



# Work-integrated learning for rural health professionals

## Who we are

The Rural Health Education (RHE) team is a workstream within Three Rivers.

Charles Sturt University's Three Rivers Department of Rural Health is a key initiative of the Australian Government under the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program. The objective of Three Rivers is to improve the recruitment and retention of nursing, allied health, dentistry, and paramedicine students in rural and remote Australia.

The aims of the RHE team are to:

- Increase the number of effective rural training experiences (placements) for health students.
- Ensure these rural training experiences are of high quality.
- Engage with the local community to support the delivery of training to health students.
- Provide regional leadership in developing innovative training solutions to address rural workforce recruitment and retention.
- Work with First Nations communities to support positive health outcomes.

The RHE team is comprised of Lecturers in Rural Health in key locations within the Three Rivers footprint - Albury, Dubbo, Griffith, Orange, Forbes, and Wagga Wagga - with extensive clinical experience in different health professions. Our Lecturers in Rural Health work with students and clinicians to develop, expand and enhance quality rural placements.

The Wiradjuri Nation has been described as the 'land of the three rivers', from where our name is derived. Our regional footprint is characterised by three rivers:

- The Wambuul (Macquarie River)
- The Galari (Lachlan River)
- The Marrambidya (Murrumbidgee River)



Charles Sturt  
University

## Our why

The RHE team is passionate about their work and base their approach on a shared vision:

- To develop students who are more aware of the needs in rural communities, with greater cultural awareness. Service-learning placements equip students with the skills and knowledge to be better health professionals who contribute to their communities.
- To address needs in rural and remote communities that may otherwise not be addressed. To work in partnership with the community to consider projects that will make a difference now and in the future.
- To inspire students to recognise how they can make a difference as health professionals in rural communities that are often underserved.
- To develop and harness a niche area of expertise within the WPL space at Charles Sturt University.
- To build the university's reputation
- To promote organisational capacity and best practice
- To address health disparities
- To make a valuable contribution to rural communities and host organisations
- To meet community needs and promote rural health by providing unique, quality learning experiences
- To help students get an insight into the wide variety of rural community health needs and how working in similar settings when they are practicing can be a very rewarding career choice.
- To expand placement opportunities within our geographical footprint
- To showcase rural as a work destination



## Outcomes

Three River placements are routinely evaluated by students and supervisors at their completion.

Student feedback from surveys completed in 2021 indicated:

**87%** “I contributed to the activity or service capacity of the host organisation.”  
**AGREED** “I had the opportunity to become immersed in the local community.”

**90%** “An identified community need or  
**AGREED** organisational gap was met by this placement.”

**96%** “I felt welcomed by the  
**AGREED** host organisation.”

**87%** “I would recommend Three Rivers  
**AGREED** placements to other students.”

Students found the greatest benefits were the interdisciplinary nature of the placements, being placed in pairs with another student of the same discipline, the cultural immersion and immersion in general in the organisation, and the Three Rivers student support provided.

Supervisor feedback indicated:

**100%** “The student/s contributed to the activity or  
**AGREED** service capacity of the host organisation.”

**100%** “The skills and experiences gained through the placement  
**AGREED** were relevant to the student/s future health career.”

**89%** “I felt supported by Three Rivers  
**AGREED** during the clinical supervision.”

**100%** “I would recommend clinical supervision of Three Rivers  
**AGREED** placements to other clinicians.”

Supervisors highlighted the benefits of service-learning placements as being able to ‘provide the community with ongoing resources’, having ‘very supportive stakeholders’, ‘having structure/timetable in place for students to work from (e.g. Three Rivers tutorials/supervision times and weekly meeting with key stakeholders)’ and the ‘cultural immersion’ aspects of the placement experience.



## Clinical placements in rural communities

Rural clinical placements are part of a global effort to recruit and retain health staff in rural locations. They form a key component of the rural workforce strategy in Australia to provide equitable health service delivery for rural people (Seaman et al., 2022). Facilitating positive, well-supervised and supported rural placement experiences is a proven strategy that increases the likelihood of students returning to rural communities once qualified (Rural Health Workforce, 2015). Rural clinical placements can influence students' intentions or attitudes regarding rural practice, as well as their early-career practice locations (Seaman et al., 2022). While studies have shown that place of origin is the strongest predictor of settling in a rural or regional area, it is closely followed by the location of clinical placements (Skinner et al., 2022).

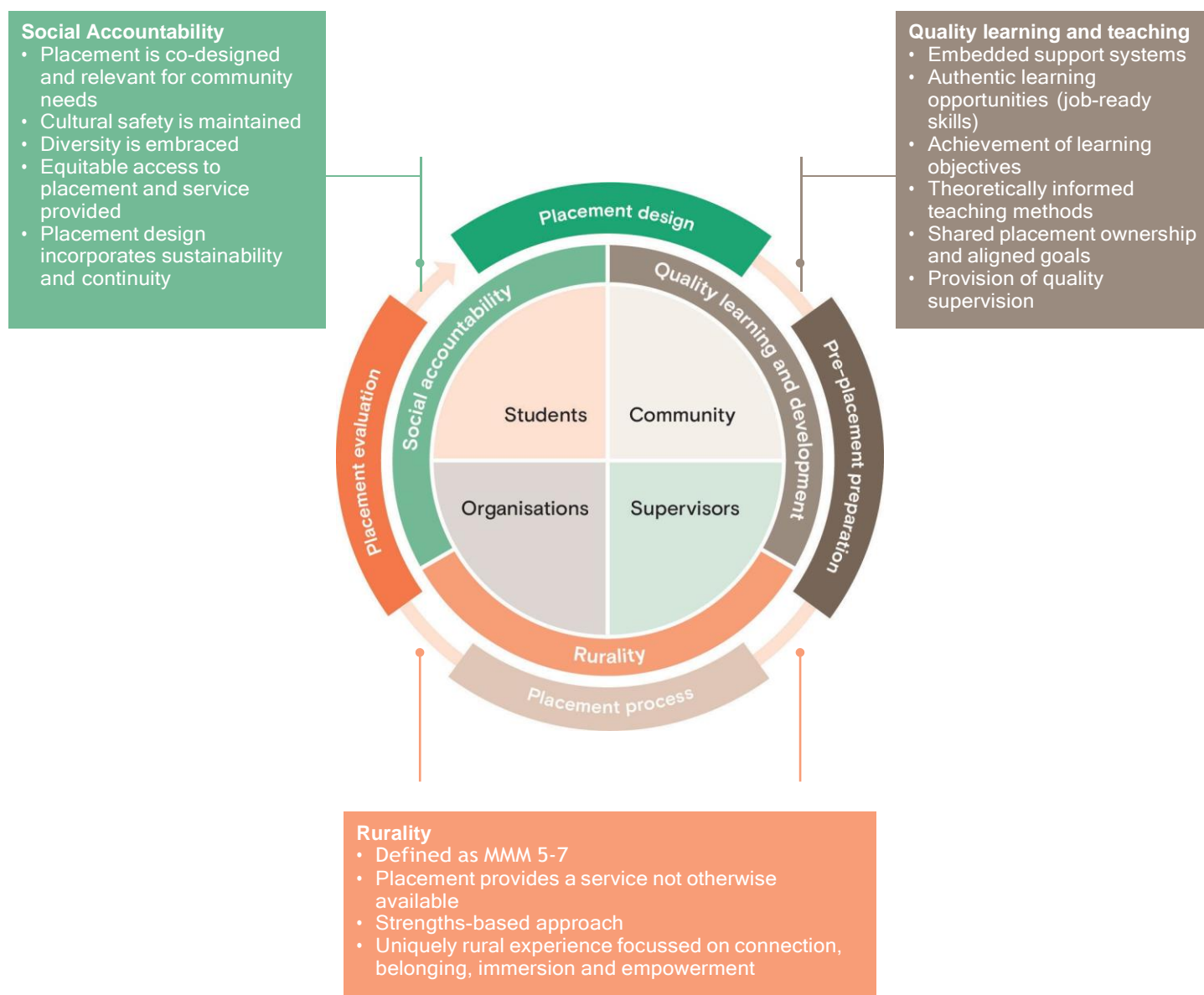
Rural health practice offers a multitude of benefits, including broader scope of practice, a friendly, relaxed atmosphere at work, opportunities for career development, cross-cultural service delivery, diversity of caseload, belonging to the local community, ability to affect change, enhanced continuity of care, and increased team-based practice (ACHSM, 2019; Bourke et al., 2010; Bourke et al., 2004; Pohontsch et al., 2018).

In research undertaken to explore student's perceptions of rural and metropolitan placements, rural experiences were strongly associated with increased opportunities for hands-on learning, more attention from supervisors and more autonomy (Rural Health Workforce Australia, 2015). Placing students in rural settings exposes them to skills and experiences unique to this area of practice, embedded within the social complexities of a rural community (Green et al., 2022). The opportunity to experience and learn about rural communities and the unique health challenges they face is consistently reported as an enriching and valued learning experience (Wolfgang et al., 2019). Effective preparation of students and the quality of these placements is therefore important.



## Three Rivers Placement Model (TRPM)

The Three Rivers Placement Model frames student learning experiences in the disciplines of nursing, dentistry, speech pathology, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy in rural communities to achieve collaborative practice and meet identified service needs. The model is theoretically informed and a range of academic staff, community partners, students and clinicians were consulted during its development. The focus is on collaborative practice and building rural health workforce capacity. Service-learning placements are created within host organisations to meet pre-identified community needs. They allow students an opportunity to provide a service and develop a project which would otherwise be unavailable to the community. The Three Rivers practice-based pedagogy and [online learning modules](#) ensure students are adequately prepared for the experience.



## Features of supportive scaffolds for the TRPM

- Facilitated online orientation to the placement model and placement site prior to arrival
- On-site and remote cross-disciplinary supervision
- On-site and remote socio-emotional support by a Three Rivers clinical educator
- [Online learning modules](#) to develop an understanding of rural practice, telehealth, placement organisation, resilience and self-care, and cultural awareness for students
- Clinical educator support for the supervising team
- [Online learning modules](#) on supervision, cultural awareness, self-care, and telehealth for supervisors
- A co-designed placement scheduled focusing on a project needed by the organisation
- Facilitating community immersion experiences/ extra-curricula opportunities within each town
- Linkages with inter-agency meetings to promote the student and facilitate networking within the community
- Co-operative learning opportunities within the site
- Peer support
- Travel grants, accommodation subsidies, placement financial support, outreach funding
- Facilitating a dialogic reflection debrief
- Informal Zoom 'drop in' meetings scheduled at regular times for all students on placement to attend

Quality rural clinical placements occur when students are exposed to:

- positive learning experiences,
- authentic learning opportunities,
- teamwork,
- relationships with rural health professionals,
- quality hands-on experiences,
- community engagement,
- high-quality supervision, and
- diversity and variety of clients and practice experienced in a rural setting (Rogers, 2020).



### Short-term rural placement – Henty Machinery Field Days, ‘Spanner in the Works?’

**In 2019, Three Rivers partnered with the Australian Men’s Shed Association to support the delivery of the ‘Spanner in the Works?’ men’s health initiative at the Henty Machinery Fields Days; a large agricultural event in rural NSW. Henty Machinery Field Days attracts more than 60,000 through the gates over three days and is regarded as southern Australia’s largest agricultural event.**

Three Rivers and the Australian Men’s Shed Association attended the Henty Field Days with an interdisciplinary group of undergraduate health students to conduct health screening for rural men. Over the three-day period, the students spoke to approximately 400 men (and a few women), measuring their blood pressure, BMI and waist circumference and discussing diabetes risks and age-specific health screening requirements using the ‘Spanner in the Works?’ model. Health ‘check-ups’ were provided by undergraduate paramedicine, physiotherapy and occupational therapy students from Charles Sturt University and undergraduate medical students from the University of Notre Dame Rural Clinical School, Wagga Wagga. Students were provided with training on the process and standard operating procedures for conducting health assessments and the interpretation of results on their first day of attendance. Supervisors were present to oversee the health promotion activities and health assessments and ensure correct

interpretation of results and subsequent education and participant management. The learning objectives met through this activity to satisfy the curricula requirement for the students’ subjects were broadly focused on students’ ability to describe the role of community-based health services in a range of environments, demonstrate professionalism in a supervised clinical setting, articulate their role and tasks, develop, and demonstrate communication and team building skills and demonstrate continual reflection on their practice.

The students were from a mix of rural and metropolitan origins and had the opportunity to explore the field day event and all that it has to offer, providing a unique perspective into the agricultural industry in rural Australia. This rural ‘experience’ provided the opportunity for students to engage in clinical skills (biometric measurements, survey administration) and non-clinical skills (communication, time management, teamwork) but extended to transforming students’ professional identity and understandings of rural health.

Short-term placements like the Henty Machinery Field Days experience can challenge metropolitan students’ stereotypical ideas of the health of rural people and their perceptions of culture. Access to multidirectional guidance allowed the students participating in this health promotion activity to learn from their supervisors, their peers, and community members. Students expressed surprise at what they had seen and learnt during the health promotion activity and reported how it challenged their assumptions of rural communities. Those students who participated in research focus groups following the event continually referenced what





they had learnt from one another individually and across disciplines, enhancing interprofessional communication and knowledge sharing.

The success of the Henty Machinery Field Days 'rural experience' demonstrates the potential value

in offering short-term placements to students, particularly as a means of attracting them to, and increasing their knowledge of rural health. After a COVID-19 hiatus, 'Spanner in the Works?' will return in 2022.

Further reading: Green, E., Seaman, C., and Smith, B. (2022). [Exploring localised learning during a short-term health student placement](#). *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 23(4), 509-525.

## First Nations Placement

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**Rural placements in First Nations communities allow students to learn from and work with First Nations people. These placements provide students with the opportunity to enhance their cultural awareness and sensitivity and learn from community and health professionals about the determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Working with communities to provide appropriate and culturally respectful healthcare is key to improving the health of First Nations communities.**

First Nations placements provide unique opportunities for undergraduate health students to:

- Learn from First Nations peoples about their health needs
- Develop cultural awareness and safety
- Participate in immersive activities specific to the First Nations community and be exposed to the importance of Country
- Develop a sense of community and an understanding of community service provision in the context of rural health.

The community of Lake Cargelligo has now hosted multiple undergraduate health students from the disciplines of occupational therapy, speech pathology and physiotherapy. These students have been placed at St Francis Xavier Primary School, Lake Cargelligo Central School, and Lake Cargelligo Early Learning Centre. Referred to as an 'unexpected oasis in central New South Wales', Lake Cargelligo has a population of 1479 and a large First Nations population 5.8 times the national average (ABS, 2016). The Lake Cargelligo Central School itself has a First Nations student population of 39.7% (LCCS Annual report, 2021). Limited allied health services

"I personally requested to come to Lake as I believed it would be a fantastic opportunity to gain insight into how Occupational Therapy is implemented into a remote community. Having the opportunity to work in a remote community has expanded my knowledge on what rural practice looks like and how important it is for the rural communities to have access to healthcare professionals and services and the impact this has on everyone. The community of Lake Cargelligo has been so welcoming, and it has been amazing to see how grateful they are to have students in their town. I would highly recommend experiencing a rural placement."

— OT student





visit the community, and significant health needs requiring allied health service provision have been identified within the centre, schools and the broader community.

The occupational therapy service-learning placement resulted in a resource being developed for Lake Cargelligo Early Learning Centre titled, 'Understanding sensory processing and its role in early development'. This is being used to educate parents and educators on what sensory processing is, introduce potential strategies to meet children's sensory processing styles, and provide ideas of how to incorporate sensory processing strategies into daily routines. The occupational therapy service-learning placement based at St Francis Xavier Primary School lead to the development of a guide titled 'An Occupational Therapy Approach to the School Environment and Learning' and provided information on developmental milestones, sensory regulation, visual perception and awareness, classroom environment and layout, and teacher supports and recommendations.

The physiotherapy service-learning placement saw two Charles Sturt University physiotherapy students

"Another great benefit of the placement was being gently nudged outside my comfort zone to experience living in a friendly and small rural community that I would not have been exposed to without having the opportunity of a rural university placement."

— OT student

and an external physiotherapy supervisor conduct screening and observations and gather information on children in the preschool room over a period of five weeks. This resulted in the development and implementation of a core stability program which provides information to parents and educators of the Lake Cargelligo Early Learning Centre on the role of core strength and its implications on motor skill development and proficiency.

The aim of the speech pathology service-learning placement was to observe students from K-2 and develop a resource targeting speech and language needs specific to the school. The students created a booklet which includes information, strategies and activities for receptive language, expressive language, speech sounds and phonological processes.

Two occupational therapy students have also undertaken service-learning in Murrin Bridge, a small Aboriginal community with a population of 86 people, north of Lake Cargelligo. The students were based at the Murrin Bridge Preschool and St Francis Xavier Primary School Lake Cargelligo. They developed a transition to school program for the children.

Further reading: Hyde, S, Smith, B, Lawrence, J, Barry, R, Carey, A, Rogers, C. (2021) *Co-designing community-focused rural placements for collaborative practice*. *Aust J Rural Health*. 2021; 29: 284- 290.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajr.12718>

## Service-learning Placement: Peak Hill, 'Raising Healthy Boori'

**A clinical placement partnership between Three Rivers, Project Sprouts, the local preschool and central school has resulted in the establishment of ongoing service-learning placements in Peak Hill, NSW. Project Sprouts is a partnership that addresses children's developmental health in rural NSW. This strong partnership is supported by local Aboriginal elders, who have graciously named the clinical placements 'Raising Healthy Boori'. Approximately eighty percent of the student population at Peak Hill Central School identify as First Nations (Peak Hill Central School Annual Report, 2021).**

Three Rivers facilitated 16 service-learning placements across the footprint in 2022 in Aboriginal Medical Services, preschools, schools, disability settings, and aged care facilities.

Allied health students involved in the 'Raising Healthy Boori' service-learning placements work with pre-school and kindergarten students in need of allied health intervention, with the support of discipline specific supervisors, school staff and Three Rivers clinical educators. Capacity building for educators is facilitated by students developing and presenting resources that will help the school support students to meet developmental goals. It is imperative that the resources developed can be applied in the absence of allied health professionals working with students at the school and preschool. In 2022, two physiotherapy students, two occupational therapy students, and two speech pathology students completed these placements.

From observation and assessment, the physiotherapy students identified delays in some children in the areas of core strength, balance, and coordination. As part of their service-learning placement they decided to target these three areas, developing games that also work on achieving identified educator goals and help promote activity

in students. Their aim was to provide educators with the resources to identify any delays that may be present, and an action plan of how to address them. The students developed a background report, screening tools and an exercise booklet with step-by-step instructions of each activity with relevant pictures, diagrams, and posters.

Fine motor and sensory activities became the focus of the occupational therapy service-learning placement project following their observations that some students were presenting with low muscle tone, low hand strength, unestablished hand dominance, decreased pencil control and less hand-eye coordination than recommended developmental milestones. The occupational therapy students developed three main activities and resources for students and educators to use to address these concerns, titled 'Peg it Out', 'Line it Up', and 'Do the Dough'.

Students also participate in cultural immersion activities including a guided tour of sacred sites.

Further reading: [Service-learning placement outcomes](#)

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