



BUSH HEALTH HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

8 September 2020 – Directors of Australia’s vital University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH) will meet Regional Health Minister Mark Coulton on Wednesday (9 Sept) to discuss a new report highlighting record numbers of university students going bush to build a health career.

The Australian Rural Health Education Network ([ARHEN](#)) will meet by Zoom with Minister Coulton following the release of an [independent evaluation of the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program \(RHMTTP\)](#). The RHMTTP aims to increase the number of health professionals living and working in rural and remote Australia and funds the 16 UDRH which make up ARHEN.

The evaluation found the Department of Health program is “...an appropriate response and important contributor to addressing rural health workforce shortage” which also has a “...direct social and economic benefit to communities and regions.”

For more than 20 years, UDRHs have supported thousands of nursing and allied health students from universities around Australia undertake clinical placements in rural and remote locations. Placements expose students to career and lifestyle opportunities outside capital cities, encouraging them to return to work rurally after they graduate.

The report showed UDRH placements have grown “...from around 3,000 a year in 2004 to more than 13,000 in 2018.” At the same time, it also applauded innovative approaches to learning used by UDRHs which resulted in “...real world training opportunities and much needed health services and therapeutic interventions to meet local (health workforce) gaps.”

“We’ve always known the importance of the UDRH network to improving the health and wellbeing of the 7 million plus people who live in these locations,” ARHEN Board Chair Prof Lisa Bourke said.

“The report again highlights the many different contributions this longstanding program makes to so many rural and remote communities.” According to the report:

- Students contribute to communities through volunteering, mentoring young people, participation in sporting and community activities and career expos
- For every dollar spent under the program another dollar is generated in the local economy.

- Alumni were identified in many communities working in their professions and often also teaching and supervising current students.
- The (UDRH research) network has been instrumental in progressing research in rural and remote health, rural health workforce, rural health delivery and rural training.

“We also look forward to discussing recommendations which point to opportunities to develop the program further,” Prof Bourke said.

“UDRHs have long wanted to support students as they move from training into graduate roles in rural and remote communities. We applaud the recommendation that DoH resource this into the future.”

The newly appointed Rural Health Commissioner, Assoc Prof Ruth Stewart, will also attend the ARHEN meeting.

Prof Bourke also thanked the Federal Government for acting on recent ARHEN feedback about proposed fee increases for social work and undergraduate psychology as part of the job-ready graduates legislation. ARHEN was concerned about the flow-on effect to the future rural and remote mental health workforce and the communities they serve.

“The Government’s change of heart will encourage students from country communities to continue to study these important courses and ultimately help bridge the gap between rural and city based mental health services,” Prof Bourke said.

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