Development and implementation of an innovative, community-engaged occupational therapy course which is valued by students, community partners and the profession.

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Summary

Over the last four years, the Occupational Therapy (OT) team has worked collaboratively with our communities of practice to develop and implement an innovative, community-engaged occupational therapy course that produces high quality graduates, and is valued by students, community partners and the OT profession alike. The focus of the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (BOccThy) is to develop an OT workforce that meets current and future needs, producing graduates who are pro-active, occupation-focused and evidence-based in identifying and responding to community needs. An essential component of the course is community engagement through fieldwork placements, service learning and other experiences. Community engagement provides strong links with our communities of practice, highlights the theory-practice nexus and contributes to producing professional and engaged graduates. Using a cohesive and coordinated approach, the OT Team has developed and embedded community engagement opportunities for students in every year of the course.

Background

Research has shown that provision of regional and rural fieldwork placements and attracting students from rural origins, influences the career choices made by graduates, especially in terms of seeking employment in the local region. In response to the identified shortfall of allied health professionals in the region, and the growing demand for professional expertise in addressing the daily living needs of people with a disability across the lifespan the four-year BOccThy was introduced in 2009, with the first cohort completing in 2012. The BOccThy addresses local needs of the community by enhancing and promoting health and the daily living needs of people with disabilities across the lifespan in a variety of contexts including home, work, school and in the broader community. The Occupational Therapy Australia National Accreditors reviewed the course in 2012 and noted the BOccThy,

“has an explicitly articulated philosophy, which includes an occupational view of people…, the challenges they face and how health and wellbeing is enabled through occupation… The program gives particular attention to the needs of the rural and regional community, and it was established with broad consultation and input from the local occupational therapy community”.

Learning

The OT Team has learnt the importance of creating learning and assessment experiences relevant to OT practice for students and ensuring that these authentic opportunities are threaded throughout the curriculum. First year experiences provide students with an understanding of the profession, providing a goal to achieve, which creates the incentive for students to continue. Fieldwork and other course experiences in later years are scaffolded and highlight and develop professional competencies that are expected by the end of the course. Our
community partners have the opportunity to learn more about the role of OT in the organisations and the benefits that can be gained through this.

**Outcomes**

Collaboration with students and our communities of practice in the design and implementation of a community engaged occupational therapy course.

The development and implementation of a course that is valued by students, professional communities, and the National Occupational Therapy Accreditors.

The National Accreditors reported:

>“Consistent with current national and international research, the educational methods used promote self-directed learning, reflection, problem solving, clinical reasoning, a client-centred focus and a broad evidence-based approach to occupational therapy practice. The theory-practice nexus is strongly reflected in the opportunities for engaging with the local communities, and as well in the opportunities for simulation learning on campus.”

**Impact**

Community partners have reported benefits through engaging with SCU’s OT students in projects that enhance and extend the services provided to their clients.

Students report that the creative and authentic learning experiences provided through community engagement have assisted in enhancing professional skills, developing professional identities, encouraged the application of clinical skills, and helped develop empathy with clients’ lives.

The University has benefitted by having closer links with the local community and “engaging with our geographic communities … for mutual benefit” (SCU Strategic Plan 2011-2015).

**Awards Category**

Community Engaged Learning

**Good practice principles**

Communities of practice, community need, student experience, collaboration, evidence-based

**Recognition**

This project was the recipient of Southern Cross University’s Excellence in Community Engagement Award for Community Engaged Learning in 2012. It also received a VC’s Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning in 2012 for developing a community-engaged occupational therapy program based on the WHO International Classification of Functioning (ICF) that produces confident, reflective, professional graduates.