest barriers to student placements. Early indications from focus groups is that workforce recruitment is a key motivator, as well as the intrinsic reward of contributing to the profession through education. The majority of supervisors had not been trained in supervision processes.

ALLIED HEALTH STUDENTS
Most (63%) students rated their placements as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ and appreciated both the clinical and cultural opportunities offered by a NT placement. 75% of students who rated their placement positively also indicated that their interest in working in the NT had increased.

DISCUSSION
These results demonstrate a high level of satisfaction from allied health students with NT work-integrated learning placements. Commitment by AHPs is demonstrated by their desire to increase the amount of students they supervise. The student’s university and the receiving organisation are seen to have a key role in enhancing placement success. Both of these entities need to implement strategies to reduce the barriers related to student placements.

Currently, student placements are organised in most professions as an outcome of individual relationships between workplaces and the universities. This results in a less efficient, fragmented approach to the placement that is reliant on individuals. In light of the high churn rate of AHPs measured in our study, universities should aim to develop robust, longitudinal relationships with organisations at high levels of governance. Placements need to be viewed as core business through all levels of management. The NT should partner with universities who demonstrate long term commitment to the provision of effective health care in the NT to ensure a stable supply of high quality placements and work-ready graduate allied health professionals.

CONCLUSION
The Northern Territory Clinical School has undertaken the first comprehensive study in the Northern Territory to characterise its AH workforce, define the AHWIL setting, and identify the factors that impact capacity and willingness to support student training. The outcomes of this study will provide an evidence base for the development of more efficient and effective AHWIL placement models.

METHODS
ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONAL DATA COLLECTION
Electronic and paper-based surveys were distributed to allied health professionals in the Northern Territory over a 4mo time period (Dec 08 - Mar 09). Data collection in the government sector was undertaken in partnership with the Department of Health and Families. The private and nongovernment sectors participated also to provide a comprehensive profile of the allied health workforce in the NT.

Focus groups with self-nominated allied health professionals across the Territory are being used to triangulate and confirm the survey data.

STUDENT DATA COLLECTION
Pre and post-placement web-based surveys were distributed to student allied health professionals undertaking WIL placements in the NT (n=57).

Ethics approval was granted through the Menzies School of Health Research HREC 07/87

CONTACT
For further information about the AHWIL project please contact:
Northern Territory Clinical School.
Ph 08 8922 7666
narelle.campbell@flinders.edu.au

DISCUSSION
Our research has not been able to quantify NT workforce recruitment as an outcome of NT student placements, however focus group participants cited examples of success. Additionally, the student data supported this proposition with students reporting increased interest in working in the NT as a result of placement. Universities need to work more closely with their supervising workforce to ensure quality of teaching, and supervisor understanding of curriculum /assessment. This could be achieved by local training.

“the student’s growing confidence is a nice thing to watch”