

# Identifying supports for rural mature-aged nursing and allied health students: a multiple case study

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## Abstract

*There is an undersupply of health professionals in regional, rural and remote Australia. Universities have been funded to encourage and support metropolitan students to undertake rural placements to increase the likelihood of future rural practice. In 2020, as researchers from different disciplines (rural health and student equity), we commenced a research program to address this workforce shortage. We 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 have untapped potential to increase and improve the rural workforce. Using a case-study design, we explored the supports that mature-aged nursing and allied health students need to participate and succeed in higher education on a regional campus. In this presentation, we will share findings from the cross-case analysis of interviews with students and staff from three regional university campuses and communities.*

## Proposal

### *Rationale*

Mature-aged students form a sizeable proportion of the student population in, and from, regional and remote areas (Crawford, 2021). They are a valuable cohort to enable the building of the rural health workforce (Quilliam et al., 2021). Several studies point out that the needs of mature-aged students are often not understood or accommodated by universities (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017; Mallman & Lee, 2016). Rural mature-aged students often juggle numerous non-university commitments as well as study and are likely to experience different study barriers compared to school-leavers (Crawford & Emery, 2021; Crawford & McKenzie, 2023). Further research is needed to understand the experiences of rural, mature-aged nursing and allied health students, particularly regarding the types of supports they find useful (Quilliam et al., 2021).

### *Approach/method*

We adopted a Stakian instrumental case-study design in this research (Stake, 1995). Typically, Stakian case studies are underpinned by a constructivist epistemology – where knowledge is “constructed” rather than “found” by researchers and participants. Consistent with this thinking, this research captured multiple realities regarding current and potential student supports at three Victorian regional university campuses. We collected qualitative data via interviews and focus groups with mature-aged nursing and allied health students (n=21),

university staff (n=9) and placement supervisors (n=6). To identify current and potential student supports for mature-aged nursing and health students, we conducted “within-case” and “cross-case” analyses. Across the three cases, identified supports were provided by i) the community (e.g., placement host organisations making students feel like part of the team); ii) the students (e.g., mature-aged students supporting each other by communicating and sharing strategies), and the university, including iii) formal supports (e.g., IT support) and iv) informal supports (e.g., lecturers referring students to services). Existing university-provided supports were not specifically targeted to mature-aged students. We identified gaps and potential supports for future students, with opportunities for improved supports relating to: student placements; financial impact of study; teaching and learning practices; and establishing and maintaining student connections. Overall, the study findings indicate that mature-aged health students studying on a regional campus would benefit from access to supports that are local, relational and age-specific.

### Questions and issues for audience discussion

1. Given we are arguing for rurally-based local responses to meet the needs of mature-aged nursing and allied health students, from your experiences in other locations, are there any different challenges or novel responses you can share?
2. How are the needs of nursing and allied health students different or similar to students’ needs in other disciplines?
3. A tension exists between providing specific supports for an identified cohort – in our case, for rural mature-aged students – versus providing supports for “all” students. We’ll explore this conundrum with the audience.

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