

'I got to experience ... so much!' Multi-university work-based learning in Far West NSW

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Introduction

The Broken Hill Extended Clinical Placement Program is an innovative integrated multi-university work-based learning program for senior medical students, designed to contribute to rural workforce development. Students live and work rurally and remotely in surrounding regions for between six to twelve months, including in general practice, hospital settings, within remote health care teams, and with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. An interprofessional learning program engages with nursing and allied health students. This paper explores how an integrated rural and remote immersive experience can impact on students' intentions to practice rurally.

Methods

Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with students, staff and community representatives. We applied socio-cognitive career theory to provide theoretical insight into the contextual and experiential factors that influence students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals particularly in relation to their intention to practice rurally. Framework analysis was used to develop a thematic framework that illustrated the key themes in the data.

Results

Results show that immersion in a rural community through both living and learning in a work-based way are important for student learning about and socialisation into rural medical practice. This immersion also promoted student awareness of personal and professional issues facing rural doctors, including the need for self-efficacy and resilience. Some students found that although they developed excellent clinical skills and felt their future urban practice would be enhanced, they had little intention to practice rurally due to a number of contextual barriers

Conclusions

The prevailing culture of a work-based rural and remote learning environment can engender feelings of authenticity and inclusion for students who favour either rural practice or urban practice. Prior rural experiences, particular personality profiles, and the serendipity of future training placements profiles are important contextual factors in intended career choice. The current workforce development model of immersing medical students into rural and remote medicine will need to focus on selection of appropriate students with realistic personal goals and outcome expectations, further development of the work-based learning environment, and maintenance of rurally focused support through their postgraduate training years.