



RESOURCE 7: CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL GENERALIST ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

OVERVIEW

This document is for graduate and early career allied health professionals who are interested in working in an Allied Health Rural Generalist Training Position (AHRG Training Position). It provides information on career opportunities for allied health professionals who choose to work in a rural generalist role.

TAKING ON A UNIQUE AND DISTINCTIVE ROLE

An AHRG Training Position is a unique opportunity to shape services delivered by a local health service whilst receiving dedicated supervision, support, training and education. Rural generalism is recognised as a distinct area of practice for allied health professionals and rural generalists deliver high-quality services to rural and remote communities.

Effective rural and remote services require a multi-professional workforce that has the capacity to deliver the breadth and depth of services needed by the community. Rural and remote allied health professionals need to possess professional and clinical capabilities, service delivery skills and personal attributes required to work in these settings.

Work in several states and territories over the last few years has demonstrated the merits of allied health professionals with "rural generalist" capabilities working in rural services. This initiative aims to develop an allied health rural generalist pathway to enhance workforce capacity and sustainability and improve service access and health outcomes for rural and remote communities.

Led by the creation of rural generalist training roles and education programs, employment in rural and remote communities is becoming a preferred option for career development and progression for allied health professionals. In a rural generalist role, rural and remote practice can provide opportunities to:

- Make a difference to the health outcomes of entire communities as part of a multi-disciplinary team.
- Apply a practitioner's full scope of professional skills and extend scope in some settings.
- Develop transferable employment skills including problem solving, flexible thinking and teamwork.
- Engage in structured, formal supervision and mentoring with senior colleagues.
- Access intensive development and advancement programs, rural incentives and training funding schemes.
- Lead changes to services that benefit clients and the community.
- Become part of a community, not just work in it.

VARIETY, BREADTH AND DEPTH OF PRACTICE

Variety is one of the defining features of rural practice. Rural generalists provide services to people from all walks of life and with a broad range of healthcare needs. Service delivery may span the continuum of care, including health promotion and education; primary, acute and subacute care.

Services can be delivered in various locations and settings including hospitals, community health centres, schools, aged care facilities, commercial settings, and clients' homes and workplaces. Clients represent the community being supported and range in age from newborns to the elderly and include people from different cultural and language backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples, migrants and refugees.

The breadth of service requirements allows rural allied health professionals to work to their profession's full scope. Extending practice through skill sharing with other professions is also common in rural services and provides an opportunity to provide more holistic services to consumers.

Rural generalists should also develop one or more "special skills". These are areas of greater knowledge and expertise that the professional brings to their community. High quality and well-designed rural generalist allied health teams include members with complimentary special skills. This provides service depth to the team, maximises local service capacity for the community and contributes to the work satisfaction of rural generalist practitioners.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

An expanding range of professional development and education options are available to rural generalist allied health professionals. These include opportunities to develop profession-specific skills as well as skills of particular relevance to rural and remote practice. Examples of these opportunities include:

- Level 1 Rural Generalist Program and Level 2 Graduate Diploma of Rural Generalist Practice which is delivered by James Cook University (JCU) and developed in collaboration with QUT.
- Participation in the Master of Rural Generalist Practice delivered by JCU.
- Education programs offered by professional associations and bodies including those offered by SARRAH (<https://sarrah.learnbook.com.au>)
- Placements and work shadowing of professionals in other rural and remote areas and in regional and metropolitan services.
- Telehealth-supported supervision and engagement with clinical experts.
- Programs for developing skills in rural and remote service delivery such as telehealth and cultural practice training.
- Conferences specific to rural and remote allied health, such as the biennial Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH) conference.

Technology supports access to professional development through online resources and learning platforms, video teleconferencing, and webcasts.

At a local level, opportunities also exist for professional development within and across professions, including training collaborations between local public, private and not-for-profit or NGO services.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPERVISION AND MENTORING

The potential challenge of accessing supervision and mentoring is a valid concern for rural and remote health professionals. Employers, professional associations, and other organisations are addressing the issue through innovative programs. Examples include:

- Mentoring programs managed by professional associations, such as My Mentoring run by the Dietitians Association of Australia and the Australian Physiotherapy Association Graduate Mentoring Program.
- The Peer Mentoring Program available through SARRAH.
- The LINKS Mentoring Program (<https://crana.org.au/workforce-support/other-support/mentoring-program/>), provided by CRANAPlus for rural and remote health professionals.
- Professional supervision support such as the WA Country Health Service Allied Health Transition to Practice (T2P) Graduate Program (<https://www.wacountry.health.wa.gov.au/Our-workforce/Work-with-us/Allied-health-and-health-science-careers/Allied-Health-Transition-to-Practice-Graduate-Program>).
- Flying Start Queensland Health and other programs provided by the Queensland Health Cunningham Centre.
- Membership of state and profession-specific professional networks including those supported by SARRAH.
- Access to telephone and online support through the Bush Support Service 24/7 (<https://crana.org.au/workforce-support/bush-support-services/>).

Local profession-specific supervision and mentoring is augmented in the rural environment by:

- Local professional peer networks including inter-agency and inter-sectoral networking.
- Inter-professional networks.

PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND TEAM PRACTICE

Effective rural and remote health service delivery requires a high level of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary practice between allied health professionals, nurses, doctors, health workers, support workers and a range of other team members and stakeholders.

Professional relationships extend across the range of agencies providing health and human services to the community. Teamwork at this level can contribute to a positive and supportive work environment. It

also offers the chance to develop knowledge and build professional relationships that may not be as easily established in larger centres.

TRANSFERRABLE EMPLOYMENT SKILLS

The rural and remote context can foster the development of important professional skills early in the career of health professionals, including:

- Independence, initiative and confidence
- Leadership
- Problem solving
- Coordination and collaboration within and across services and locations
- Recognising community needs
- Evaluating and presenting the benefits of services to stakeholders
- Service redesign and development
- Education of self and others
- Operational management

These skills support the growth of an individual's professional capacity, performance and career opportunities.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Opportunities for career advancement arising from rural and remote practice come from different avenues, including:

- Demonstrated clinical, leadership and professional skills
- Opportunities to act up in senior roles and work shadow locally and in other services
- Strong rural workforce networks
- Formal career advancement pathways and policies

One example of a rural and remote career advancement policy is the Queensland Health HP3 to HP4 Rural Development Pathway (RDP).

SERVICE INNOVATION AND EVALUATION RELEVANT TO THE COMMUNITY

In small rural and remote services there is the need and opportunity to be resourceful, innovative and creative. Regardless of role or experience every health professional plays a role in service design, development and evaluation to respond to local context, culture and needs. Rural and remote areas also present a unique opportunity for actively engaging community members in developing solutions directly relevant to local priorities.

An allied health rural generalist education program provides participants with skills in service development and quality improvement activities that can be applied in the local setting.

COMMUNITY ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

A significant reward of rural and remote practice is the chance to provide services to a health professional's own community.

The health professional can contribute to improving equitable access to health services, and to deliver services as close to rural and remote communities as possible. Examples include using allied health assistants and other support workers, telehealth, and skill sharing to increase access to services in small communities.

FINANCIAL SUPPORTS AND INCENTIVES

Employers may provide a range of financial supports or incentives for allied health professionals working in rural and remote communities. These may include:

- Higher remuneration and rural-specific recruitment or retention incentives.
- Flexible employment arrangements, including work hours, leave entitlements, and options for public-private work arrangements.
- Funding and time to access professional development, including formal training programs relevant to rural and remote practice such as the Allied Health Rural Generalist Pathway.



- Financial and logistical assistance with accommodation and relocation.

Benefits may be provided as part of a comprehensive program offered by an employer or rural health workforce agency.

A PLACE IN THE COMMUNITY

For many people, employment in a rural or remote community brings benefits that extend beyond their career. Many people are drawn to rural and remote areas to meet new people, enjoy a relaxed lifestyle, and experience being part of a small, cohesive, connected community.

Although each region is different, rural communities can offer the benefits of affordability, a good place to raise a family, ease of getting around, and a range of social, recreational and sporting activities. Many communities make a particular effort to welcome and orientate health professionals to the area and to introduce them to social networks and activities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Allied Health Rural Generalist Pathway is a collaborative initiative comprising a broad variety of organisations across the Australian and New Zealand healthcare sectors. The full list of organisations is available on the SARRAH website at www.sarrah.org.au.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Resources relevant to AHRG Training Positions and the Rural Generalist Program are available through SARRAH at www.sarrah.org.au. SARRAH can provide advice to healthcare providers, commissioning agencies and other stakeholders to support scoping, development and implementation of the AHRGP.