Medical Xpress

Rural placements lead allied health, nursing students to consider relocation, study shows

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University of Melbourne physiotherapy students Charlie Gibbs (left) and Leanne Chua (right) on placement at Primary Care Connect in Shepparton. Credit: Mikaela Egan

Allied health and nursing students at metropolitan campuses are open to working rurally after undertaking a rural or regional placement, a

University of Melbourne study has found.

More than 4,000 students were surveyed following placements in north and north-eastern Victoria, Ballarat and the Grampians for the study recently published in the *Australian Journal of Rural Health*.

Dr. Kristen Glenister, senior research fellow in the University of Melbourne's Department of Rural Health, said the study shows how rural placements can showcase new lifestyle and career opportunities for students.

"Nearly 70% of students agreed that the placement they had undertaken encouraged them to consider living and working in a regional or rural location after they complete their degree," Dr. Glenister said.

"That's really encouraging to show how rural placement opportunities inspire students to consider pursuing a career outside of a major city.

"It's important in the context of the broader rural workforce shortage in health care."

Professor Lisa Bourke, also from the University of Melbourne's Department of Rural Health, said the findings challenge the belief only students from regional Australia go on to work and serve their communities in the health sector.

"This study suggests that students from the city may be interested in practicing in rural settings and living in regional Victoria, which is something we don't often hear about,"' Professor Bourke said.

"Nurses, midwives and allied health professionals such as speech pathologists and physiotherapists play an integral role in ensuring quality health care in the regional communities they work in.

"This truly highlights the value in rural placement programs that bring students from the city to rural and regional areas."

University of Melbourne physiotherapy student Charlie Gibbs, from Melbourne's east, found her first rural placement in Shepparton highly beneficial, providing valuable insights into the health care system in rural communities.

"I feel like I understand more about the different challenges that rural health care services face, and why there is such a need for more funding and practitioners,"' she said.

"My opinion on working rurally has definitely changed after placement, I would be much more likely now to apply for a job in a rural setting than prior to going on placement."

Fourth-year speech pathology students Hannah Sowden and Ella Matthiesson, from the Australian Catholic University, undertook placement at a primary school in Mooroopna, in northern Victoria.

"Our placement experience has been truly incredible and impactful. We wholeheartedly recommend a rural placement to anyone given the opportunity. It extends far beyond the realm of speech pathology, offering an opportunity to experience the Mooroopna local culture and a warm embrace from the school community," the pair said in a joint statement.

"Each child we encountered during this placement had a unique story to tell, providing invaluable learning opportunities that have enriched our clinical development. This placement will forever remain in our memories, and we are profoundly grateful for the impact it has had on our growth as speech pathologists."

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More information: Kristen M. Glenister et al, Positive change in intent to practice rurally is strongly associated with nursing and allied health students of metropolitan origin after rural clinical placement, *Australian Journal of Rural Health* (2024). DOI: 10.1111/ajr.13099

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