

Gaining a 'proper sense' of what happens out there: An 'Academic Bush Camp' to promote rural placements for students

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Abstract

Undergraduates who undertake rural placements often choose a rural career. Reluctance from universities to send students to rural settings limits placement numbers. The Western Australian Centre for Rural Health (WACRH) invited allied health and nursing academics and clinical placement coordinators from Western Australian (WA) universities to an Academic Bush Camp. Based on situated learning theory, this camp modelled student programs through experiential learning and structured workshops. It aimed to build relationships and showcase innovative rural learning opportunities.

Objective: To build relationships and showcase innovative rural learning opportunities.

Design: An evaluation of a residential camp based on situated learning theory.

Setting: The camp started and finished in Geraldton, WA and was centered in Mt Magnet, WA a remote town 600 kilometres northeast of Perth.

Participants: WACRH invited allied health and nursing academics and clinical placement coordinators from Western Australian (WA) universities.

Intervention: This camp modelled student programs through experiential learning and structured workshops. Online pre- and post-camp questionnaires included open-ended questions and questions on a 5-point Likert scale. Responses were analysed in SPSS 22 using descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Follow-up phone interviews six months later assessed longer-term reflections and changes in student placement practice.

Main outcome measures: The main outcome measure was whether the camp met participants' expectations, and their knowledge about and interest in WACRH's programs.

Results: Twelve academics from five WA universities and seven health disciplines attended. Nine had previously lived or worked rurally. The camp met participants' expectations and all would recommend the opportunity to a colleague. Many valued the interaction with community and clinical placement partners and would have preferred more of this. The camp increased awareness of WACRH's pro-grams and benefits of longer rural placements and a service-learning environment. Six months later, participants' familiarity with WACRH's placement model, supports and staff had led to an enhanced willingness to place students.

Conclusion: Rural academics can influence rural placement intentions by demonstrating the infrastructure, learning and academic support available. A camp experience increases metropolitan academics' awareness of rural placement programs and willingness to encourage student participation. Participants with rural backgrounds appeared more receptive to rural learning possibilities.

KEY WORDS: rural workforce development, student placement, teaching and learning, undergraduate teaching, workforce planning.

What is already known on this subject:

- *Rural health practitioner workforce short- ages persist across most disciplines.*
- *Rural placement participation during under- graduate education is believed to encourage future rural workforce participation.*
- *Opportunities to expand rural student numbers are limited by several factors, including reluctance of universities to send students to rural non-traditional settings.*

What this study adds:

- *Rural academics can directly influence University placement intentions by showcasing opportunities for rural placement in terms of infrastructure, learning and academic support.*
- *An academic bush camp appears effective in increasing awareness of opportunities for rural clinical placements.*
- *Academics from a rural background appeared more receptive to rural learning possibilities.*

Introduction

Rural health practitioner shortages limit health service access for rural Australians. Undergraduate rural placements are an identified strategy to help address this shortage.^{1–3} Experiential rural placements increase the number of medical, nursing and allied health graduates who choose rural careers.^{4,5} After rural placements, students' intention to choose rural careers increases⁶ and their knowledge and clinical skills are equivalent or superior to peers who remain in an urban environment.^{7,8} Furthermore, rural placements prepare students to be workforce ready.⁹

Located in regional Australia, University Departments of Rural Health (UDRHs) offer rural clinical placements and undertake multidisciplinary rural health education and research at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. The only Western Australian (WA) UDRH, the Western Australian Centre for Rural Health (WACRH) has its main office in Geraldton, Western Australia (WA) and partners with multiple universities. WACRH has developed several innovative, interprofessional rural experiential and clinical placement models^{10–13} that focus on nursing, allied health and medical students. Placement opportunities are individualised to different disciplines' needs and their required learning outcomes. An interprofessional approach and service learning principles underpin longer placements, clinical rotations and partnerships with community organisations. Non-traditional placements embrace experiential learning outside hospitals or clinics.

Although WACRH is well situated to deliver innovative rural placements, several factors constrain opportunities to expand student numbers.¹⁴ For enrolling universities, challenges to placing students rurally include clinical supervision and accommodation accessibility for students. Since metropolitan academics influence rural placements, programs targeting them can change teaching approaches.¹⁵

In 2013, WACRH hosted a bush camp for metropolitan-based academics to demonstrate WACRH's innovative rural health programs and student learning opportunities. The bush camp aimed to build positive relationships with university partners to increase their familiarity with WACRH's placement opportunities. The desired outcome was that participants consider WACRH's programs a valuable placement option, then develop opportunities within their curricula and promote them to students. This paper investigated if a bush camp is an effective method to influence metropolitan-based academics intentions on rural placements. Specific questions were what factors influenced their own attendance, and the relative attractiveness of related opportunities such as a camp conducted over a shorter time period in the regional centre where WACRH is based.

Methods

The bush camp program

A multidisciplinary education team comprising one Aboriginal and six non-Aboriginal health academics organised the 4-day camp over several months with additional general support. Adapted from two previous bush camps for academics, organisation included program design, learning activities, site visits and stake-holders and community service providers coordination.^{10,11} Allied health and nursing academics from all WA universities were invited to express interest for the camp with formal invitations to those registering interest.

To enable visiting academics to see WACRH's office, education and accommodation facilities and to meet local health partners and visit their sites, the program started and finished in Geraldton, a regional town located 420 kilometres north of Perth. The camp centred in Mt Magnet, 600 kilometres northeast of Perth and 350 km east of Geraldton. Mt Magnet has a fluctuating population under 1000 people; approximately one-quarter is Aboriginal. Camp accommodation was in shearers' quarters at a 100-year-old sheep station 60 kilometres from Mt Magnet.

Five WACRH academics attended the camp as facilitators plus one student completing a long clinical placement with WACRH. The camp was based upon situated learning theory in which learning occurs by socialisation within communities to gain knowledge, skills and experience with participants reflecting upon their limitations in a new situation.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Participants visited service learning sites in both the regional and remote town. They undertook a walking tour of the remote township to visit significant local sites and community service providers. Structured workshops included an overview of WACRH's student placement programs; WACRH's approach to cultural security in context; future directions for student placement based on what WACRH could offer and what the participants required and wanted. All aspects were supported through conversations with local service providers and community members. Camp learning objectives were met by activities detailed in Table 1.

Data collection

The multiphase evaluation used a mixed-methods approach with collection of demographic details at registration, electronically administered pre- and post- questionnaires (including Likert and open-ended questions), and semi-structured interviews six months later. Within the first phase, we used a concurrent mixed- methods research design with a survey that included both qualitative and quantitative questions.¹⁹ This was followed 6 months later by follow-up interviews.¹⁹

The pre-camp questionnaire was completed when participants first arrived in Geraldton, and the post-camp questionnaire was completed prior to departing from Mt Magnet to Geraldton. The questionnaires included both open-ended questions and questions inviting responses on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 5). Open-ended questions on the pre-camp questionnaire asked about expectations and knowledge of WACRH's programs. The post-camp

questionnaire asked the experience of the camp and whether it met their expectations. Likert scale questions assessed participants' attitudes towards the specific placements offered at WACRH and their willingness to both send and encourage students to participate in rural placements.

Six months later, follow-up telephone interviews used open-ended questions to explore participants' perspectives and reflections, and explore any changes related to their student programs. Notes were recorded by hand during the interview. Specific questions related to what influenced attendance and preferences for the length and location of WACRH familiarisation programs.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS v22 for Macintosh²⁰ using descriptive statistics. Pre- and post- camp responses were paired and the Wilcoxon signed rank test used to compare change in each Likert scale question. Given the small number of participants, statistical significance was set at $P=0.10$ as we were more likely to find a false negative result (type 1 error) and were willing to accept a 10% chance of a false positive finding.

The comments, views and perspectives of participants were collated manually. We undertook a content analysis to explore the themes and changes with time.

Results

Quantitative

Twenty-six academics replied positively to the expression of interest, and 12 participants ultimately attended representing all five WA universities and seven health disciplines (physiotherapy, speech pathology, pharmacy, social work, nursing, public health, and teaching and learning). Eleven of 12 participants were female. Ten participants completed the post-camp questionnaire. Seven of 10 respondents completing had previously lived or worked in a rural area.

Nine stated the camp met their expectations, and all indicated they would recommend the opportunity to colleagues. Responses to the Likert scale questions (Table 2) showed a significant improvement in participants' knowledge of WACRH's programs. Participants were more likely to agree that, in the opinion, service learning placements improve students' work readiness and that students benefit from longer rural placements. Confidence in having a sound understanding of Aboriginal culture showed a mixed response, declining in four and increasing in two participants.

Open-ended and interview information:

Pre- and post- camp survey

Motivation to participate in that camp was categorised into two areas: commitment to rural health and to gain knowledge of WACRH's placements.

There were five categories of response to what aspects of the camp participants enjoyed most:

networking (8/10 participants), including with staff from different universities; location, particularly the remote site (8/10); increased familiarity with WACRH staff and programs (7/10); site visits (6/10); and WACRH's approach to Aboriginal cultural awareness (6/10).

[T]o get a proper sense of the environment our students will be in when on placement. It was an excellent opportunity to discuss future placement opportunities and network with other colleagues.

(A4)

The camp . . . provided the opportunity to learn from others. I am now able to talk to students about the many positive experiences that await them on a placement with WACRH. (A9)

Immediately after the camp when asked what could improve it, six attendees gave practical feedback suggestions, and three wanted greater community interaction and involvement with key placement partners including the school.

Follow-up six months post-camp

Six months after the camp, 10 of the 12 (83%) participants were interviewed. All reflected positively on the camp and reported they had discussed their experience with colleagues. Most repeated the benefits of the networking opportunity and enjoyment getting to know- networking opportunity and enjoyment getting to know academic colleagues from WACRH and at Perth-based universities.

Participants discussed favourably the experiential learning and location. The remote experience was a highlight for most and preferred to a regional centre, *'it was extraordinary and was a great place to visit – very different.'* The contrast of the regional city to the remote town to the station drew comments such as *'You have to be there to fully understand the issues of remote or rural work'* (A8). Participants repeated they would have liked to interact more with community members and health care workers to hear their experiences of living and working rurally. No mobile phone reception was noted as reducing distractions and as an advantage.

Participants appreciated seeing WACRH approach to student placements. Four reflected that the camp strengthened existing interest in WACRH's placements through better understanding of the education, staff and support systems. Others responded that learning about WACRH's programs kindled their interest in placing students rurally. Respondents overwhelmingly supported the remote location of such an event, feeling it was distinctly different and one which had to be experienced. Nobody reported that finding funding for travel had limited academic attendance, noting the costs were fairly modest. A 4-day commitment was seen as a barrier.

Most participants acknowledged that the camp had not yet changed their practices in sending students rurally. This was often clarified with comments that the camp introduced them to new opportunities and ideas about rural clinical placements but needed time to implement changes. Participants felt better equipped to promote rural placements to students and prepare them. Three

participants discussed engagement and follow-up with the UDRH team in the period after the camp, two commenting that greater follow-up after the camp would have been useful. Some wanted WACRH staff to assist to integrate rural content into their course or promote the placement directly to students.

Discussion

Following the camp, metropolitan-based academics had better knowledge of WACRH's rural placement programs. Participants' attitudes towards the rural placement opportunities at WACRH changed; they recognised advantages of longer rural placements and situated experiential learning in a service learning environment to promote work readiness, factors already identified in the literature.²¹ Hosting and visiting academics considered the structured workshops and experiential, in-situ learning combination to work well, as a previous related camp found.¹⁰ Participants considered the mixed-teaching approach and emphasis on experience to effectively demonstrate the WACRH's programs adapting to local needs and experiential learning support.²² Others reported appreciating the peer-learning benefits within a faculty development community.²²

The remote environment emphasises that learning differs and should reflect the priorities and needs of local populations. Interactions with key staff and providers, the remote location and site visits were particularly valued. However, our focus on broader teaching and learning approaches reduced engagement with local rural community members. The community engagement had been an appreciated feature of previous camps and an essential component of situated learning.^{10,12} Unfortunately, the camp occurred in school holidays as this was a common student-free week across all universities which meant key community partners such as the school were unavailable. This highlights scheduling challenges to suit academic teaching schedules and key service learning partners' availability.

Rural academics can directly influence metropolitan academics' intent to place students rurally by showcasing rural placement opportunities in terms of infrastructure, learning and support. This was demonstrated by the academics' increased interest in collaborative work opportunities with WACRH and their self-report that they were actively encouraging students to undertake rural placements because of the camp. Participants considered strategies more likely to provide benefit when existing resources were used, operated through collaborative action and coordinated at the institutional level.²³ However, translation into increased student numbers was just beginning. This may reflect the long cycle of curriculum planning and change involved with changes to curriculum practice and planning. Further, a collaborative team-based decision is generally required to change a practice such as to reform the nature and culture of placements.-based decision is generally required to change a practice such as to reform the nature and culture of placements.

Participants were self-selected. Many reported either a rural background or experience in rural health, suggesting an increased receptivity to rural placements. The remote camp location attracted participants, although around half who originally expressed an interest in the camp did not attend. Reasons for this are unclear, but participants may have been influenced by the need to find funding to travel from Perth to Geraldton, or the basic level outback accommodation. Unfortunately, low participant numbers limit our analysis and conclusions.

High-quality rural student placements encourage consideration of working rurally after graduation.² To encourage student participation in rural clinical placements, it is important that metropolitan academic staff are aware what exists in rural areas, including the logistical and pastoral support and clinical supervision that UDRHs provide during rural-based programs. Camps are effective to increase awareness of rural clinical placements opportunities. They form an additional strategy to increase teaching academics' awareness of rural health issues and to encourage students to undertake rural placements. Our findings highlight previous work on the importance of embedding rural health learning in campus-based coursework delivery²⁴ and linking this with rural placement opportunities.^{25,26}

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TABLE 1: *Learning objectives and learning activities*

Objectives/situated learning theory	Learning activities
<p>To strengthen relationships across organizations</p> <p><i>Learning is situated, and embedded in activity, context and culture.</i>¹⁷</p>	<p>Visits to WACRH service learning sites (residential aged care facilities, a private multidisciplinary medical clinic and regional base hospital)</p> <p>Mt Magnet walking tour and service learning site visits (nursing post, and Aboriginal Medical Service outreach clinic)</p> <p>Dinner with key community members in Mt Magnet and a visit to significant local sites</p> <p>Structured workshops to provide an overview of WACRH’s current interprofessional clinical placements and the future direction</p>
<p>Participant perception of WACRH’s alignment with their teaching and learning/curriculum needs</p> <p><i>Meeting educational needs (in rural areas) embraces a different epistemology for learning where students’ learning is enhanced by social interaction and collaboration.</i>¹⁷</p>	<p>Share and discuss our rural health student programs</p>
<p>Demonstrate the impact of our approach to developing and applying cultural security in context for students on placement with WACRH</p>	<p>Conversations with local health care and service providers who discussed their experiences of the benefits and challenges providing services in a remote setting and Aboriginal community</p>
<p><i>Learning occurs through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge.</i>¹⁸</p>	<p>A structured workshop to demonstrate and discuss WACRH’s approach to cultural awareness for students</p>

TABLE 2: *Survey responses*

	Pre-camp <i>n</i> = 9	Post-camp <i>n</i> = 10	<i>P</i> values (a)
I am aware of the programs that WACRH has to offer.	3.0 ± 0.7	4.5 ± 0.5	0.016*
Interprofessional learning opportunities are beneficial to students	4.4 ± 0.5	4.7 ± 0.5	0.157
Working in a service learning environment promotes work readiness.	4.4 ± 0.7	4.8 ± 0.4	0.083*
Rural placements provide a greater opportunity for self-directed learning.	3.9 ± 0.6	4.0 ± 0.8	1.000
I have a sound understanding of Aboriginal culture	3.4 ± 0.7	3.1 ± 0.7	0.317
Immersion in a rural/remote Aboriginal community offers students a unique understanding of cultural issues.	4.8 ± 0.4	4.7 ± 0.5	1.000
I have the flexibility to adjust scheduled university based requirements to accommodate student placements.	3.3 ± 0.5	3.2 ± 0.6	0.655
Students from my university are interested in rural placements	4.1 ± 0.3	4.3 ± 0.5	0.157
I encourage students to undertake rural placements.	4.3 ± 0.5	4.6 ± 0.5	0.180
There are adequate rural placements available for students.	2.5 ± 0.5	2.9 ± 1.0	0.157
I would like to work with WACRH on developing innovative rural placements.	4.2 ± 0.8	4.5 ± 0.7	0.157
Students would benefit from a longer rural placement.	3.4 ± 0.7	3.8 ± 0.8	0.083*

*Denotes statistical significance at $P < 0.1$. Data are represented as mean ± standard deviation.

