



Research

Several strategies for clinical partners and universities are perceived to enhance physiotherapy student engagement in non-metropolitan clinical placements: a mixed-methods study

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KEY WORDS

Physiotherapy
Clinical placements
Non-metropolitan
Student
Rural and regional

ABSTRACT

Question: What strategies can clinical partners and universities implement to enhance physiotherapy student engagement in non-metropolitan clinical placements? **Design:** Mixed-method research design combining focus groups and survey. **Participants:** First-year physiotherapy students from one university at the commencement of their course (n = 26); third-year and fourth-year students who had completed a non-metropolitan placement (n = 39 survey, n = 25 focus group); and clinical educators from three non-metropolitan clinical sites (n = 15). **Intervention:** The cohort of first-year physiotherapy students was surveyed to establish their perceptions regarding non-metropolitan clinical education placements. A survey and four focus groups were conducted with third-year and fourth-year students after they had attended non-metropolitan clinical placements, to explore recent experiences. Two focus groups were conducted with clinical educators regarding student engagement at non-metropolitan placements. Quantitative data were summarised with descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, synthesising the perspectives of students and clinical educators. **Results:** At the commencement of their physiotherapy course, interest in undertaking a non-metropolitan clinical placement was higher for students with a non-metropolitan upbringing. Concerns about attending non-metropolitan sites included finances, change in living situation, and perceived inferior quality of clinical education. After completing a non-metropolitan placement, four themes were identified in an analysis of student and educator perceptions: individual factors, clinical experience, logistical challenges and strategies for success. **Conclusion:** Strategies that were perceived to enhance student engagement in non-metropolitan placements included: tailoring preparation for students, paired rather than individual placements, and near-peer presentations for physiotherapy students prior to undertaking non-metropolitan placements. Dedicated clinical coordinator positions at non-metropolitan sites and assistance in accessing affordable accommodation are likely to positively influence the student experience. [Francis-Cracknell A, Maver S, Kent F, Edwards E, Iles R (2017) Several strategies for clinical partners and universities are perceived to enhance physiotherapy student engagement in non-metropolitan clinical placements: a mixed-methods study. *Journal of Physiotherapy* XX: XX-XX]

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Introduction

In Australia, there are significant challenges in recruiting and retaining the rural and regional health workforce. This is particularly important given the unmet healthcare needs of communities in non-metropolitan areas.¹ There is evidence to suggest that students who have had positive clinical placements in these areas will be more likely to seek employment in non-metropolitan areas on graduation.²⁻¹² As the demand for physiotherapy clinical placements across Australia increases, there is an urgent need to utilise all geographical areas and provide students with positive learning experiences outside of metropolitan areas.¹³ To better prepare and support students to fully engage in clinical education opportunities, universities and health services need to better understand the challenges that physiotherapy students face.

When physiotherapy students undertake clinical placements, they are supervised by clinical educators. These are physiotherapists who undertake the responsibilities of student supervision, teaching and assessment in a clinical placement. Clinical placements are often overseen by a clinical education coordinator, who is a staff member employed by health services specifically to: coordinate clinical placements; support students and clinical educators; and liaise with university partners. Some clinical placements occur in nearby centres such as metropolitan hospitals, but other placements may be in rural, remote or regional city locations. For the purposes of this study, non-metropolitan clinical placements are defined as placements that occurred outside of metropolitan Melbourne. In practice, these settings may be quite different to one another and present different experiences. Different universities give different amounts of consideration to student preference for placement location.

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Anecdotally, clinicians and education providers have reported resistance by physiotherapy students to give preference to non-metropolitan clinical placements. This has been supported by some research in the broader health field,^{2,10,14,15} including one study investigating physiotherapy students.¹⁶ Some of the reported student concerns include finding affordable accommodation, ability to maintain part-time employment, travel, social isolation and being away from social supports. Students have also reported concerns that non-metropolitan placements may provide substandard clinical opportunities in contrast to large metropolitan hospitals, with the potential for reduced professional opportunities on graduation.¹⁶

Strategies to assist with student placements in non-metropolitan areas have been discussed in the medical education literature. Useful strategies have included accommodation assistance,^{7,11,14,17} financial assistance for travel,³ and voluntary allocation of students to non-metropolitan areas.^{3,7,9,11} From the university perspective, providing education on what to expect, promoting interprofessional learning opportunities, and offering pastoral care and academic support during placement have contributed to positive experiences for senior medical students.¹⁵ Student-specific enablers may include having: previously lived rurally, previously lived out of home, career goals, and personality traits such as resilience and flexibility.¹⁵ The research in this area is, however focused on medical students, and while it is expected that there may be similarities in student experience, it is not known whether the same strategies would assist physiotherapy students. Also, if given the opportunity, physiotherapy students may come up with different strategies to improve the appeal of non-metropolitan placements, even if the issues faced are the same as those for medical students.

This study aimed to investigate strategies that universities and health services can use to maximise physiotherapy student engagement in non-metropolitan placements.

Therefore, the specific research questions for this mixed-methods study were:

1. What are students' pre-perceptions and concerns regarding clinical placements at non-metropolitan clinical sites?
2. What are the challenges for students completing clinical placements at non-metropolitan sites?
3. What are the enablers and facilitators to successful non-metropolitan clinical placement experiences?
4. What strategies may be useful to support and prepare students on non-metropolitan clinical placements?

Method

Design

A mixed-method research design was applied; it combined focus group and survey methods of data collection. There were three stages to data collection.

Part A

First-year physiotherapy student pre-placement perceptions were assessed. An online survey of physiotherapy students in the first month of the first year of physiotherapy study was conducted to identify pre-placement perceptions of attending a non-metropolitan placement. The questions included in the survey are presented in Appendix 1 (see eAddenda for Appendix 1).

Part B

Third-year and fourth-year physiotherapy students' post-placement perceptions were assessed. An online survey of these students was conducted when they had recently completed one or more non-metropolitan placements. Survey items included questions regarding educational experiences, resources and professional considerations. The questions included in the survey are presented in Appendix 1 (see eAddenda for Appendix 1).

Box 1. Stimulus questions for focus groups with students.

1. How many weeks have you been allocated to this site? Is this a one-off placement or part of a longer clinical school? Please elaborate.
2. Did you have any concerns prior to attending this clinical placement in a non-metropolitan area? What were they?
3. Did your concerns eventuate? Possible prompts:
 - Was accommodation or cost of the regional placement a concern for you?
 - Did you find it difficult to be away from your friends and family?
 - Do you think the workload differs in a rural or regional site compared to metropolitan sites?
 - Do you think the educational experience differs in a rural regional site compared to metropolitan sites?
 - Do you think placement area impacts on future work choices and/or opportunities?
4. If you have had previous metropolitan placements, what are the differences?
5. How did you tackle the challenges whilst on this regional placement?
6. What would you describe as the successful elements of your non-metropolitan placement? Possible prompts:
 - Can you give me an example?
 - What were the things that contributed to the successful elements of your non-metropolitan placement?
 - Were there any other enabling or facilitating factors?
7. What strategies do you think would be useful to support or better prepare students for non-metropolitan clinical placements? Possible prompts:
 - Does having a peer with you help?
 - What strategies/resources did you utilise to support you in your non-metropolitan placement?
 - Is there anything else that would have supported you in this placement?
 - What preparation did you do for this non-metropolitan placement?
 - Was there anything else in hindsight that you could have done to prepare better or further?

All students who had completed a non-metropolitan placement were also invited to attend a focus group. Groups were limited to a maximum of eight students and ran for a maximum of an hour. A semi-structured approach was undertaken, including questions about student concerns, challenges, successes and strategies. The stimulus questions for the focus groups are presented in Box 1. Participants were encouraged to discuss any issues regarding their clinical placement experience. Student focus groups were facilitated by a university staff member (AFC, RI).

Part C

Part C was designed to elicit the perceptions of clinical educators and clinical education coordinators responsible for students in non-metropolitan placements. Focus groups with such clinical educators and clinical education coordinators at three different non-metropolitan health networks were undertaken to gather perspectives of the challenges in providing education in non-metropolitan settings and possible strategies for success. A staff member from each participating physiotherapy department invited clinical educators to participate in a staff focus group lasting 1 to 1.5 hours. Staff focus groups were facilitated by a member of the research team not involved in clinical placement education (FK). A semi-structured approach was taken, using the stimulus questions presented in Box 2. The full interview guide is presented in Appendix 2 (see eAddenda for Appendix 2).

Participants

For Part A, all first-year physiotherapy students were invited to participate in the survey at the commencement of their course in

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