

Supporting mature-aged, rural nursing and allied health students: an interdisciplinary collaboration to build the rural health workforce

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Abstract

Universities have dealt with the declining rural health workforce by encouraging medicine, nursing and allied health students to undertake placements in rural areas. These students are often studying in metropolitan areas. A recently-initiated collaboration between four Victorian University Departments of Rural Health and a researcher at the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education has seen the exchange of ideas between the disciplines of rural health and equity in higher education. Thus, the endeavour to address the rural workforce shortage has shifted focus from city students to the rurally based, and from younger students to mature-aged, drawing on research suggesting that this mature-aged rural cohort are committed to their communities and are “untapped” in their potential to improve the rural workforce. In this presentation, we will share findings from Stage 1 of our emerging initiative – a systematic scoping review, and our progress with Stage 2 – gathering data and evidence.

Proposal

Rationale

There is an undersupply of medical, nursing and allied health professionals in regional, rural and remote Australia, and, as a result, there is an urgency for action to address rural health workforce shortages (National Rural Health Commissioner, 2020). Despite implementing strategies to mitigate the issue, the maldistribution of the health workforce in rural areas persists (Battye et al., 2019, p. 10). Literature exploring initiatives to improve rural health workforce recruitment and retention has tended to focus on medicine, particularly evaluating strategies to select students from rural origins and educate them in regional areas in the later years of their course (McGrail et al., 2018). The rural workforce development of nursing and allied health disciplines has received less attention (National Rural Health Commissioner, 2020).

Approach/method

Our emerging initiative is an interdisciplinary collaboration to consider the ongoing challenges related to the rural nursing and allied health workforce in new ways and from different perspectives. In the initial exploratory phase of the collaboration, our interdisciplinary team has included researchers from four University Departments of Rural Health in Victoria and a researcher from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Our focus is on considering the support needs of mature-aged, nursing and allied health students who live, work and study in rural communities. We focus on this older cohort of students, as they are potentially an “untapped” cohort of students in rural areas, and are likely to remain in their rural communities due to family and work commitments (Crawford, 2021).

We spent the early months of the collaboration conducting a systematic scoping review (project Stage 1). This stage involved screening 4,170 journal articles and reviewing 583. Fourteen articles met the inclusion criteria, demonstrating a significant gap in the knowledge focusing on the experiences of rural, mature-aged, nursing and allied health students in higher education (Quilliam et al., under review). The scoping review findings justify and inform project Stage 2— gathering data and evidence.

Questions and issues for audience discussion

1. In regard to the needs of mature-aged students in regional, rural and remote areas:
 - a. What are the particular needs and challenges of nursing and allied health students?
 - b. How might the needs of nursing and allied health students differ or be similar to their counterparts in other disciplines?
2. We are interested in hearing about interdisciplinary collaborations that you have been involved in. What have been your experiences, challenges and benefits?

References

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