DISCUSSION PAPER

Health professional service-learning innovations in rural contexts

C. Swanson & C. Quilliam

Abstract

Service learning is not a new concept in Australia, although it could be better harnessed in rural Australian health student placements for the betterment of rural communities, students and rural health workforce development. The service-learning literature offers several concepts worth considering further in the Australian context. This paper addresses three common barriers to health professional service-learning uptake in rural Australian communities by drawing on service-learning concepts from the international literature. It offers rural Australian health organisations innovative strategies to consider when hosting health professional students on service-learning placement.

Keywords: service learning; rural health; allied health

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the Australian rural health workforce, whilst the demand for quality rural health student placements remains unmet. Innovative thinking and novel approaches are required to sustain the rural health workforce through and beyond the pandemic. These approaches could involve entirely new workforce development strategies, or they could aim to innovate existing strategies. Service learning is an existing workforce development strategy often used in rural contexts. Despite its wide use, service learning is a contested concept that can be broadly described as a process where students actively engage with a community group, with the result being positive outcomes for students, host organisations and community members (Marks et al., 2015). Service learning as a student placement model is particularly relevant to the nursing and allied health fields in regional and rural Australia, where there is significant unmet health need, largely due to ongoing maldistribution of the health workforce (National Rural Health Commissioner, 2020). Innovative health professional service-learning student placements in rural communities can help to address these unmet needs (Kirby et al., 2018; Salter et al., 2020) as well as provide opportunities for students to become work

Department of Rural Health, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Correspondence: Charmaine Swanson charmaine.swanson0508@gmail.com

ready by developing new skills related to their discipline and interdisciplinary practice in a rural context (Craig et al., 2016; Longman et al., 2020). Such placements may also encourage students to consider working in non-metropolitan areas, as exposure to rural communities via placements may lead to future rural employment (Jones et al., 2015; Thackrah & Thompson, 2019). However, the uptake of a service-learning model in rural nursing and allied health student placements in Australia has been somewhat conservative compared to other countries. Rural healthcare is provided by a range of organisations, including those that are not-for-profit and for-profit organisations, local, state and federal government funded, that provide a vast range of services—from prevention, screening and early intervention to specialised health issues, disability and aged-care services (Jones et al., 2015; Patrick et al., 2019). At times, these rural Australian health organisations, who host health students on placement, have demonstrated some hesitance to introduce a service-learning model, although they have also simultaneously worked to overcome hurdles that prevent them from offering service-learning student placements (Longman et al., 2020). Given this dynamic, this paper offers service-learning concepts identified in the international literature as innovative practice pointers for rural Australian health organisations to consider in order to address three common barriers to developing health professional service-learning student placements in rural communities.

Service-learning barriers and innovation

One barrier to rural host organisations considering service-learning student placements is that the placement model itself disrupts how placements typically occur, creating change and role uncertainty for university educators, host organisation employees and students (McMillan, 2009). Service-learning placements allow for classroom learning to be understood in real-life contexts and, therefore, hold the university accountable to ensure that what is learnt in the classroom is applicable in day-to-day contexts (Smith-Tolken & Bitzer, 2017). Despite the disruptive nature of service-learning student placements, hosting service-learning placements gives rural Australian health organisations an opportunity to play a valuable role in this important teaching work. McMillan (2009) suggested engaging "boundary workers" to manage this disruption, particularly during university–rural host organisation interactions. Smith-Tolken and Bitzer (2017) argued boundary workers facilitate communication to ensure a clear understanding of what service-learning placements might entail for the student and the community. Cloete and Erasmus (2012) suggested using a clearly scripted service-learning placement process to support boundary work. To some extent, boundary work is currently offered by stakeholders providing student support services in Australia, such as university departments of rural health. McMillan (2009) further identifies that these boundary workers be knowledgeable of the host organisations' needs as well as the university needs, such as supervision and student assessment criteria. Rural host organisations may benefit from using and working with such stakeholders as boundary workers because they are

likely to have the skill set to innovatively adapt student assessment to meet expected criteria and ensure discipline-specific competencies are met (Longman et al., 2020).

Another barrier is that the benefits of service learning are often poorly understood by host organisations, particularly because the capacity of students to offer valuable services is frequently underrated (Patrick et al., 2019). However, Marks and colleagues (2015) noted students commence placement with a knowledge base and other experiences that are of significant value to the host organisation and consolidate their knowledge during placement in a way that benefits the host organisation. Smith-Tolken and Bitzer (2017) argued students translate classroom-based knowledge while providing additional services to the community via host organisations. In host organisations, students may indeed bring discipline-specific classroom-based knowledge to their practice while on service-learning placement, although they may also come with other knowledges that can be useful to host organisations. According to Smith-Tolken and Bitzer (2017), the translation of knowledges between service-learning stakeholders occurs through a cyclical interchange process, where actions of giving and receiving information and changes in attitude and actions occur during repeated interactions between stakeholders. Rural host organisations could benefit from increasing such interchange processes that occur between host organisations, community members and students over the period of the placement to enable more opportunities to observe the benefits of the service-learning placement for all stakeholders. This process would also allow students to apply discipline-specific knowledge to service delivery while increasing organisational confidence in student contributions (Smith-Tolken & Bitzer, 2017).

Finally, host organisations often worry about the impact of finite organisational resources on student learning experiences, including time available for staff to engage with students (Patrick et al., 2019). However, students on service-learning placements have ample opportunity to learn during interactions with and while providing services to community members who share contextually situated knowledges (Marks et al., 2015). Students also develop an awareness of civic responsibility during these engagements (Smith-Tolken & Bitzer, 2017). Smith-Tolken and Bitzer (2017) highlighted that the service-learning model is an experiential learning pedagogy, and in the "doing", students develop into global citizens as they learn to relate to those they work with. Marks and colleagues (2015) described how, by learning in communities outside of the students' own life experiences, they develop a greater sense of citizenship. To further embed this academic learning and personal growth in civic awareness, Cloete and Erasmus (2012) recommended the use of student reflection, either verbal or written, on a service-learning placement. Guided by questions, students can independently and critically reflect on their strengths and areas for development in the service-learning setting and, in turn, observe their academic, personal and social growth (Cloete & Erasmus, 2012). To reduce concern about the impact of limited organisational resources on student learning, McMillan (2009) suggested placing students in groups and developing student communities of practice to

foster a supportive environment for students during placement. Rural Australian host organisations could consider hosting multiple students concurrently under a service-learning model to bypass organisational resource issues, as demonstrated by Longman and colleagues (2020).

What next?

As service learning continues to evolve in Australia (Patrick et al., 2019), well-developed service-learning models in the international literature offer innovative thinking and novel approaches to sustaining rural health service-learning student placements. This paper identifies three barriers to health professional service-learning student placements in Australia and offers international service-learning concepts that could be applied at the rural Australian health service level to address these barriers. These concepts include the use of boundary workers, interchange processes (to enhance student contributions and organisational confidence in students) and the use of student reflection and concurrent student placements. We have not critiqued the effectiveness of these concepts in the Australian context. However, future research on the suitability of these concepts in the Australian rural context could advance approaches to the implementation of health professional service-learning student placements in rural Australian host organisations and, in turn, work to sustain the rural health workforce through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Conflicts of interest and funding

The authors have no conflicts of interest or funding to declare.

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