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A Satellite Model for Rural and Remote Social Work Field Education

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Abstract

Social work field education is expanding in rural areas at a time when rural social work is under great strain. This paper discusses a new model for rural field education. In this 'satellite' model, the university employs local senior social workers as university liaison staff to locate, organise, resource, support and assess social work placements in their region.

Based on four years' experience, it is argued that the 'satellite' model addresses many barriers rural social work field education currently faces, and has the potential to improve the sustainability of rural social work.

The model aims to develop stronger links between rural organisations and universities, provide better support for rural student placements and their host organisations, and strengthen rural social work practice. Benefits to students and supervisors, senior practitioners, organisations and universities are outlined. It is recommended that universities work together in rural areas to expand this model, to improve the sustainability of rural social work throughout Australia.

Introduction: Challenges for Social Work Practice in the Rural Context

Regional and rural Australia is beset by many well-documented challenges that impact on social work. Some, such as the trends to privatisation, contracting out of services, and shrinking welfare services generally (Healy 2004, Ife 2000), are shared by urban communities. Others, such as accelerating poverty and declining community numbers at a time when city centres are booming, are particular challenges for rural and regional communities (Alston 2002; Alston & Kent 2004).

A series of droughts over many years (Alston and Kent 2004), combined with policy changes such as trade liberalisation (Halpin & Guilfoyle 2004), have exacerbated rural depopulation and decline. Between 1996 and 2001, the populations of major cities and inner regional areas grew by 7 percent, while the populations in the other areas grew by less than 5 percent (AIHW 2005).

Exploding the myth of better lifestyles for people in the bush, recent figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2005) reveal that regional and rural Australians suffer

higher death rates due to factors such as circulatory diseases (42% of 'excess deaths') and injury (24%). Notably motor vehicle accidents caused 11% of the excess deaths along with suicide (6%), diabetes (6%) and 'other' injuries (another 6%). Death rates increased with increasing remoteness. The Australian rural suicide rate, partly attributed to the severe drought, is amongst the highest in the Western world (Perry 2005).

Overall, life expectancy is highest in major cities, and lowest in very remote areas. People outside major cities generally experience poorer health (AIHW 2005). Educational status is markedly lower in regional and remote areas, with adults from regional areas being less likely to complete secondary education, hold tertiary qualifications or even commence tertiary studies (university or TAFE). In 2001 unemployment was higher in regional areas (8-9%) than in major cities (7%), but lower in remote areas (5-6%). Generally regional and remote areas are more socioeconomically disadvantaged than in major cities, with poorer outcomes for economic resources, education and occupation (AIHW 2005).

Generally, the AIHW (2005) reports that health professionals are less prevalent in regional and even less so remote areas, than in major cities. GPs, specialists and registered nurses were less prevalent outside major cities, but enrolled nurses were more prevalent. The prevalence of pharmacists, podiatrists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists 'decreased sharply with increasing remoteness' (AIHW 2005, p. 20). A worrying statistic in this report is that young people from regional and remote areas are less likely, or much less likely, to commence a health-related degree than their city counterparts. Not surprisingly, all types of health workers work longer hours than those in major

cities. Social workers are not mentioned in this report as they are not included in the list of allied health workers.

This climate of welfare turmoil and community change invites social work, with its driving force of fostering human well-being and social justice (IFSW 2002, 2004; AASW 2002), to step into a leadership role. Indeed social workers have been identified as the new practice leaders (Healy 2004) and policy re-shapers and community development leaders, particularly in rural areas (Alston 2002). However, if social work is to take on this challenge, barriers in rural social work and social work education must be addressed.

Accompanying welfare and rural community shrinkages, Lonne and Cheers (2004) document a high staff turnover in Australian rural social work, leading to a loss of expertise and 'professional community'. These researchers also note that rural social workers tend to be new graduates, who are faced with having to 'do more with less' to cover the gaps left by unfilled, deleted or frozen positions. Rural social workers also face a lack of resources for supervision or other forms of professional development. This, coupled with time pressures, discourages reflective practice. Those professional development opportunities that do exist, such as workshops, tend to be offered in urban centres far away, and there is both reduced financial support to attend and the disincentive of time lost in travel.

To counter some of these challenges, Lonne and Cheers (2004) recommend more support and supervision for existing rural social workers, and regular local training opportunities. Further, they recommend that social work education around Australia should prioritise rural practice and practicum. These recommendations

are supported in the wider social work education literature, where it is argued that partnerships and collaboration between universities and welfare organisations, and increased support from universities, particularly through the practicum liaison role, are now more important than ever (Bocage, Homonoff & Riley 1995; Bogo & Globerman 1999; Camilleri & Humphries 2005; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde 2000).

Social Work Education in Rural Australia

Since the early 1990s, social work education has been available to rural Australians through distance, or external education. Beginning with Charles Sturt University in New South Wales and Monash University in Victoria in the very early 1990s, this form of offering social work education has spread to most Australian states and today is offered by many universities. At present, external social work courses are offered by Charles Sturt University, Monash University, Deakin University, Central Queensland University, and James Cook University.

In addition, the increased use of on-line delivery means that even traditional campus based social work degrees offer some of their subjects in an external mode. This relative explosion in flexible delivery of university education has significantly increased the access of rural people in Australia to social work degrees.

Most of the courses offering distance education include in their aims, better preparation of social workers for rural practice. For example, social work educational aims at Charles Sturt University include educating rural people for rural social work practice, raising numbers of rural social workers,

and providing access to social work education for those who unable to study by full time, internal modes.

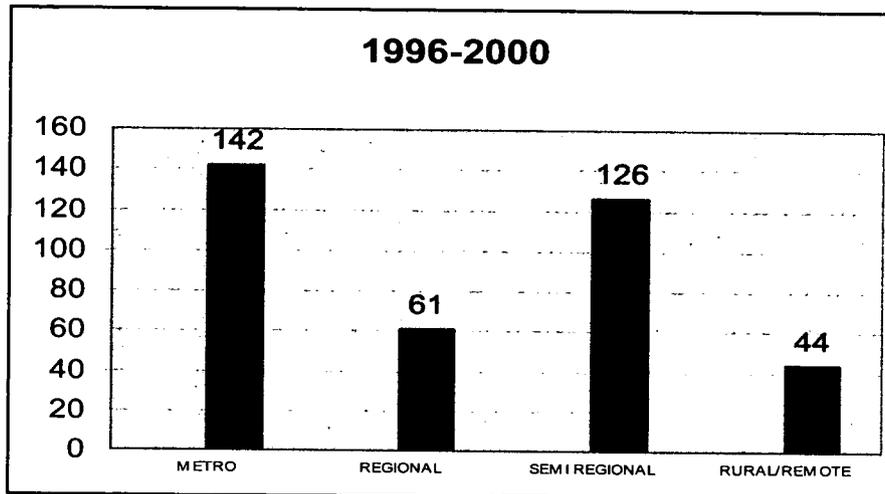
Charles Sturt University has had some success in reaching its target group of rural people. Student enrolments from 1996 – 2000 reveal about two thirds of students coming from non-Metropolitan Australia, of which most come from larger regional towns (126) and cities (61). A much smaller proportion (44 students) come from rural and remote communities of (less than around 10,000 people (Figure 1).

Barriers to obtaining social work education in rural areas still exist. Factors such as relative rural poverty, increasing expense of tertiary education, and costs of attending residential schools at distant locations, postage and online expenses, long distance phone calls, and postage of library materials, mean that rural people still face additional hurdles when engaging in tertiary education.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the expansion of social work education into rural Australia offers the possibility of addressing many of the issues identified for rural social work. Educating rural people who demonstrate a pre-existing commitment to rural life ensures more chance of retaining practitioners skilled in rural practice in rural areas. Specific preparation for rural practice will better inform and prepare students who are re-locating to rural areas (Lonne & Cheers 2004).

There has been growth in both the number of distance education social work schools and an increased commitment to developing students for rural practice in on site social work courses. This has meant that for the first time, social work placements are being sought in larger numbers in regional and remote areas of Australia.

Figure 1. CSU Students' Location



Coinciding with the staff shortages and staff turnover discussed above, this growth in demand for student supervision and student practicum opportunities can place additional strain upon an already stressed sector. Issues arising from this increase in rural student placements are discussed from the perspective of the university, the student, the organisation and the supervisor, before a model of 'satellite liaison' is proposed, which addresses many of these issues.

Issues in Rural Social Work Field Education

From the University Perspective

Establishing placements in rural areas, where organisations and students are at a great distance from the university, raises many issues from the university's perspective. It is likely that university staff will have little or no knowledge of the local community, and it is common

for remote placements to be set up in organisations that the university has not used before. The university is unlikely to know either the organisation or its personnel. This puts the success of the placement at greater risk (McFall & Freddolino 2000). Ideally, in such a situation there would be stronger liaison with the organisation, but this is only possible to a limited degree because of distance and also because of financial limitations. It is not financially reasonable to do a reconnaissance visit to a remote organisation and potential supervisor, whereas this might well be done in a capital city setting.

Strong links with the organisations hosting practicum students, and with the personnel who will act as field educators, are essential for good field education programs (McFall and Freddolino 2000). Without such knowledge, placing students in organisations can be a risky business, with university staff having little idea of what they are sending their student into.

The high costs of liaison or assessment visits means that universities are constantly tempted to lower standards and reduce the amount of direct contact with organisations and students. These costs are not only high financially, but also in terms of time taken for staff travel, time that might otherwise be used in other academic pursuits. There may be a personal cost for liaison staff too, when they are necessarily absent from family responsibilities.

Experience with electronic communication such as videoconferencing indicates that if the people are well known to each other, this medium can be successful, but for those situations where the participants do not have prior relationships, communication can be reduced to information exchange rather than more complex exchanges required to challenge and stimulate professional development. For example, if electronic means of communication are the sole option, the university liaison is likely to be at a disadvantage in picking up non verbal cues indicating difficulties in the supervision relationship. Over the telephone or the television screen, it can be easier to avoid discussing difficult or sensitive issues which interfere with the student's learning.

A further issue is that whereas it was once relatively easy to place students in rural areas, the growth in the number of universities using rural and remote placements has meant an increase in competition for those placements. Some state-wide organisations, such as the Department of Community Services in New South Wales, have responded to this situation by centralising and regionalising the placement of students in their organisation. Under this system, universities are given priority for placements in particular geographical areas, depending on where the university is located.

This strategy resolves some of the logistics for metropolitan universities and those with reasonably well-defined catchment areas, but fails to engage with the central issue for distance education. A Charles Sturt or Deakin student could live for example in a small Hunter Valley town and study externally from there but be excluded from some Hunter placements because of such an arrangement.

In distance education, students can be located anywhere, as demonstrated in Figure 1 with nearly one third of Charles Sturt University social work students coming from large metropolitan areas. Distance education universities are also challenged, in capital city or regional settings, by exclusive arrangements between organisations such as large hospitals and a locally based, on-campus provider. For the distance education provider, this means constantly having to argue that the distance education students are just as local as those from the nearby university, and just as likely, if not more so, to continue working in the area after graduation.

From the Student's Perspective

Students in rural placements are usually quite isolated. They may be in agencies with a sole social worker as their supervisor, or in organisations with no social work supervisor on-site, and an off-site supervisor providing social work supervision from outside the organisation. Students sometimes need to travel considerable distances for meetings with their off site supervisor.

Many students on placement in large metropolitan organisations complete induction programs about the student role (and sometimes university requirements) from the organisation's perspective. Students in rural placements are unlikely to have this

opportunity, especially in organisations that have never had students before. Rural host agencies may lack experience in how to support the student and guide their learning in a first time practicum setting.

Students on rural placements have restricted access to their university, in contrast to their colleagues studying by internal mode who may attend regular debriefing and skills workshops at the university for the duration of their practicum. With access sometimes restricted to assessment visits only, students may struggle with poor understanding of university expectations. Students will generally have fewer resources at their disposal during a rural placement, given the resource-poor environment of most rural organisations, especially the smaller ones.

It needs also to be said however that such placements can also provide wonderful and creative opportunities. When the student role is not constrained by past experience within the organisation, both agency and student may benefit from embarking on genuinely groundbreaking ventures.

From the Organisation's Perspective

Rural organisations are affected by the wider trends in welfare such as the pressure to be ever more efficient, and to turn a profit (Bocage, Homonoff & Riley 1995; Healy 2004). This in turn leads to organisations viewing student placements as non-income-producing, resulting in fewer placements being offered (Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar & Strom 1997; Raskin & Whiting-Blome 1998). For more than a decade, Australian social work has experienced a 'crisis' in finding placements, according to Camilleri and Humphries (2005) and Camilleri (2001).

The relative lack of human service agencies in rural areas compounds the general reduction in placement opportunities. Consequently, placements may be established in relatively novel environments. Such agencies, perhaps neighbourhood centres or voluntary service delivery programmes, may not have a qualified social worker on staff. They may struggle to come to terms with student and university expectations.

Because the agency is less likely to have experience of students and an understanding of university requirements, there may be greater hesitancy to take on a placement. With shrinking staff numbers and high staff turnover in rural areas (Lonne & Cheers 2004), there may be little physical space for students. In addition to any lack of experience with social work students, supervisors may receive little support or professional development themselves, have little time to supervise their students, and so feel under-resourced for the task.

Despite these barriers, a recent exploratory study by Charles Sturt University field educators reveals that supervisors assess the benefits of participating in social work field education as outweighing the costs (Barton, Bell & Bowles 2005). The forty three supervisors included in the study were fairly evenly spread between rural, regional and metropolitan areas. They reported positive outcomes for themselves, their organisations, the students and universities. Of most value is the work done by the students, with placement often serving as a prelude to employment. The next most listed benefit is professional development for the supervisor, including understanding new theory and encouraging reflective practice, and bringing new ideas and challenges to practice. Establishing links with the university and its resources is also an important benefit perceived by supervisors.

Importantly, and supporting Lonne and Cheers' (2004) findings about conditions within rural social work, all the rural respondents in Barton, Bell & Bowles (2005) study identify reduced time for usual duties as an agency cost, whereas only 57 percent of metropolitan based supervisors list this as a cost. 62.5 percent of rural and 28.5 percent of regional respondents note office resources as a cost, whereas only 14 percent of metropolitan based supervisors note it as a minor workplace cost. These results suggest that the costs of supporting a student on placement are considerably higher in smaller rural and regional organisations, where there are fewer staff and resources than in city-based organisations. Thus there is a relatively high burden placed on rural organisations and social workers taking students, compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

A Satellite Model for Field Education in Rural and Regional Australia

Notwithstanding the additional costs to rural and regional organisations, student placements can provide real value to organisations in the current climate of shrinking services and staff shortages. However, the issues identified in the preceding discussion: universities being at a distance and being ignorant of local conditions; competition between universities for placements; isolation of students and supervisor; lack of knowledge, support and training opportunities for supervisors and agency staff; little understanding of university requirements; must all be addressed if rural students are to receive the same high quality educational field placements as other social work students in Australia.

In response to the issues identified, (particularly lack of knowledge of local areas and reluctance by university staff to undertake extensive travel to assess student placements), and facilitated by serendipity (a lecturer moved to a regional area over 1,000 kilometres from the university), Charles Sturt University has been developing a new model of field education for rural and regional areas.

The model began to evolve when local senior practitioners in remote areas started being recruited, trained and employed to undertake the mid-placement visit on behalf of university staff, a practice recognised by the accrediting professional body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). When one of the university staff members moved to a more remote location to take up a senior practice position, the idea developed to employ that person part time, not only to visit at mid-placement, but to locate, organise, teach, assess and perform all other liaison functions that would normally be undertaken by academic staff based at the university.

This model, of a 'satellite' field education lecturer who is also a senior practitioner located within a rural or remote area, has now been trialled at Charles Sturt University for four years. The CSU liaison staff role includes locating and negotiating placements, liaising with students and supervisors, teaching the practicum curriculum, including providing resources (in counselling, research, group work, evaluation) and advising on the learning plan, assessing student progress, and providing support and mediation if necessary. In addition to roles directly related to the particular placement, the liaison person can become involved in providing on-line support for students and supervisors, and developing networks with area agencies.

McFall and Freddolino (2000) describe a similar model for distance education social work field education in Canada, but with the functions split between two workers. At two sites where social work was taught by distance education, a local coordinator was employed one day per week to source and organise the placements, and a local liaison person was also hired. In the Charles Sturt University model, the university liaison person performs all these roles along with their academic liaison functions, with administrative support from the field education office located at the university campus in Wagga Wagga.

The Charles Sturt university experience indicates that it is preferable if the person who is employed has a background or experience in education as well as being a senior practitioner. However, if there is no background in education, professional development in this area can be provided through the university through its usual induction and tertiary teaching training mechanisms.

Benefits for Students and Supervisors

Having the university liaison staff person available locally offers many benefits for students and supervisors. The person is on-hand to clarify university expectations, provide access to training and literature through the university, model reflective practice when doing the assessment visits, and provide continuity by organising, teaching and assessing the placement.

Students value the continuity that is afforded by having their own university staff do the mid practicum assessment. Even when a contracted visitor (a local practitioner or staff from another, closer university) provides an excellent service, the dissociation from the home university is an inevitable feature of

many remote placements.

With a locally-based university liaison person, students and supervisors can be linked into support networks, and resources can be shared. For example, a small group of supervisors and students in Toowoomba and Warwick in south east Queensland met over lunch and were able to start to share experiences and resources. This also contributed to their building a local professional network. In this way having the liaison person close by can provide some of the advantages offered by student placements in urban settings, in the rural context.

Supervisors also express greater satisfaction with having the home university liaison person undertake the direct contact visit. They experience this as more supportive, and less as though they have been 'dumped' with a student. The personal visits facilitate informal discussions over coffee that frequently include important clarifying pieces of information about the university's expectations.

Benefits for Rural Organisations

Lonne and Cheers (2004) identify professional development and training as important factors in retaining social work professionals in rural areas. Having a locally based practicum liaison person with access to university resources and other social work academics, creates networks and possibilities for better staff training, and better resourcing of professional development for rural organisations, based on local needs.

Bogo and Globerman (1999) see the strength of bonds between organisations and universities as being an important factor in the quality of placements (they

emphasise that university personnel need to know the agency staff and create projects of mutual benefit to both organisations and university). The Charles Sturt model strengthens university/organisational bonds in rural localities, and creates the possibilities for mutually beneficial projects to evolve.

In addition to strengthening bonds between university and local organisations and offering training and professional development opportunities, a locally-based liaison person can become an external professional who is familiar with the organisation and available to assist with problem-solving. Being local and visiting students regularly will also raise the profile of supervision and hopefully opportunities for reflective practice and evaluation of services. Lastly, the liaison person can also assist in creating local and regional professional networks, a further possible source of resource sharing for stressed organisations.

Benefits for the University

The satellite model of liaison proposed here addresses most of the issues identified for universities undertaking rural placements. The local environment will now be well-known to the university liaison staff and placement opportunities will be easier to assess in advance. Further, continuity of contact contributes greatly to the educational experience of both supervisor and student, and face to face contact is again possible.

Under this model, visits and contacts generally are much less expensive than paying campus-based staff to undertake long trips, or alternatively, briefing and paying a succession of people to undertake the mid-placement visits.

Finally, the possibility exists for universities to co-operate and coordinate their placements in rural areas through the local liaison people. In this way, the competition for rural placements that is presently experienced could be replaced by more rational planning. If all requests are channelled through the local liaison person, it is more likely that everyone's needs would be taken into account, no matter which university is hosting the placement.

Benefits for the Liaison Person

Having networks with a university also provides benefits for the local liaison person. A new career path becomes possible, with mentoring of academic development, partnerships with other academics to research, publish and develop teaching expertise, and access to university resources including professional development. Having opportunities to develop rural and regional networks broadens the liaison person's experience. In offering supervision and other training workshops, they will be developing their own skills. All this provides new work perspectives, in environments where there are sometimes limited opportunities for senior roles and professional development at senior level.

We have noted the importance of having an educational background as well as senior practice experience, in order to fulfil this role effectively. If senior practitioners are employed who do not have this educational experience, we recommend training in tertiary teaching through the usual university induction and post graduate processes, as part of the professional development offered with the position

Conclusion: Creating a Sustainable Model for Rural Social Work Field Education

This paper has presented a satellite model for social work field education liaison. After a trial period of four years, this model has been found to offer an effective way of improving the quality of field placements in rural and remote areas. It provides better educational continuity than the use of contracted visitors, and is more cost effective than extensive travel by staff based on a distant campus. In addition, the model encourages better knowledge of local conditions and organisations, both requirements for good field education programs.

This model offers potential benefits in the training of social workers for rural practice and for the strengthening of existing rural social work practice. Not only are career and professional development opportunities created for the senior rural social workers who take up the liaison role, but better support, training, supervision and research resources, through stronger links with university social work departments, become available to rural organisations. Enhanced professional networks in regional and remote areas can also be developed.

University departments also benefit from this model, with closer ties to local conditions in rural areas through the local liaison staff. These relationships offer research and consultancy opportunities that will enrich social work knowledge and practice for both academics and practitioners.

Finally, the satellite model of field education liaison provides an opportunity to increase cooperation between universities, consistent with social work ethics, at a time when competition has become the dominant

paradigm. It would be particularly useful to do this in partnership with the professional association the Australian Association of Social Workers. At Charles Sturt we hope to continue to develop this model to enrich rural social work. We invite other universities to join with us in this exciting project.

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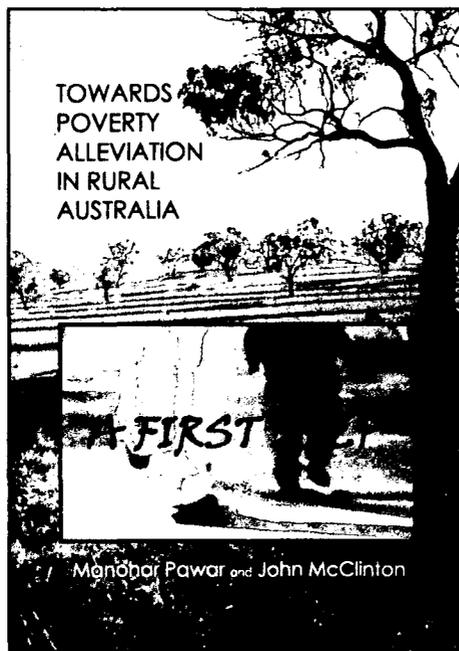
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'The study has enabled a group of people "to tell it how it is, in their own words", and it is to be commended for doing so.'

Professor David Cox
La Trobe University

'This book provides an excellent addition to the literature on poverty and rurality. The views of rural people living in poverty are presented with disarming frankness. The book challenges us to acknowledge the extent of rural poverty, to understand the circumstances of those living in poverty and to work towards acceptable solutions that create an improved quality of life for rural people.'

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