



Supporting rural health students:

Collaborations between universities, allied health, rural health services and communities

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1. La Trobe University 2. Bendigo Health

Background

- La Trobe University commenced an OT course at the Bendigo campus in 2009 as part of establishing the Rural Health School
- La Trobe Rural Health School (LRHS) – largest rural health school in Australia aims to provide a rural health workforce and improve the health and wellbeing of rural communities.
- Bendigo Health – the major regional health service for Loddon Mallee region in Victoria and a major industry partner for LRHS, providing student placements and graduate employment.
- Long standing rural health workforce shortages.
- Workforce shortages in occupational therapy and mental health services.

Aim

- To achieve a sustainable OT workforce for Bendigo Health mental health services

Methods

- LRHS put in strategies to recruit students of rural origin, establish an end-to-end course in regional Victoria and work closely with local health services to ensure positive experiences during placement in regional and rural areas.
- LRHS recruited OT academic with expertise in mental health to increase student awareness of and positively promote the role of OT in mental health
- LRHS worked closely with managers and occupational therapists in local mental health services to source quality student placements.
- Bendigo Health utilised the Prequalification Program (prequel) funded by the Victorian Department of Health providing employment and early career exposure to mental health for LRHS students.
- Bendigo Health provided a graduate allied health program supporting new graduate occupational therapists during their first year of employment including a rotation program in Mental Health Service, providing comprehensive CPD and offers credits towards a Master of Mental Health degree.
- Bendigo Health Grade 1 Rotational Program (18 months) also includes 6 months in inpatient mental health service to increase exposure
- Bendigo Health mental health occupational therapists teaching into LRHS OT course
- Bendigo Health appointed Grade 3 occupational therapy educator in 2022.



Results

- On average, 2 or 3 Bendigo Health occupational therapists have taught into the LRHS OT course
- 5 positions within the Prequalification Program commencing in 2021 have been filled by 3rd year LRHS OT students in 2023/2024
- No vacant occupational therapy positions within Bendigo Health mental health services – stark contrast to other disciplines, which has seen Bendigo Health recruit mental health nurses.
- Approximately 25% of Bendigo Health occupational therapists work in mental health services.

Year	Total OT Students	% Rural Origin Students
2019	37	81%
2020	33	88%
2021	46	87%
2022	63	81%
2023	41	83%
2024	54	87%
2025	60	65%

Year	Students doing Bendigo Health mental health placements	Total number of placement weeks
2017	6 final year students	48
2018	6 final year students	48
2019	6 final year students	48
2020	2 final year students	16
2021	5 final year and 7 third year students	96
2022	7 final year and 1 third year students	64
2023	5 final year and 4 third year students	72
2024	6 final year and 3 third year students	72

Recommendations

- Pipeline or 'grow your own' approach has been successful to build a sustained occupational therapy workforce within Bendigo Health mental health services
- Universities and regional/rural health services need to collaborate to address recruitment and retention issues.
- Ongoing need to increase awareness of occupational therapy role within mental health services.